



Teaching Writing to Saudi EFL Students: Theory, Practice and Reflection

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Abstract

This paper looks at the situation of EFL/ESL writing in the Saudi context. It accounts for some of the current challenges in teaching English writing to Saudi students and proposes an alternative, task-based approach that should address many of the shortcomings of the current practices. The paper acknowledges that writing is the most difficult language skill among standardised English proficiency test takers in general and among Saudi students in particular. The paper recommends a more practical approach when teaching English writing, one that works outside the classroom as well.

Keywords: ESL Writing; task-based learning; Saudi context.

1. Introduction

Needles to say, writing is among the most prominent skills of the language that L2 learners need to practice in their academic and, later on, their professional life. Teaching writing has prompted a good deal of research which covers different aspects of its broad instructional contexts. The last two decades has experienced a shift of interest from teaching writing to native speaker to their foreigner counterparts (i.e. non-native speaker Saudi learners) which have resulted in a growing number of researches and studies in second language writing. (Silva and his colleagues 1994) However, teaching writing in EFL settings has proved to be an extremely demanding task not only from students' perspective but their teachers as well. It needs careful planning, creative thinking, complying with conventions, linguistic knowledge and skills ... etc.

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According to the Natural Order Hypothesis of acquired language skills, writing comes the last but by all means not the least in importance. This assignment, however, will view writing as an indispensable component of EFL classes that will be discussed with solid reference to the current literature pertaining teaching writing. In order to appropriate the proposed micro-teaching session, a detailed description of the educational as well as linguistic backgrounds of the context where the lesson is supposed to take place is essential. This will be conceivable in the learning objectives and outcomes as well as actual lesson plan sections. The discussion then moves on to the traditional and current approaches in teaching writing with reference to task-based learning as most of the proposed lesson was based on it. The third part will be based upon the former two parts with a more practical application of theories into real teaching practices. This will include the lesson plan’s development guided by the relevant literature and controlled by lesson objectives, a brief description of the targeted proportion of language learners and their special needs when applicable, how the actual lesson will take place and what learners are supposed to do and why, and finally a reflection on the lesson with my own insights.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social, Educational and Linguistic Dimensions

In order to fully conceive the teaching environment in Saudi Arabia, a comprehensive description of the educational as well as the status English language occupies in the society there is essential. Needless to say, learners’ expectations, preferences, experiences, familiarities, reasons for learning English (or not) all formulate the corner stone of any lesson plan designed for that specific group of learners and will be mentioned in the section about lesson plan. First of all, statistics show that Saudi students are among the lowest achievers in all English language skills, most specifically in writing. Results obtained from IELTS prove that Saudi students consistently score lower in writing than world average and that writing is by far the lowest score. Please see the following table along with results from other countries for comparison.

Table 1: IELTS Results by Country in 2018. (Source: IELTS test taker performance 2018 www.ielts.org)

Country	IELTS Avg	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Saudi Arabia	5.33	5.33	5.76	5.08	4.91
South Korea	5.99	6.23	5.79	6.22	5.48
Brazil	6.62	6.72	6.68	6.91	5.93
Nigeria	6.77	6.93	7.17	6.57	6.16
Germany	7.43	7.84	7.42	7.60	6.60

The table also shows that despite the disparity of results between countries, writing is consistently the lowest score regardless of which country IELTS takers come from. This statistically proves that writing is indeed the most difficult of all language skills. Another problem that faces must of the like-minded researches who are interested in the Saudi teaching/environment and Saudi researchers in the field of education alike is the fact that relative resources, data, statistics, studies and researchers concerning Saudi educational context is rather scarce and hard to obtain. Albeit the current emergence of electronic databases and gateways that are considered as a very helpful tool to find appropriate information about a research topic, a number of unsuccessful tries or with

