

DEVELOPMENT OF A WRITING CURRICULUM FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES AT TERTIARY LEVEL: THE CASE OF ALGERIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Writing requirements and standards may differ from one field of study to another. There is no one perfect writing curriculum that can meet every goal of the institution, departmental demand and students' needs. This paper tries to analyse both the university requirements for the English academic degree in Algeria, and students' needs in order to develop a pedagogical framework that would answer both exigencies. Along this line, we suggest the implementation of a strategy-based writing curriculum for EFL university students that would develop their strategic competence (i.e. develop within learners a vision of writing as a process and build up the related strategies of planning, drafting, revising etc.) and consolidate their linguistic knowledge (i.e. build up students' mastery of the syntactic and textual aspects of writing).

KEY WORDS: writing, curriculum, learner needs, target needs, strategic competence, metacognition.

RESUME

Les exigences et les normes de l'écriture sont différentes d'un domaine d'étude à l'autre. Il n'existe pas un programme parfait pour l'enseignement de l'expression écrite qui peut répondre aux objectifs de toutes les institutions, à la demande des ministères et aux besoins des apprenants. Cet article tente d'analyser à la fois les exigences de l'université pour le diplôme de licence d'anglais en Algérie, et les besoins des étudiants afin de développer un cadre pédagogique qui permettrait de répondre à la fois aux deux exigences. En partant de ce principe, nous suggérons la mise en œuvre d'un programme pour l'enseignement de l'expression écrite basé sur l'apprentissage des stratégies pour les étudiants universitaires d'anglais langue étrangère (EFL) qui renforceraient leur compétence stratégique (c.-à développer au sein des apprenants une vision de l'écriture comme un processus et mettre en place les stratégies connexes de planification, de rédaction, révision, etc.) et de consolider leurs connaissances linguistiques (à savoir la construction de la maîtrise des élèves des aspects syntaxiques et textuelles de l'écriture).

MOTS CLES : l'écriture, curriculum, les besoins des apprenants, les besoins cibles, la compétence stratégique, la métacognition.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four basic language skills that has increasing significance for English ‘licence’¹ degree students as it represents the main medium they use to do assignments in the different subject areas and answer examination questions. In fact, writing failure for these students is more likely to result in educational failure, because lacking the means to communicate their knowledge, students will find it difficult to answer properly the questions they are assigned. However, the Algerian English degree student is still found to be lacking in the English language competence in general and in writing competence in particular. Bouhadiba (2000 :104) explains that one of the reasons for this low achievement is that:

No adequate responsive educational or pedagogical programmes have been suggested this far. The BA curriculum dates back to the 1980s (perhaps prior to this date) and no substantial change has been brought about in spite of the drastic changes in the social-economic environment.

Therefore, the importance of developing a writing curriculum for academic purposes that would serve the purposes of EFL university students. In this enterprise one needs to consider two important parameters at the same time: the institution demands or target needs, i.e. what the learner needs to do in the target situation; and learner needs, i.e. what the learner needs to do in order to learn (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The present paper will try to bring the two sets of needs together and propose a writing curriculum that would apply to EFL university students.

UNIVERSITY REQUIREMENTS

In Algeria, the new ‘Baccalaureat’ holders enrolled in English departments normally spend a period of four years study to graduate and obtain the English ‘Licence’ degree². During this period students are theoretically assisted and trained to become either English teachers in Secondary Schools or to carry on post graduate studies at University upon an admission test. The first two years of graduation aim at consolidating the basis of the language already acquired in Secondary Schools (5 years of English learning³). Therefore, the modules students are concerned with deal mainly with the teaching of the target language system and skills: grammar, written expression, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and oral expression, in addition to phonetics, linguistics, and the Arabic language and literature. Content modules such as civilisation and literature are taught in the second, third and fourth years. It should be pointed out that in the fourth year, students are also required to choose between writing an extended essay which would present a small scale research, or attending teacher training sessions in a Secondary School followed by writing the training report.

