Writing in ESL/EFL: Surmountable Challenges?

The power of the written word has long been acknowledged, and especially since the dawn of so-called formal, school-based education systems. Writing not only provides permanence to spoken words by preserving them through visible signs, but it is also manifestly an efficient means of communication (White & Arndt, 1991; Arndt, 1990). The written word can transcend time and space, a quality that makes its effect long-lasting and thus increases its value as a record-keeping mechanism (Ong, 2002). Hence, through writing, knowledge is preserved and passed down the generations. Indeed, without the written word, civilizations might not have arisen and human advances in science, technology, and all other fields of endeavor would not have been possible. Little wonder then that the teaching and learning of writing has become a necessity in all modern societies. If, as they are, mother tongue literacy skills are an essential acquisition, mastering writing lies at the heart of them. According to Reichelt, Lefkowitz, Rinnert, and Schultz (2012), “A hallmark of the educated person is thus partly defined by the ability to write correctly” (p. 28).

Yet writing is no simple transcription of spoken language into written symbols (Oller, 1981). It is an inherently complex skill and often the last that students master (Ozbek, 1995). As Storch (2009) says, it is a:

...multi-dimensional, socio-cognitive activity, where the processes involved and the features of the text produced are very much shaped by socio-cultural norms and interpersonal relationships within the context in which the writing takes place. (p. 105)

Unlike speech, which is naturally acquired, writing demands instruction; yet even with this, not all students succeed in mastering it. Some claim that talent is required, while others believe that “practice makes perfect” and that reading is a sure help. Examining the nature of writing, and also the situations in which it occurs, might assist in clarifying its complexity. For example, the writer is detached from a wide range of those expressive possibilities in speech that Vygotsky calls its “musical expressive intonational quality” (quoted in Arndt, 1990, p. 3). Moreover, the usual writing situation is relatively decontextualized, and since meaning must “reside” within the text for readers to decipher it, the absence of tone, gestures, and clues provided by facial expressions and body language makes this problematic. If this is not enough, the characteristics of the reader also affect understanding and interpretation. Such features surrounding the written word, then, are what make writing a challenging task even for first language learners. For second and foreign language learners, however, there are such added drawbacks as inadequate linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target language (hence an inability to think and conceptualize ideas in it) and interference or negative transfer from their mother tongue.
Since English is now the world’s international language and globally used as a medium of instruction in schools and higher education institutions, and because a mastery of English written communication is routinely demanded in all local and international job markets, English writing instruction must evolve to help ESL and EFL students achieve this vital competency. However, for many reasons, large numbers of EFL/ESL students struggle to acquire this skill (McMullen, 2009; Fageeh, 2003; Berman & Cheng, 2001; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Mohan & Lo, 1985). Comparing first and second language writing, Al-Mahrooqi (1995) stresses the difficulties and pitfalls involved. After considering the problems of first language writing, she goes on to say:

*If we turn to think of writing in a second or a foreign language, then the task becomes even harder, more formidable and sometimes forbidding. This is because second or foreign language students have to juggle two composing systems as they write. In addition, these students’ problems are doubled as they are in the process of learning a language; they lack native-like intuition about grammar and vocabulary and their linguistic repertoire is usually limited. Moreover, ESL and EFL students lack adequate knowledge about English culture and, therefore, lack information about the ways of thinking, the ways of organizing the written discourse and about the rhetorical patterns specific to the English language.*

Research has found that for ESL and EFL learners developing writing competence takes time even when they study in Anglophone universities and colleges and are thus immersed in an English-speaking context. For example, when comparing L2 learners’ writing on a number of linguistic features before and after a full-time preparatory English for Academic Purposes course, Shaw and Liu (1998, cited in Stoch, 2009) found that it did not improve much in terms of complexity or linguistic accuracy, although it showed more features of formal discourse. Hinkel’s (2003, cited in ibid) study showed that ESL learners’ writing still exhibited features of text simplicity and informal language use, although they had spent much time in the United States. As Chou (2011) points out, because success in English medium higher education, whether at the undergraduate or graduate levels, hinges on students’ ability to perform well in their written assignments (among them reports, articles, book reviews, library research papers, examinations, projects, case studies, reflection papers, letters or memos, essays, annotated bibliographies, critiques), it is vital to address the question of what methodologies work best for students in diverse contexts when teaching them this essential life and academic skill. In addition, consulting students’ views on writing, on teaching methods, and on their teachers is also important, since research has found that students and their teachers do not always see eye to eye on “the characteristics and reasons for [students’] difficulties in writing” (Chou, 2011, p. 48). Assessment techniques, whether authentic or inauthentic, summative or formative, ways of viewing and responding to students’ errors, teaching aids, and technology helpful for teaching writing inside and outside the classroom are all factors that can affect students’ progress in acquiring this vital skill.

