79. Academic Writing in the Yemeni EFL Context: History, Challenges and Future Research

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ABSTRACT

With the efforts of institutions of higher education towards excellence and globalisation, there is a growing awareness of using English as a medium of instruction in higher education in Yemen. However, similar to other EFL countries, the results of previous EFL literacy studies in Yemen indicate that university students are facing many difficulties and problems in acquiring the EFL literacy skills necessary to cope with the rigorous academic demands expected at the university level. In addition, it has been reported that the lack of proficiency among students in higher education is related to the gap between the current state of the preparation process at the secondary school level and the expected level required at the tertiary level with regards to both curriculum and instruction. This paper provides an overview of the problems and challenges of English writing instruction in the Yemeni EFL context and presents guidelines for the overall improvement of the secondary curriculum and the preparation for higher education learning.

Keyword: EFL, Academic Writing, Higher Education, Secondary Education

Introduction

English is a global language (Crystal, 2003). In the globalised higher education sector, English has become even more important (Sidek, 2012). Among English language skills, writing is one of the most important methods of communication (Reigstad, 2008). Writing proficiency is invaluable to support academic communication and academic performance and success (Stoynoff, 1997 cited in Sidek, 2010). According to (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007), effective writing skills are essential for success in higher education. The importance of writing lies in its extensive use in education and in the workplace. In education, writing is the way by which students communicate professionally with instructors and peers, and participate in teaching and learning activities. According to Reigstad (2008), “we acquire knowledge through reading the written word, and we express ourselves to others through the use of the written word”. In the workplace, college graduates should have effective communication and writing skills to be able to manage daily operations, make decisions, and document and report large amounts of complex information (Jones, 1995).

For university students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the ability to write academic text effectively is one of the most important skills required. In Yemen and other Arab countries, English is taught as a foreign language at schools and universities. This only complicates the problem of written English proficiency. Prior to its empirical investigation, this paper presents an overview of the secondary curriculum development, along with problems and challenges of writing in the secondary and higher education levels. The paper concludes by proposing guidelines for the overall improvement of academic writing in the context of EFL counties.

Literature

English Language Instruction in Yemen

The English language was first introduced by the British in the southern part of Yemen in the early decades of the 19th century. Yemen is one of several countries that teach English as a foreign language at schools. It is a compulsory subject in the general curriculum of the Yemeni preparatory and secondary schools. At the university level, English is a required subject in the first year in all departments, except in the Department of English in the Faculties of Education, Arts and Languages where it is the major field of study. In specific scientific departments, such as Medicine and
Engineering, English is the main medium of instruction. The nature of English usage varies from one faculty to another. In faculties such as Arts, Languages and Education, English is taught for general purposes. In the fields of Science, Medicine, and Engineering, and for students in technical education and vocational training, English is taught for specific purposes (Alaliee, 2006). Outside the formal education system, many private English language institutes have been established throughout the country to provide various English courses for students and teachers.

Because of the increasing importance of the English language, there is a growing focus on teaching it throughout the world. In Yemen, such efforts can be seen in the continual development of different programs and curricula for teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The Ministry of Education, for example, places great importance on English teaching and learning. Teaching English starts from the preparatory level (grade seven) and, at the time of the present study, there is a plan to start teaching it from grade four. In addition, many professional training programs for the accreditation of English language teachers have been developed to ensure teachers have the required skills to teach English as a foreign language. In a sign of the continual improvement of the curriculum, the Ministry of Education has updated the textbooks four times since 1981 (Hasan, 2010).