EFL students have to develop a sound proficiency in writing skills in order to respond successfully to university writing assignments. They are required to have a command of the linguistic system of English and to master the sentence and paragraph structures to be able to complete different types of writings either as home or class assignments. These students are required to write when realising exercises, research papers, report, etc. and when answering the examinations they are to take in the

¹ The Licence degree is the equivalent of the BA degree.

² Presently the LMD system is taking place little by little in Algerian universities. In this system the time spent for a licence degree is 3 years.

³ This period has been extended to 7 years since 2002.

various modules of their curriculum. Above all, these students should be able to criticise, synthesise, analyse coherently a situation and ultimately undertake research. In sum, these students are prepared to be either future English teachers who need to master all the four language skills, and thus, be competent writers who understand and master the writing conventions of the language to be able to transmit them to their pupils; or future researchers who need to present coherently and convincingly their findings in a written form.

EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' NEEDS

Though the analysis of the target situation needs gives the general direction of the writing course the specific route is determined only through an analysis of learners' needs. This second step is important for designing a relevant curriculum and appropriate materials. Yet it is quite a complex task which requires the course designer to consider some important questions such as:

- What are students' weaknesses?
- What do they need to learn?
- What will they do with the learned skill / items?

Let's start with considering the first question. Many new entrants to University have serious deficiencies in English. In spite of their five years of pre-university English learning, most students have difficulties in both oral and written expression. In class, teachers report students' inability to construct appropriate error-free sentences. Likewise, when writing they seem to be unaware of the basics of writing such as the mechanics of writing (e.g. capitalisation, punctuation, indentation), grammar (e.g. subject-verb agreement, use of pronouns) and vocabulary (e.g. frequently using anglicised borrowings from French). Their compositions are merely a list of ideas lacking cohesion and coherence.

To have a clearer idea about the first year university student's writing proficiency level, Ourghi (2002) carried out a research work in the English Department (Tlemcen University) and analysed short texts written by new university students during their first two weeks at the university. He distinguished two proficiency levels: low-intermediate (nearly 80% of the new students) and high-intermediate (around 20% of the new students) describing each category as follows:

High-intermediate (developing) level	Low-intermediate (basic) level
<p>Abilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -accurate grasp and use of writing mechanics (fair accuracy in punctuation, spelling and capitalisation) - correct construction of different sentence patterns; ability to write a meaningful text and to convey clear ideas, despite the problem of inadequate vocabulary); - good knowledge of cohesive ties and discourse-organising connectors; - ability to expand short paragraphs into a whole text. <p>Lacks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of contextual knowledge (unawareness of readership); - insufficient composing strategies (drafting and revising); - a tendency to be prolific (free writing) without monitoring one’s performance 	<p>Abilities:</p> <p>Production of short texts; division of texts into two paragraphs; convey ideas with clear difficulty.</p> <p>Lacks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of control of basic syntactic structures; inadequate knowledge of writing mechanics; limited vocabulary; - Unawareness of useful writing micro-skills and composing strategies.

Table 1: Description of students’ proficiency levels

(Ourghi 2002:42)

This situation is worrying all the more as these students seem to be unaware of useful writing strategies. In effect, in a research investigating EFL students’ writing processes I undertook at the department of English, University of Tlemcen (Hamzaoui-El Achachi, 2006), I noted that students showed little use of strategies when writing an essay in English. Many students did not use those successful essay writing strategies such as brainstorming, key words, planning and revision. Moreover, a careful study of five metacognitive strategies⁴ (i.e. topic reading, planning, key words,

⁴ O’Malley & Chamot (1990) put learning strategies under three categories: *Metacognitive strategies* defined as “higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of learning activity”(p44); *Cognitive strategies* which are often specific to distinct learning activities; and *Social/ Affective strategies* which refer to a broad set of strategies involving “either interaction with another person or ideational control over affect”(p45)

self-monitoring and revision) revealed that some students used these strategies inappropriately and thus ineffectively. This affected the content, organisation and coherence of their essays. I also noted an overuse of translation (either from French or from Arabic to English) which impeded students' writing process and resulted in fragmentary compositions. To summarise, this study revealed that lack of use or ineffective use of strategies affected the quality of students' compositions and was reflected in the low grades obtained on their essays. In fact, it should be noted that the benefits of effective use of writing strategies has been highlighted many times as conducive to writing competence (Jones 1982, Graham 1997, Kasper 1997).

