The Challenges that English Writing Teachers Face in Teaching Writing at the University Level in Libya

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Abstract
Teaching English writing in EFL contexts is most of the time described as a challenge. In the case of university writing teachers, the task is formidable in many cases. This paper investigates the challenges encountered by Alzawia university teachers in teaching English writing in three selected colleges. It attempts to answer the following questions: what are the challenges that writing teachers face? The findings of the study revealed teacher centred methods, unsystematic material are among the major problems that affect the way of teaching.

1. Introduction
Teaching English language in foreign language contexts is a challenging task because English is the subject of the study and the medium of instruction (Tsui 1995). When students listen to the teacher’s instructions and explanations, express their ideas, answer questions, and write about different topics, they are not only learning about the language, but also using the language that they are learning. In situations
where the exposure to the English language is limited to a few hours in the classroom as is the case in most EFL classes including Libya the context of this study, the task of language teachers in general, and writing teachers in particular, is a challenging one (Griffiths 2008:244).

This is mainly because the courses of teacher education in Libya depend on theory rather than practice and the Libyan national universities do not provide pre-service or in-service training for university teachers. Hashweh (2005:279) states ‘subject matter knowledge alone is not enough’.

Based on this, this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by university writing teachers in Libya, and tries to recommend feasible solutions.

2. Literature Review

Among the factors most frequently cited making it difficult to teach English language skills, writing in particular, in EFL classes are: teachers’ understandings, experience, and training, the influence of textbook, as well as large class size, and insufficient economic resources, (Muncia,2000:48) and (McKay1992:18). Those factors are reported by researchers working in different cultural contexts, including: China (Barkhuizan and Wette, 2008:372-87) and You (2004, 97-110), and Hungary (Medgyes and Ryan, 1996: 361-73)
In their research, Barkhuizan and Wette (2008: 372-87) used narrative frames to investigate the Chinese university teachers’ experience. The teachers stated many different problems related to their teaching context such as students’ large number, low proficiency and instrumental motivation. Also some teachers mentioned the effect of fixed syllabus and heavy workloads. Teachers work under pressure to complete the textbook and prepare students for exam. Correcting students’ papers and lesson preparation are time consuming for teachers’ out of class time. Teachers do not have time for extra reading or preparing activities, (Muncia, 2000:48).

University teachers are affected by the economic situation as well. Because of their low income, Chinese teachers; for example, work extra hours and as a result have no time for further training, (You, 2003:105). The possible lack of sufficiently economic rewards with regard to EFL writing teaching is exemplified in a research article on teaching EFL writing in Hungary (Medgyes and Ryan, 1996: 361-73). The researchers state that Hungarian university teachers are getting insufficient salaries to the extent that most of them consider their teaching at university as a part time job and work another job to get more money.
While admitting that all the above mentioned factors may have an important effect on the teachers’ practice of teaching, this research aims to investigate the contextual factors that influence the university teachers in Libya.

3. Methodology
3.1 Participants
The findings reported below are based on semi-structured interviews with 14 writing teachers working in three Libyan colleges. The participants’ teaching experience varies from 2-27 years. The population of the study consists of 2 females and 12 males.

3.2 Method of Data Collection
3.2.1 Semi structured interview
Semi structured interviews have been selected because they are flexible for more follow up of responses (McDonough and McDonough 1997:183-84). This flexibility allowed for more questions and asking for clarifications based on the interviewee’ answers.

3.2.2 The Process of Data Collection
The first step taken was to contact the heads of the English language departments in the three colleges, in order to get approval for conducting research. This initial phase required meeting the heads of departments and the staff members working in the departments where the study took place. These
contacts gave easy access to the information about the time table and facilitate the task. Writing teachers were approached for permission and clarification was given about the procedures. There were meetings with the participants before initiating data collection procedures in order to explain and clarify whatever they may ask about. Before collecting data I have explained research ethical issues such as the aims of the research and the issues explored.

3.3 Data analysis
The interview data were analysed with reference to the research question mentioned above. During the analysis I looked for answers related to the challenges that influence teachers' classroom teaching practice as well as whether they are related to students' background and culture or to the higher education. Interview data were initially coded under the broad heading then gradually modified into sub-categories referring, for example, to different types of challenges that the teachers mentioned.

4. Findings
The current teaching situation affects a teacher's teaching practice by imposing some constraints on what tasks the teacher may use (Borg 2006:284; Beach 1994:194). In what follows, an attempt will be made to answer the question raised in this study, to highlight the challenges of teaching English writing
and then to propose some recommendations that may be used in teaching writing.