Secondary School English Curriculum in Yemen

The Yemeni education system provides 12 years of basic education, composed of nine years of primary education and three years of secondary education. Students are required to pass an English paper as part of the Yemeni certificate examinations in grade 9 or Yemeni secondary school certificate in grade 12, before they are awarded a certificate. Various textbooks are used for teaching English in the school system. “English for Use” was the first textbook to be used in the teaching of English as a foreign language in primary and secondary schools in 1962. In the 1968/1969 academic year, “English for Use” was replaced by a new course called “Living English for the Arab World”. In 1982/1983, English was taught through two different courses: the first course was called “Crescent”; and the second course was called “The English Course for Yemen”, which was prepared by a team from the British Council (Mountford in Al-Mushriquee, 2004). “The English Course for Yemen” continued to be taught until 1992. After the unification of Yemen in 1990, the Ministry of Education developed a new curriculum called the “Crescent English Course for Yemen” which was published in cooperation with Oxford Press and is still taught today.

The Crescent English Course was published after conducting research, conferences, and seminar discussions over a number of years (Teacher’s Guide, Book 6). The course presents a combined syllabus and methodology drawn from a variety of sources. It adopts an integrated skill approach aiming to promote learning through meaningful individual and interactive tasks. As the course develops and learners become more familiar with the mechanics of the language, they are expected to do more for themselves, such as memorising vocabulary and spelling at home for example (Teacher’s Guide, Books 3 and 6).

The Crescent English Course pioneered the communicative approach to language learning and teaching (Teacher’s Guide, Book 6). It contains communicative activities that mainly help the learner to develop his/her communicative ability through participation, reflecting real-life situations in the classroom for the purpose of using the language competently (Hasan, 2010). In addition, the course provides a functional/structural syllabus that needs to be taught by the teacher communicatively in the classroom.

The instructional materials for English typically focus on the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The number of students in an English language classroom in a primary or secondary school is typically 40-60, and the duration of the class session is approximately 45 minutes. English is taught for three to four hours per week. The textbook currently assigned for the secondary school level, particularly grade 12, is Book 6. Topics are organised in six units, with each unit containing texts of different lengths that deal with various topics. Every chapter includes tasks related to reading, listening, grammar, and writing. The textbook and the workbook are presented in two separate books. In the writing part, students are taught how to write descriptions, instructions, reports, articles, and simple speeches. The present research conducts a comprehensive investigation of Book 6 in order to analyse the content and to assess the extent to which the EFL writing approaches and strategies are reflected in this curriculum.
The Crescent English Course is based on communicative language teaching (CLT) which, according to Galloway in Al-Mushriquee (2004), considers the learner as the centre of the learning process. In the CLT approach, students are engaged in activities that give them the opportunity to think critically and use the target language in meaningful contexts and in new ways. Students in a communicative class ultimately have to use the language productively and receptively in unrehearsed contexts outside the classroom. Classroom tasks must therefore equip students with the skills necessary for communication in those contexts. Brown (2002) described the teacher as a communicator who participates with students to build their confidence. In the communicative language teacher as a facilitator or counsellor who facilitates the communication process between the students in the classroom and between those students and the different activities or texts (Ghassan, 2009).

**The Role of English in Higher Education in Yemen**

From 1990 to 2000, higher education in Yemen witnessed tremendous radical changes. During that period, more than fifteen public and private universities, many two-year colleges, and a number of post-secondary institutes were established in the country. As explained above, the English language is a compulsory subject in any major at colleges of higher education, either public or private, and students need to pass this subject before being awarded their certificate. In courses like Medicine and Engineering, all the subjects are written in English and the instruction is delivered in English. Therefore, students have to be competent in the English language for their overall academic achievement and success.

The Yemeni University English Placement Test (EPT) was introduced to measure the English language proficiency of students to start their university studies. The EPT has recently become a compulsory requirement for admission into public universities in Yemen. Students who want to undertake undergraduate studies at a public university have to sit for the EPT during the university registration process. The EPT is comprised of four sections: listening, speaking, reading comprehension, and writing. The maximum scores for each section are 15 for listening, 10 for speaking, 35 for writing, and 40 for reading. The test results are grouped in six bands, from Band 1 being the lowest to Band 6 being the highest. The EPT result determines whether a student is accepted into the university or not. In some faculties, the EPT results determine the number of English language preparatory courses required of the student while at university.