Regarding the second question: What do students need to learn? It appears clearly that EFL university students need to develop a good command of the linguistic system of English as well as its actual use in order to write different text types respecting the rules and conventions of written English, i.e. a correct use of grammatical rules and sentence patterns, appropriate use of vocabulary and good organisation of ideas. Students will also need to learn some study skills such as outlining and note taking in addition to essay writing using different modes of discourse and creative writing. They will also need to learn how to present a research work in a written form.

Finally, what would they do with the learned skill? A good mastery of the writing skill will pave the way to these students to academic success, allow them to transmit this skill to their learners if they are future teachers and enable them to present successfully their findings if they are to undertake research.

This brief presentation of learner needs and target needs helps clarifying the objectives of a writing curriculum that would serve the purposes of EFL university students.

TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WRITING CURRICULUM FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES AT TERTIARY LEVEL

Most English university teachers of writing use a language based curriculum giving priority to language mastery and focusing grammatical accuracy. Indeed, without *linguistic competence* one cannot reach effectiveness in writing, but that students develop their *strategic competence* (i.e., full and proficient use of writing strategies) to achieve writing competence is as important. Thereafter, we believe that students should be taught not only language forms and structures but how to set their writing goals, and to develop effective strategies to reach these goals as well. In sum, to promote learning of the writing skill and improve its performance, it is important to design a writing curriculum that develops a two-directional teaching procedure working in a parallel manner: to promote students' strategic competence (by developing within the learner a vision of writing as a process and build up the related strategies and reinforcing their metacognition) and consolidate their linguistic knowledge.

a) Developing Students' Strategic Competence

To develop EFL students' strategic competence, our curriculum will have three main objectives:

- 1) promote metacognitive knowledge
- 2) instruct writing strategies
- 3) develop learner positive attitudes towards the writing course.

First, this curriculum aims to develop metacognitive knowledge within students, that is those “beliefs, insights, and concepts” that students “have acquired about language and the language learning process” (Wenden 1991:34). Three types of metacognitive knowledge are defined by Wenden:

- Person knowledge i.e. the learner’s beliefs and views on how learning takes place, on factors that enhance or inhibit it and on himself as a language learner.
- Strategic knowledge i.e. the learner’s understanding of which strategies work best under which circumstances.
- Task knowledge i.e. the learners understanding of how a certain task should be completed, the reason for doing the task, and the resources required for its completion.

Acquisition of the metacognitive knowledge enables students to reflect, evaluate and revise their knowledge to gain greater control over the learned strategies and the learning programme in general as explained by Anderson (2002): “When learners reflect upon their learning strategies they become better prepared to make conscious decision about what they can do to improve their learning.”

Indeed, metacognitive knowledge is very important for writing achievement. It helps students monitor and evaluate a plan of action that will help them complete successfully a writing task as revealed by many studies. Victori (1999) shows in his study that successful and unsuccessful foreign language writers can be distinguished by their metacognitive knowledge in each of the three domains cited above. Likewise, Devine (1993) and Kasper (1997) establish a positive correlation between metacognitive knowledge and writing performance. These results lead us to give due attention to the development of metacognition in the suggested curriculum to enable our learners to take on responsibility for self-direction in writing and become autonomous. Moreover, this metacognitive knowledge will be used by students to build up the broken bridges between modules. Students will perceive the relevance of the writing instruction received to the other subject modules such as civilisation or literature and will transfer the skills and strategies acquired in the writing class to write a book report or analyse a historical event, or apply the rules learned in the grammar module to write in any other module.

