

Academic writing challenges at Universities in Saudi Arabia and solutions

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Abstract:

A teacher of English always faces a challenge to teach the writing skill to the foreign language students especially at the UG level. As one of the language skills, writing is excelled only when the other three language skills are excelled. It is the combination of process and product. It involves mastery in grammar and vocabulary to present the message. It requires self-knowledge to express the thought process. It is felt a dry exercise, only used to write the exams. Though the students have the knowledge in English finds it difficult to express. Most of them depend on rote system to get through the examination. If the teacher is asked to teach the students whose English knowledge is absolutely poor at the UG level, it becomes a challenge. We tried all the traditional methods and modern methods to teach writing here in our university, and found out the reasons for the problem. The reasons may not be new, when we compare with that of Indian university students'. But the difference is here the students do not feel it as a challenge. In India, students force themselves to learn writing for official purposes. This paper tries to present the methods that have been used to teach the foreign students whose mother tongue is Arabic.

Key word: Language excellence, teaching the writing skill, teaching methods, problems, solutions,

Introduction:

The developing of the language skills has always been a very hard and an interesting task. The process of writing suggests that we can actually teach students how to write with coherence, an appropriate grammar structure and an acceptable spelling. Being a teacher it is

important to discuss the objectives of writing skill and let the students know that their script will speak in their absence.

The main reason for teaching Writing is to help the students express their thoughts into words. This process usually starts from

Copying → Doing Exercise → Guided writing → free writing

One of the effective ways to do this is to motivate the students and make them aware of the steps involved in effective writing. Four reasons why students dislike writing are:

1. It leaves as more permanent record of proficiency than speaking; so it seems a threat for them.
2. Students feel that they lack sufficient knowledge of the language.
3. Students believe that writing must be grammatically correct.
4. They think that formal correctness must be achieved at their very first attempt.

In terms of teaching writing for language learners teacher should consider some aspects in teaching writing. Every single lesson requires careful preparation- need to think about a variety of techniques, activities and teaching aids to make the lesson appealing to the students. In many classes, attention in writing is very limited because writing is only to be as a testing tool. It may be that makes teaching and learning writing skill to be bored.

The present paper tries to concentrate on the problems of the teacher and the taught. The teachers usually face a peculiar confusion regarding:

- The standard of the students and their learning style by the time they join UG level.
- The types of writing carried out by UG students?
- Problems faced by the UG students in relation to writing skill?
- Causes of the writing problems?
- Solutions to overcome the writing problems faced by UG students?

By the time the students join the UG, they are expected to have some knowledge in grammar, spelling of the words, word order and vocabulary. Though they hail from vernacular medium, they are exposed to English language teaching at certain level of their schooling. Though English has been introduced as a language study, they learn it as a subject. Hence, they do not show any interest to use it as a language; instead they feel that it is a subject to be passed.

Secondly, most of the time the students show interest to copy, memorize and present in the examinations. Unfortunately, the examination exams the retention power of the students and give less importance to the language aspect. Hence they are not aware of the various types of writing and the suitable language to use accordingly.

Thirdly, the students face lot of problems in the UG level, when they fail to discriminate the styles of writing and methods and vocabulary to use under different headings.

Fourthly, the causes of not showing interest in writing may be lack of motivation to learn English, and the teacher's lack of interest. Environmental reasons include the use of the mother tongue, few opportunities to practice English, and isolated culture. On the other hand, methods of teaching English included the medium of instruction, using L1 in English classes, writing done in L1, teacher's low proficiency in English, and lack of writing practice in educational institutions.

Finally, the writing activities should be geared to their needs and interests. They should be linked to the real life whenever possible.

When we talk about writing is necessary to remember that there are three inseparable aspects when teaching it; Writing as a channel of a Foreign Language (FL) is the use of it alongside listening, speaking and reading in the process of learning important elements of the language; Writing as a goal of a FL learning, is the development of writing skills to fulfill such purposes as: note-taking, summarizing, narrating, reporting for various real-life situations and Writing with cohesion, is the employment of various linguistic means by which the parts of a written text are related to one another, with continuity and organization (The teaching of **English** as an International Language/Peter Wingard-143). But how can a teacher motivate the students for the writing activity?

In the present work we pretend to give useful information about the developing of writing skills and give some **practical** teaching ideas for this purpose contributing to improve teacher's knowledge about this topic.

Then, we would like to state what the word PRACTICAL means. According to Webster's Dictionary it means 1) capable of being put to use, 2) useful thing, 3) disposed to action, 4) opposed to speculation or abstraction, 5) qualified by practice or practical training by experience and also concerned with ethical decisions. (Webster's Dictionary)

From our point of view, a practical teaching idea has something to do with a good idea, characterized by being attractive, exciting, applicable to real life and taking into account the

environment, context and most of all, the learners 'needs and interests. Thus, teachers should know how to teach writing to be effective.

When trying to choose the right methodological approach for teaching writing, questions like those below, always arise:

- A) How and when grammar explanations are necessary?
- B) Do you think there is no communication when grammar is not well used in writing a foreign language?
- C) How can the teaching learning process be activated?

On the other hand, students should learn grammar rules, hear and read authentic English as much as they can, look at the vocabulary notes every day and other necessary activities to develop the writing skills.