**English Academic Writing at Yemeni Universities.** In Yemeni universities, two approaches are used to improve academic literacy and learner proficiency in English skills including academic writing. In some universities, students are required to study English language preparatory courses as part of their academic program. The number of courses required of the student is based on the EPT results. The preparatory courses have different names across the different universities, however, they have the similar objectives of equipping learners with the necessary skills and knowledge required at the university level and to develop their academic literacy. Some universities integrate English modules in the study plan, which students have to take in the first year parallel with other courses. Whether the courses are preparatory or integrated, the aim is to prepare students so that they have the language skills needed to compete in the academic environment. In relation to writing skills, these courses cover writing for specific purposes and technical writing. Despite the importance of the English language at the secondary and university levels in Yemen, many problems, challenges and obstacles continue to face both teachers and students at all stages of the Yemeni educational system (Al-Mushriquee, 2004).

**Problems and Challenges of Writing in English in Yemen.** As discussed earlier, EFL writing is still one of the most challenging areas for teachers and students. In the Arab context, the challenges are enormous for learners of English writing, as demonstrated by many researchers (e.g. Ahmed, 2010; Rabab’ah 2005; Abbad 1988). Writing in English is a skill that is often neglected in Arab secondary schools (Rabab’ah, 2005; Ahmed, 2010). In relation to academic performance, a number of studies set in the Arab world have highlighted students’ coherence problems in English writing. For example, a study of Arab students’ written texts revealed that repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices were major sources of incoherence and textual deviation (Qaddumi, 1995). Other studies have asserted that Yemini and
Moroccan students have some weaknesses in terms of coherence and cohesion, as manifested in the students’ written texts (Ahmed, 2010).

Arab and Yemeni learners appear to have many problems when writing in English, such as not knowing how to organise their ideas. This is due in part to their lack of experience writing in English. More specifically, in the context of the present study in Yemen, although writing plays a vital role in the four basic language skills, it has long been ignored in Yemeni secondary schools (Abbad, 1998). Compared to the other three skills, writing is considered too complicated to teach. Some teachers do not feel confident about their own English and steer away from designing writing tasks or getting students to write more than just grammatical exercises. In reality, most teachers follow the tasks required in the textbook, and sometimes allow students to simply copy the models from the book. It is noticeable that writing occupies a lower position in Yemeni secondary English classrooms. Furthermore, it has long been the tradition that teachers are responsible for correcting their students’ writing. Thus, students write for the teacher, not for themselves, and as a result, teachers are the only audience for whom students gain experience writing. One result of this is that writing teachers are often overloaded with the task of giving feedback to and correcting students’ writing. This has led to a situation in which teacher-controlled feedback remains dominant in Yemeni English writing classrooms.

The problem of English teaching in secondary schools in Yemen has been a topic of significant research. Haitham (2004) revealed that there are real problems faced by teachers and students in teaching and learning English at the secondary school level in Yemen. The most significant problem was the irrelevance of the content to students’ real-life situations. It was also noted that students commonly believed English was too difficult to learn, and there was a lack of qualified teachers. A study conducted by Awadh (2000) revealed that English teaching faced a number of problems, including students’ general weakness in English and the failure to recognise the role of teachers in designing the curriculum. In relation to the factors that might affect English language teaching at the secondary school level, Thapaliya (2010) found that the teaching load, lack of time, and overcrowded classes were the most important factors.

The many difficulties and challenges that affect English language teaching in secondary schools in Yemen, in turn, negatively affect the teaching and learning of the English language at the university level. Abbad (1988) found a low level of English proficiency among Yemeni learners at the university level in English language faculties and departments. Nofal (2011) noted that students’ English language proficiency at the university level was not satisfactory, nor the teachers’ qualifications and competencies.