Second, this curriculum aims at developing writing strategies i.e. actions, behaviours, tactics or techniques used to facilitate writing and overcome the difficulties encountered. As mentioned above, knowledge of effective writing strategies helps students produce more effective compositions and achieve autonomy in writing. But Will the focus be on those highly generalizable strategies (i.e. metacognitive strategies such as planning and self-monitoring) or on some strategies specific to individual tasks (i.e. cognitive strategies such as translation, approximation and circumlocution) or on those strategies that enable learners to control their affect and facilitate interaction with others (i.e. social/ affective strategies such as avoidance and risk-taking)?

The results of research which examined the effectiveness of teaching different types of strategies (O’Malley, 1987; Vann and Abraham, 1990) imply that training students to use cognitive and social/ affective strategies successfully will probably help them in generating sentences, overcoming writing difficulties and controlling anxiety related to the task, but students will not be able to plan, control and evaluate the writing task they engage in unless they learn some effective metacognitive strategies. It, then, appears essential to combine the three types of strategies (metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies) in a strategy-based writing course.

Third, it is not least important to consider the learner's attitude towards his role in the learning process and his ability to learn in this pedagogic undertaking. In a learner training framework such as the one proposed, the learner should assume an additional responsibility once reserved to the teacher. Thus, when coming from an educational system which promotes teacher dependency (the case of our learners) he will encounter conflicting demands, that will render his task of assuming his new role of independent learner even more difficult and may lead him to develop a negative attitude towards learning. In this situation, the teacher will act thoroughly as a manager of the process of change by guiding and providing learners with motivating tasks, opportunities to learn, think and discover the real nature of writing, without neglecting praise and reward of hard work and effort. Through this teacher behaviour the learner will develop a positive attitude towards learning, accept the additional responsibility given to him and believe in his ability to manage it.

b) Consolidating Students' Linguistic Knowledge

Besides developing students' strategic competence in writing, it is important to build up students' linguistic competence. Then, besides strategy training, the teaching programme will try to activate and reinforce students' passive lexical, grammatical and orthographic knowledge and language structure so that students learn to edit their compositions. Language accuracy and appropriateness are also given due attention through the use of those strategies looking for clarity of content and accuracy of language (e.g. revision and self-monitoring).

Moreover, it is important to teach students to write for an audience and to take into consideration the reader's expectation and use the appropriate mode of discourse relevant to the topic type and text-type.

Writing in English will be rarely done by EFL students outside the classroom (which could be an occasional letter to a pen-friend, an e-mail, or a short formal letter to an institution). Therefore, most EFL writings will meet the institution requirements i.e. reports, articles, summaries, outlines, abstracts, research papers and essays. In their writings students will be required to use different modes of discourse such as narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. Consequently, it is essential that EFL students be taught how to produce these types of writing as pointed out by Reid (2001:153): "Exposing ESL students to the functions and forms of the writing requirements and assignments they are almost certain to encounter in their future courses is essential to EAP instruction."

So, students need to know how to write for each type of text, being fluent and accurate, using the required discourse mode and addressing the intended audience. This is necessary to answer subject modules questions, because acquiring knowledge without having the linguistic means to transmit it in the written form will certainly prevent learners from academic success.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the suggested writing curriculum is to improve students' writing performance by working in a parallel manner on two areas:

- 1) Develop students' awareness and training of some effective writing strategies such as thinking, brainstorming, outlining, planning, drafting, redrafting, revising and editing the linguistic product, involving both individual and peer evaluation of the written work.

2) Consolidate students' knowledge in grammar, discourse conventions, discourse patterns, semantics and writing mechanics.

In fact, the proposed writing curriculum aims not only to fulfil university requirements but also to serve EFL students by preparing them to become successful, confident, efficient effective academic writers.

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Bio-bibliography

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