Challenges and Issues:

It took some of our time to understand the problems of the students such as ,

- 1) Lack of vocabulary
- 2) Lack of Grammatical Knowledge
- 3) Lack of Motivation
- 4) Learning Environment and

We realized our challenges as a teacher regarding:

- 1. Motivation
- 2. Use of technology
- 3. Class room management and
- 4. Different learning styles of the students.

In the present work, it is obvious we should mention dictation as one of the writing activities to practice writing, although it also develops listening-understanding skills. It has usually been considered a boring teaching activity by many, but we should see it as an encouraging exercise. We need to brainstorm a new methodology for dictation. Pictures about dictation can change if we ask some questions and answer them putting into practice creative and practical teaching ideas, questions like:

- A) Who gives the dictation and who to?
- B) Who controls the pace of the dictation?
- C) Who chooses or creates the text?
- D) Who corrects it?

(Paul Davis and Mario Kinvoluc. Cambridge handbooks for language Teachers. University Press, 1997)

- Lack of Vocabulary:

Vocabulary is the most important aspect of writing because it is to be a basic component of the successful writing skill. Lack of vocabulary is a problem that often occurs during class activity, beside become a crucial problem for the teacher nonetheless students.

To solve this problem we followed the suggestion of Michael Graves (2006) and find the way out to help their students, by using some tools available around them such as to open any kind of dictionary during task or assignments. We encouraged the students to install “Dictionary App” in their smart phones and insisted them to consult it very often. Michael Graves (2006) offers a framework for successful vocabulary programmes that support effective teaching and student’s development of word knowledge. The foundation of his instructional program includes a four-part approach to developing robust vocabularies: (1) provide rich and varied language experiences, (2) teach individual words, (3) teach word learning strategies, and (4) foster word consciousness.

Grammar Problems

Grammar is very helpful for effective language skills. Grammar, in writing skill, determines how a paragraph build- up and how the ideas can be understood. Teacher often find their students lack in this respect. It is important to explain any given topic as clear as possible and assure that all of them fulfill the objective that teacher want. According to Rabeya Nasrin Khan (2007) , based on GMT method , grammar is taught inductively or called the directive method , for example grammar structures are taught through examples.

Lack of motivation

According to Areej in his journal about the effect of motivation on student’s writing skill (2012), motivation in education effects on how students learn and how they behave towards a subject matter. It can direct behavior toward particular goals, lead to increased effort and energy.

Furthermore, many student think that writing skill is one of the most complicated skill because it requires better grammar, lots of vocabulary and any other aspect to make it perfect and readable. But, all of these are back to teachers how to attract students’ attention and make them have a will in doing the task even the whole teaching learning activity.

Learning Environment

Environment has a special role toward learning process. The study found that students, especially in a remote area, are not really supported by people around them even their parents. Not only the students, teachers also often found a difficulty to teach in a remote area where most of people think English less important for their children.

Of course, if all the power remains in the hands of the teacher, we have a traditional approach of dictation, but dictation could be otherwise. Dictation taking as a potential practical teaching activity for writing has some advantages, among them:

- Improve spelling
- Students are active during and after the exercise.
- Foster unconsciousness thinking when they hear important things.
- Copes with mixed-ability groups.
- Gives access to interesting texts

In our class we introduced small group activities like quizzes to identify the figure and tell the suitable word and use that word into sentence. The teacher dictates at least 25-30 words in a minute or two, and the students are asked reproduce what they have listened to. This activity helped them to improve their listening skill, understanding the pronunciation and guessing the spelling and meaning so that they can use it a sentence. Though we have pressed with time, we used to follow this method to make them active in the class room.

Later on instead of asking them mug up the answers and reproduce in the exams, we introduced reading and we encourage them to to prepare the notes by themselves. The students were forced to copy down and browse the notes related to the topic and paraphrase the information in their own words. This activity initiated a healthy competition among the groups and they started experimenting with their understanding.

Later on we proceeded with the guided composition. Slowly we made them understand the power of reading to get the vocabulary and while writing, they were able understand the importance diction, grammar, punctuation pointers, coherence, etc., slowly exercises were given to complete the incomplete sentences, writing paragraphs on small topics, a task accordingly.

Here the university has introduced the language study in all semesters and the students complete all the courses in English and here, the teacher has an ample time to introduce various activities like linguistic games such as Word Association, Guessing the word, using it

in sentence, exercises on connectors, asking them to browse the material for a given topic and prepare the notes, encouraging the students to conduct quizzes, etc.

During the process, we overcome the problem of vocabulary by following the framework suggested by Michael Graves (2006). It has a four part approach to developing robust vocabulary:

- 1) provide rich and varied language experience,
- 2) teach individual words ,
- 3) teach word learning strategies and
- 4) foster word consciousness.

It took some of our time to motivate the students. Later on the small group activities really developed a competitive spirit among the students. We prepared the learning objectives for our lessons and understood our students' learning styles and started implementing successfully and encouraged to students to practice writing as a skill. We used instructional scaffolding in learning process to promote deeper level of learning. The support, that has been given, tailored to the needs of the students with a goal to help the students achieving his or her learning goals.

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