At the university level, many difficulties and challenges are reported. In general, writing in English is one of the biggest challenges to learning at university (Kim, Mendenhall et al., 2010). Students appeared to have many problems in organizing their ideas (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010), creating coherent and well-reasoned writing content, developing extended arguments and providing supportive evidence for their arguments (Campbell, Smith et al., 1998). In the Yemeni and Arabic context, English is taught as a foreign language at schools and universities (Al-Hussaini, 2009), this complicated the problem. Many studies conducted in the Yemeni context have reported that Yemeni learners face problems in acquiring the required English skills at the university level. For example, Al-Mehwari (2005) identified that the most significant problems faced by both students and teachers in teaching English at the university level were the course teaching methods, the course content, and the course assessment methods. Al-Refa’ai (2001) found that teaching methods, the courses adopted, teaching materials, and the assessment used by teachers were the main factors that influenced students’ achievement in the English language. Further, one of the most significant problems faced by Yemeni universities is the lack of competent teachers.

Most EFL writing problems are associated with the secondary school level, from which many students graduate only to face difficulties in adapting to the academic writing requirements at the university level (Jakobs et al. 1999). According to Weshah and Tomok (2011), the vast majority of university students graduate from secondary schools with low levels of communicative ability in English, particularly in written communication skills. The results of previous studies have revealed that EFL university students in many EFL countries appear to have many difficulties despite the long period of preparation at secondary school. For example, in Korea, students receive EFL preparation for 10 years (Ahn, 2003 cited in Sidek, 2010) at elementary and secondary school levels, however,
most of them are unable to speak or read English at the university level (Dickey, 2004 cited in Sidek, 2010). In a study in Yemen, many university students were poor speakers and writers despite the six years of preparation in primary and secondary school. Abbad (1988) suggested that the students’ problems were due to the inappropriate methods of language instruction and the learning environment which may be unsuitable for learning a foreign language. The present study thus investigates the curriculum content and language teaching at the secondary school level in order to identify the main factors impacting on the effectiveness of English teaching and learning at that level.

**Guidelines for Future Research**

In summary, many researchers have reported that EFL learners at the university level face a range of difficulties and problems in acquiring the English skills required for academic achievement and success. In addition, some studies have suggested that the lack of proficiency among students in higher education can be linked to the secondary school level. To date, there is a need for further investigation of the problematic aspects of EFL teaching at the secondary school level and an analysis of the extent to which the preparation at this level might affect students’ writing academic proficiency in higher education.

The problem of declining English proficiency levels is due to the failure to take the aims of English language skills into consideration and apply them in a way that corresponds to the learners’ cultural, social, and cognitive needs. Many aspects of language teaching, such as curriculum design, teacher qualifications, student preparation and the nature of the syllabus adopted at all stages of education, need to be considered for the purpose of evaluation and improvement. Therefore, investigation and evaluation processes are needed at every level of the educational system: primary, secondary, and higher education. For further improvement of English literacy in the Yemeni EFL context, there are possible directions for curriculum evaluation and research development as detailed below.

**Preparation Process in the Secondary Level**

Based on the above discussions, it can be concluded that secondary English curriculum has long been a compulsory subject taught for six years before university. In addition, the Yemeni secondary English curriculum was designed based on CLT principles. Although communicative language teaching is well suited for learning and teaching English, the linguistic performance of students in Yemen is still poor and unsatisfactory (Thabit, 2002). According to Al Aqeeli (2007), the attainment of Yemeni students in learning English is quite poor and this is shown when they face real-life situations in which they have to communicate and interact. A number of researchers, such as Al-Mushriquee (2004) and Al-Kadasi (1999), have reported that students do not have enough knowledge of how to communicate by using appropriate social language. That is why they are not able to communicate in the target language they study as well as expected. While they are supposed to use the language communicatively, Yemeni students show quite poor proficiency in the English language. Between 60-70% of Yemeni students leave secondary school (after studying English for six years) without achieving an optimal proficiency level in English (Al-Mekhlafy, 2008). They tend to study English with the aim to simply pass the final examinations rather than to make use of it in their future life.