Even though the topic has been addressed by previous research, there is a dearth of EFL/ESL research-based writing texts that investigate all its features and include them inside one cover. Hence, a book of this sort is valuable for both native and non-native English language teachers, since it should help them to see clearly why their students struggle to acquire the writing skill and what can be done to help them overcome the obstacles they will inevitably face. The book will be particularly important perhaps for novice teachers who would like to learn how to teach writing under different circumstances and to benefit from the experiences and expertise of those who have been in the field longer. The book might
also be seen as helpful for first, second, and foreign language researchers wishing to advance their own knowledge of the field by looking at the “writing question” from fresh perspectives and its situation in a variety of different cultures. Meanwhile, undergraduate and postgraduate EFL/ESL students can also use the book as a study resource since its contents are both current and multifaceted.

Thus, the book’s aim is to examine EFL/ESL writing from a wide range of perspectives and to investigate issues of importance to both teachers and learners. There are 4 sections and 20 chapters. Section 1 contains chapters dealing with cultural details and influences. These are important aspects of ESL/EFL writing instruction since it involves two cultures, native and non-native, and deciding which is which is still a controversial issue. Christopher Denman, in his “Explicit Instruction in Western Cultures in the English Language Writing Classroom of the Arab Gulf: Pedagogical Perspectives,” explores how writing is taught in the Arab world, focusing on arguments for and against the explicit teaching of Western cultures and their rhetorical patterns. He suggests culturally relevant approaches and theories that seek to integrate learners’ language into EFL classroom activities and to guard against the dominance of Inner-Circle norms within the Arab context, especially in writing classes. For their part, adopting an auto-ethnographic approach, Patrick Ng Chin Leong, Tsui-Chun (Judy) Hu, and Esther Boucher-Yep, from Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan, respectively, examine contextual influences on their teaching methodology. School policy, the researchers’ identities as writers, and the kind of students being taught emerge as the most significant factors affecting their teaching. Then, considering the effect of Arabic as a first language on Omani students’ writing, Samia Naqvi, Jesudas F. Thomas, Kakul Agha, and Rahma Al-Mahrooqi examine how the directionality of Arabic writing from right to left affects the way students read and write English, with its left to right directionality. Neil McBeath’s chapter bravely questions the conventional wisdom of teaching the five-paragraph essay, and, using lab reports to illustrate his point, suggests that such a practice might indeed be counterproductive for students studying their majors through the medium of English.

Section 2 of the book focuses on the two main, seemingly dichotomous, approaches to teaching writing, namely those privileging product and process, and then also on the task-based approach. In the first chapter, Semire Dikli, Justin Jernigan, and Susan Bleyle examine the process approach, reviewing the literature on the topic and providing insights into how such an approach might be implemented. In addition, they explain some of their points by focusing on the revision process and its implementation. Their chapter also includes results from an open-ended survey of student attitudes concerning methodology. In “Process vs. Product: Arabic and English Writing Classrooms in Oman,” Rahma Al-Mahrooqi and Christopher Denman explore, from a student perspective, how both Arabic and English writing are taught in Omani schools. The country’s latest educational reforms have stressed the implementation of a process approach in the classroom and the authors look to see if this is actually being done. Their findings reveal that a focus on the product approach is still prevalent. The chapter by Khadernawaz Khan and Umamaheswara Rao Bontha demonstrates how blending both approaches in foundation-level writing classes can be particularly beneficial for low-level proficiency learners. Viewing the process as a necessary scaffolding technique, the authors claim that EFL learners should be trained using the process approach in order to produce a better product. Their chapter focuses on how the writing course in Dhofar University’s foundation program uses a blend of the two approaches. It also describes the role of writing portfolios and the application of assessment procedures, ending with opinions on the blended approach gleaned from both teachers and students. The last chapter in this section examines a task-based approach as a way to reduce students’ difficulties in this area. In addition to defining task-based learning, it offers examples of tasks that teachers might use to direct and focus their teaching in the EFL classroom as well as strategies to increase learner involvement in reading-to-write class activities.
In contrast to the approaches and methodologies discussed in Section 2, Section 3 of the book concerns itself with strategies to enhance student success in learning how to write in ESL/EFL classes. The first chapter here, by Neil Heffernan, looks at a class of motivated Japanese EFL learners taking a course in critical thinking and academic writing and presents data arising from the course since its inception in 2008. Included are students’ writing samples, the results of a self-assessment survey, and student opinion at the end of the course. Suggestions are made on how to adapt and implement the techniques used in the course in other contexts. Chapter 10, by John Adamson and David Coulson, demonstrates, through the application of what they term Content and Language Integrated Learning, how to prepare new undergraduates of varying levels of English language proficiency to succeed in English-medium university courses. The authors demonstrate how scaffolding can provide an equal opportunity for all students to be active and to take steps to improve their writing and access relevant materials beyond the classroom. On the same issue of scaffolding, Aminah Sutphen shows how it can support struggling EFL students in learning about essay structure. Her chapter also explains the particular nature of Hammond and Gibbon’s (2005) scaffolding techniques and reports on how scaffolding was used with success in a classroom of struggling Omani EFL learners. Then, concentrating on audience as an important element that determines why, how, and what students should write in their essays, Shaker Al-Mohammadi and Emira Derbel show how Omani students conceive of audience and how this affects their writing performance. Chapter 13, Omar Al Noursi’s “Don’t Get it Right, Just Get it Written: Making Feedback Work,” discusses different forms of feedback, demonstrating which ones work best under various circumstances. Providing feedback by peers using a technology-based forum is the subject of Chapter 14 by Melissa Bodola and Stephanie Siam, who discuss the implementation process and the limitations that reduce the success of this technique. They conclude by suggesting an integration of a paper-based and an online peer review system. On the use of technology to develop language competence and writing ability, Shaimaa Torky considers how to incorporate online synchronous and asynchronous communication into writing instruction and concludes by offering guidelines on how best this might be done.