very low results in number or content will well show the rarity of material that can be used to refer to Saudi context. However, I started from unpublished MA dissertations and PhD theses by Saudi post graduate students hoping to find – through their research projects whatever subject about education- some material to build on (e.g. Mubarki, 2003 and Asiri, 1997) alongside with some articles written by expatriate teachers who have been working in Saudi Arabia. I believe that by combining both native Saudi researchers' and expatriates' perspectives, a better understanding will develop. When one starts describing a very much closed, religiously and traditionally controlled society such as the Saudi one, all precautions have to be taken for reasons yet to be mentioned. Moreover, Saudi Arabia occupies the most prominent position in the Islamic world and has Muslims' most sacred spots where millions of Muslims come to visit every year. It is also the richest country in the Middle East region with most of the world's crude oil reserves. That has been reflected on its inhabitants in terms of becoming very much connected and proud of their inheritance which is partially represented by their language (Arabic) and mostly their religion. The culture is so ingrained in the people that even questioning it in an ambiguously interpreted way proved to be so risky. Language bears more than the linguistic dimension, it conveys another culture as well. The former debate leads us to understand why English, as culture rather than a language, has been minimised, even eliminated in the Saudi context and subsequently the English curricula provided by the educational authorities. Complete abandon of foreign culture may seem a very extremist view for expatriates and foreigners, but it is quite normal for ordinary people there. The bottom line here is that in order to design a lesson that is trouble free, a teacher has to select a culturally safe topic (weather in the following proposed lesson plan). Moving on to another equally important issue that is also closely connected to the previously mentioned one is the status of English in common, everyday life and in more academic-oriented settings. Obviously, English has become the world's most important language in science (according to the Saudi MOE statistics, 70 % of the world's different disciplines of sciences is now presented in English) but for ordinary people, English is merely a mandatory course in formal education that has to be passed in order to succeed to the following level and English therefore for most Saudi people is something unwanted and even useless. This notion will be supported by the fact that there are no or very little chances for common people to practice their already poor English because although around seven million foreigner workers live in Saudi Arabia, the absolute majority of them feel obliged to learn Arabic. English apparently has no communicative value in Saudi Arabia which is one of the main reasons why many people learn it in the first place. However, there are exceptions especially for high tech businesses and specialisations, medicine, computing, communication ... etc but the targeted segment of people here are the majority of Saudis which does not mean excluding previous areas necessarily. Here is the other side of the coin then, lately many Saudi students have realised that in order to widen their horizons they must overcome the linguistic barrier which gives a real boost to learning English in Saudi Arabia. A contradiction might be perceived here but not really for the fact that the number of English-interested people is still very limited and usually within absolutely academic or high-tech business settings and the communicative dimension of English is still unnoticeable. However, I want to make a difference that may sound subtle for some between learning English in order to indulge in a specific culture as referred to earlier and learning English as a medium to obtain knowledge. In the former situation, English is a goal itself whilst in the latter it is barely a tool. Taking all that into the consideration, a better understanding of the role of English in such a community will hopefully be established here. The other point here is simply a statement of facts about actual teaching of English in Saudi Arabia or what I have called it 'Educational

Background' that is of importance as well to fully comprehend the speciality of Saudi educational context. Students start learning English as a compulsory subject since their seventh year of formal education (intermediate school) and it continues for the next six years until they finish formal education and decide either to join working force or continue to university. All the educational materials are designed and provided by the Ministry of Education and teachers have little or no margin to alter the contents. As already mentioned, this curriculum is foreign-culture-free and the designers tried to connect the content to the daily life and own culture of students, a rather bizarre idea that I really doubt it to succeed. For the linguistic content, all the skills have been well looked after. The variant approaches of teaching, old and current, were said to be considered including grammar-translation, audio-lingual, and communicative language teaching, but in actual practice, only more traditional, teacher-centred practices are the dominant.

2.2. Teaching Writing

Writing is among language basic skills. In more academic settings, it gains even more significance. This is exactly the case when it comes to teaching writing in formal classes as in EFL ones. In this section, two main issues will be discussed which are the fact that the micro-teaching session was addressing EFL students, and the different approaches of teaching writing as described in the literature. Teaching writing as a foreign language is definitely more demanding than teaching it to its native speakers for the fact that students are still struggling with their newly-taught language; their proficiency is in most cases deficient and, especially in situations where English does not occupy a prominent status as in my case, students are demotivated. All that add up to teachers' concerns; teachers are no longer just lecturers, they are nurturers. On the other hand [7], that teachers also have to know that students are already equipped with some writing skills and strategies from their L1, so teachers can exploit these by either applying them when necessary (adopting) or they can change them to suit the new context (adapting). Equally, Reference [6] in a more recent study come up with similar recommendations as to when and how to apply L1 strategies in ESL writing classes. The recommendation is to use this L1 repertoire when possible.

2.3. Writing Approaches: Product, Process and Genre

It is essential to refer to the different approaches in teaching writing in order to have a solid foundation of a lesson that is based on adequate theory, researches and studies. Roughly speaking, there are three main approaches in teaching writing which are (according to their chronological order of popularity) product, process and genre. References [4, 9, 2] Before I start describing each of them, I have to stress on the fact that these approaches are not completely divergent approaches but rather interrelated and connected ones with different perception of the same concern. The two former approaches, product and process, have dominated much of the teaching of writing over the last twenty years while genre approach became more popular especially in the last few years. Product approach puts its primary concern over linguistic knowledge such as the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices. (Pincas, 1982 quoted in [2]) The final product has to be accurate and writing is viewed as 'assisted-imitation'. Product approach usually has four main stages: familiarisation, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. Process approach is defined by [12] as "... writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the 'publication' of a

finished text.” Linguistics skills, such as planning and drafting, are perceived as the most prominent in process approach of writing while little emphasis is put on linguistic knowledge for instance knowledge about grammar and text structure. There are four main stages of writing in the process approach: prewriting (sometimes called brainstorming), composing/drafting, revising, and editing. References [4,9,2].