4.1. Difficulties in Higher Education
The interviewed teachers mentioned that they all face the following difficulties related to students’ level, number and lack of materials.

a) Most of the interviewed writing teachers consider students’ mixed and low level as the main difficulties that they face. This is due to the fact that this problem affects the teacher’s choice of certain approaches and materials and even roles.

b. The large number of students (about 45 in each class) is another difficulty because it affects the classroom teaching practice. For example, one teacher mentioned that the class size affects his choice of activities such as group work because the class will be noisy.

i) 'If you want to apply any activity in the class, sometimes we are humbled by the number. So we cannot divide them into group, the class will be noisy'

This is mainly because teachers like to control ‘most of what is said and done in the class’ (Johnson 1998: 16). In this case, interactive activities such as group work challenges the teaching tradition as they require teachers to reduce their control over the class.
c. The third difficulty is the lack of consistent materials. For university level in Libya, there is no established curriculum to follow in selecting the textbooks. Therefore, writing teachers select the books based on their experience of students and context. They might get suggestions from the head of the department or colleagues who recommend books that they used before.

i) 'we do not have curricula. It is changeable and sometimes it depends on the teacher'

This problem seems to affect the teaching practice as students sometimes study the same content such as letter writing every year. Also it makes the task difficult mainly for the teachers who teach third and fourth year. As sometimes they find themselves obliged to start from the types of sentences where as they are supposed to teach writing essays.

4.2 Background Educational and Cultural Difficulties

The interviewed teachers mentioned other difficulties that they think affect their way of teaching writing such as how writing is taught in secondary schools, lack of writing practice in either Arabic or English and the influence of L1.

a. The way of teaching writing in secondary school.

Five of the interviewed teachers think that the way writing is taught in secondary schools is not helpful as
it is usually exam oriented and students do not practise writing. University teachers often are obliged to deal with those students as beginners although they studied English writing for three years in secondary school. This is due to the fact that they enter the university with lack of the basic skills in writing.

i) ‘the level of students they are very weak because they have not been taught writing in previous stages in primary or secondary school’.

b) Lack of practice in Arabic language

The second difficulty that the teachers mentioned is related to teaching writing in Arabic language. Students often do not practise writing in both languages sufficiently. Even in Arabic language lessons, writing is taught mainly through focussing on micro level features and trying to apply the grammatical rules in writing correct sentences. In addition, Arabic writing teachers have the assumption that students are supposed to know how to write extended pieces of writing since Arabic is their first language. Thus less practice is given and usually they do not focus on style or organization.

i) 'They have other difficulty as I said earlier they do not write in Arabic. Teachers usually do not ask them to write in Arabic’

The less practice in writing is also related to the culture as it is not common in Libya to write letters or send
cards as a way of communicating with other people. This might also indicate that the way of teaching first language might influence teaching writing in English as teachers focus on micro skills and grammar. Two teachers mentioned that students' first language which is Arabic affects the way they write in English as both languages have different structure. Those teachers are influenced by a behaviourist view which considers transfer as the cause of students' mistakes rather than the cognitive view that considers transfer as a resource that students draw upon in interlanguage development (Selinker 1972). According to Richards (1990:186) interlanguage is the language that SL students use in their process of learning another language. Students sometimes use their first language when they need to generate ideas and write about a given topic. Mclaughlin (1987:50) mentions that students tend to think in their first language because they lack the required information in the second language. In addition, this can be linked to students' previous learning experience in secondary school where teachers used grammar translation method and students used to translate the texts to Arabic. As a consequence students tend to think in Arabic and then translate their sentences into English. 
i) 'They think may be in Arabic and write in English'
This leads to many mistakes such as word order and wrong collocations. For example, in Arabic the adjective follows the noun whereas in English it precedes the noun.

5. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In this study, the challenges of teaching English writing at the university level in Libya were investigated. Part of these challenges is related to higher education like students’ level and number. In addition, in contrast with basic and secondary education, there is no consistent syllabus to teach in the higher education. For the non Libyan teachers, they might have practical knowledge about designing courses but they lack the knowledge of context and learners to select appropriate materials. The other challenges that the teachers mentioned are related to students’ background education and culture such as the lack of writing practice in Arabic and its interference in learning English.

On the basis of the findings from the empirical fieldwork and my experience in teaching English writing in Libya, I would recommend the following steps for the heads of departments and university teachers:

The use of a university graded syllabus which has clear learning outcomes, methods of presenting the content of the syllabus and criteria of assessing
students’ writing are essential at the university level. These features are likely to influence the consistency of students’ level and progress in writing. Formal and informal forums of professional development to which all teachers have access should be provided to support teachers in their efforts to improve their teaching skills.

References
Medgyes, P. and Ryan, P. (1996) 'the Integration of Academic writing skills with other Curriculum Components in Teacher education'. System. 24(3), 361-373