In the university level, research has emphasised that students are facing difficulties acquiring the level of English writing proficiency necessary to compete in an academic environment, which in turns affect their academic performance and achievement. This raises the question regarding the extent to which the preparation process in both the curriculum design principles as well as the instruction strategies and methods are adapted in the secondary level. The lack of academic writing proficiency in higher education is related to the proficiency achieved in previous levels. This may be due to the absence of a systematic approach in Yemeni schools leading to a gap between the curriculum and the techniques used in teaching the communicative approach. Investigating the preparation process in the secondary stages, which is the most important stage for students to move to higher education, will directly affect their performance at the university level.
Teaching and Learning Approaches

It is clear that the English language teaching process faces many problems and challenges. Another possible reason for the lack of English proficiency among students relates to the instruction methods. The way English is taught in Yemeni schools today is responsible, to a great extent, for the low levels of English language proficiency in the country. This may be due to the absence of a systematic approach in Yemeni schools leading to a gap between the curriculum and the techniques used in teaching the communicative approach. Therefore investigating the instruction methods used and the alignment between the teaching and learning strategies adopted in the classroom with the CLT approach is recommended for future research. For example, the cooperative and communicative learning enables students to maximise their own and each other’s learning (Johnson et al., 1984). Investigating learners’ and teacher roles using classroom observations would contribute to a better understanding of (a) the current problems, and (b) the alignment between the curriculum and instruction.

Curriculum Evaluation and Development

Curriculum is the backbone of any teaching and learning environment. Without a proper curriculum it is difficult to gauge where student are heading (Wallin, 2011). Curriculum evaluation is an essential process in teaching and learning. Through evaluation, the faculty can discover whether a curriculum is fulfilling its purpose and whether students are actually learning (DiFlorio et al., 1989). In the context of this study, we have argued that despite the Yemeni secondary curriculum being designed based on the communicative approach, a number of issues need to be evaluated, such as teacher roles, learner roles, and the types of writing tasks. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the secondary and university curricula is required to evaluate the design principles and the alignment of the curriculum with SLA and L2 writing theories and approaches.

The SLA theories and instructional approaches reflected in the EFL secondary writing curriculum can be analysed in relation to three main SLA theories and their related instructional approaches, namely: structural/behaviourism approach, cognitive information processing approach, and the socio-cognitive/socio-cultural approach. The learner roles can be analysed based on the descriptions of Richards and Rodger (2001) as well as Johnson and Paulston (1976). The learner roles contain the types of learning tasks set for learners in the form of learning assignments, given to students in terms of learner groupings, whether they are individual or pair/group. In related to the teacher roles, the curriculum should impart more emphasis on the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than as director. Promoting a learner-centred environment will create an opportunity for students to improve their language skills through self and peer-reflection, and this will result in students being more capable when working independently on a variety of writing tasks. In addition, to prepare students with the required academic skills, it is important to have information about the types of writing tasks actually required and about the instructors' purposes in assigning these tasks (Shih, 1986). If EFL instruction focuses on training students more toward narrative writing, than with regards to expository writing students might overcome the difficulties of academic writing thereby assisting in boosting their academic performance at university.

Conclusion

Academic writing is perhaps the most important skill required in higher educational settings for the purposes of academic communication, academic performance, as well as academic achievement and success. However, the results of many studies in the EFL context confirmed that students are facing difficulties in mastering the required academic writing skills, particularly at the higher education level. This paper reviewed the problem in the Yemeni EFL context, and proposed directions for undertaking further studies. The proposed assumptions presented in the paper relate to the preparation process in the secondary level whereby instruction and curriculum will help in identifying the relevant factors that are causing these problems.
Reference


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