2.4. Task-Based Approach in Writing

When designing the lesson plan in general and the writing bit in particular, the task-based approach of teaching has been carefully considered. Task-based learning comes under the broad notion of communicative language teaching which shifts the attention to the learner rather than the teacher [8]. There are many advantages of adopting a task-based approach when teaching EFL writing including getting students more engaged in the process [1]. Reference [10] believes that task-based approach is very helpful in making learners use language for practical purposes, which in turn should help learners use the language in situations outside the classroom. Although there are many benefits of task-based writing classes, there also a number of challenges that have been identified in previous studies. For instance, Reference [3] identified lack of task-based materials as among the most prominent of these challenges.

3. The Micro-Teaching Session: Theory into Practice

In this lesson, a topic that is culturally-safe has been chosen as response to the already described educational environment’s specialities. The topic is about weather and to be more specific how to report, describe and associate weather with everyday practices. Regarding theory, I will restrict my discussion with the writing part only as the other skills were looked after by other colleagues.

3.1. Lesson Objectives and Outcomes

Generally speaking, the lesson (including my micro-teaching part) has the following learning objectives:

- a) Students will be able to comprehend the meaning of selected weather forecast and expressions
- b) They will know how is the weather like at this time of the year in different parts of the world
- c) They will be able to connect the weather vocabulary to their country according to its location in the map
- d) They will know how to skim a weather report using key words
- e) They will use these weather vocabularies and expressions in different genres of writing
- f) They will know how to use adverbs with weather adjectives to form expressions.

For my writing part, I have to involve all of the above objectives but with special reference to the last two ones. This can be perceived from the writing tasks.

3.2. Actual Lesson Plan

The writing session has three main stages (as usual). The first can be described as a warming-up activity where students' imagination will be enhanced using attractive pictures about different places of the world with extremely divergent climates and then asked what do they expect to have in their lesson. This is a valuable opportunity to revise their already learnt vocabulary (recycling) and to introduce new words when necessary (orientation). Teacher may have a short conversation with his/her students as a pre-task activity. Obviously, the teacher here assumes that students have been already introduced to this topic and, in fact, it comes as a production stage for these students. However, as noted earlier in the literature review section, writing is a long-term process that will take a relatively long time to teach/learn before students can gain concrete development.

3.3. Reflection: Whole Session and Writing Part

Drawbacks are unavoidable in such a situation where the actual micro-teaching session has been carried out. The main causes are: a) preparation: as the group does not have enough time to prepare for the lesson as long as we decided to start from scratch rather than choosing an already available lesson plan from a textbook, b) timing: the group also did not have enough time to give a fully developed lesson that addresses all of the objectives and gives every student enough chances to practice and this is especially true with my writing bit as it requires more than just a few minutes, it actually requires hard working from both students and me as their teacher, c) the heterogeneous backgrounds of actual students (not the targeted ones) in terms of linguistic and cultural means will definitely complicate the task and fade away the intelligence behind choosing that particular topic. However, the sample of colleagues who pretended to be students were very cooperative and they show great interest in the tasks embedded in the lesson. Regardless of the pros and cons, I tried my best to achieve the lesson objectives in a more concrete shape of learning outcomes. This can be done with the help of given exercises that were designed with the aim of not only improving students' linguistic competence, but to check their actual progress as well. In the micro-teaching session that I gave, however, that was impossible. All in all, a real effort has been spent on that project from all members of the group including myself in preparing the lesson, finding proper material, planning the lesson in its final shape, designing the exercises and finally the PowerPoint show.

4. Conclusion

Despite of the overwhelming obstacles that faced the group when preparing for the lesson, the outcome can be honestly described as quite satisfactory. It emerges all the language skills in a reasonable sequence that took students' needs and expectations into the account. For the writing session, it was not a coincidence that it comes as the last part of the lesson following the widely recognised natural order hypothesis. The tasks were designed in a way to consolidate already learnt vocabularies and expressions on one hand and on the other they also have the purpose of improving students' writing skills in the foreign language. The learning objectives were carefully developed, theoretically speaking, however, in real life situation, they may sound somehow over-optimistic. The role of the 'extreme' local context has contributed to the choice of the lesson topic especially in avoiding certain culturally unsafe topics. Finally, the successfulness (or not) of this preliminary lesson plan cannot be fully investigated in such settings that it took place for as long as it does not occur in its target social and educational

context, the very important component of local culture will not have its word.

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