The book’s fourth section concerns itself with error correction, plagiarism, assessment, and evaluation. Seetha Jayaraman reflects ruefully on the knotty problems teachers and learners face when learning English spelling and applying grammar rules in their writing. He concludes that a bilingual approach, based on contrastive analysis, can prove helpful in raising students’ awareness of the similarities and differences between their mother tongue and English and thus minimize negative transfer. Muhammed Ali Chalikandy details the types of errors made by Omani students in their writing and concludes that they are both interlingual and intralingual. Learners’ previous experience and their experience with learning English, it appears, both influence their acquisition of the target language. From a student and teacher perspective, Reham Alhinai and Rahma Al-Mahrooqi wonder why English foundation students in an Omani institution plagiarize, currently a serious issue in many universities. Their findings indicate that most students lack awareness of what plagiarism really is as this was not part of their school training. In addition, they suggest, a negative relationship exists between students’ academic proficiency and their willingness to plagiarize. Instructors, apparently, deal with plagiarism in various ways, the most common a deduction of marks. The authors conclude by suggesting that, in order to effectively prepare high school students for tertiary education, the school curriculum must raise their awareness of what constitutes plagiarism, and how to cite, quote, and use references and thus avoid it. Chapter 19, by Farah Bahrouri, reports on a mixed-method study exploring factors influencing teachers’ assessment of foundation students’ academic writing and the elements on which they focus. The findings from a quantitative analysis reveal that teachers’ native language is a significant factor that influences their marking,
though qualitative data show that such factors as teaching and learning experiences, culture, educational background, and personality also affect assessment styles. As for the features teachers focus on in their assessment, the author says that qualitative and quantitative data revealed that native speakers showed differing patterns. These findings suggest a need to address the differences between teachers’ ratings so as not to jeopardize the validity and reliability of the tests they administer to students. The book’s final chapter evaluates students’ writing performance from a pedagogic perspective by reporting on a cross-sectional study that took place in Sohar University’s foundation program. In addition to reporting on the findings of the study, the chapter also helpfully surveys relevant literature on the teaching of English in Omani high schools and tertiary institutions.

Even though all 20 chapters focus on writing, each is unique in that it addresses specific aspects and features of teaching writing in EFL/ESL contexts. The contributors are experienced professionals from different parts of the world and most have taught English in a variety of countries. It is hoped that in an engaging and effective way the book will provide guidance on how ESL/EFL writing can be taught in a manner that helps students to overcome their challenges and master this skill so vital for their academic success and their lives in general. It is also hoped that the book will be a springboard for new research in the field, whether on writing in a native, foreign, or second language. Since mastery of EFL/ESL writing has been reported as a main challenge for foreign as well as second language learners, it is timely to direct a more concentrated effort on its investigation. This will bring us a clearer understanding of this complex matter, from students’ and teachers’ perspectives alike, and move us closer to solving its related problems.

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REFERENCES


