

Problems of Teaching English in the Iraqi Context: Teaching Writing in Focus

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Abstract

Teaching writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) is challenging, especially in non English-speaking countries, where English is taught as a school subject rather than a means of communication. In Iraq, there still seem to be many weak writers despite the fact that the majority of them have had a long exposure to English teaching at school, at university and beyond. This research addresses the primary pedagogical, linguistic and situational challenges that hinder the writing instruction in the Iraqi EFL classrooms. Investigating general EFL writing pedagogy in the Iraqi context, this study integrates findings of research conducted in Iraqi universities and schools regarding grammar problems, poor vocabulary, L1 interferences, inadequate writing practice, unhelpful feedback procedures, syllabus limitations and teacher training insufficiencies. A descriptive analytical approach, drawn on literature review is utilized. The results show that the sources of writing problems are the complex mix of learner-, teacher-, and institution-related factors. The last chapter of the research proposes a number of pedagogical improvements involving writing process methodologies, better teacher education, more powerful feedback practices, and curricular changes with a greater emphasis on writing development.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the English language has become more important globally than ever before. It is the primary means of international communication for higher education, science, business, diplomacy, and digital technology. As globalization furthers the development of academic and business networks, English proficiency is becoming an ever more necessary qualification for participation in the exchange of international knowledge. English is not simply another foreign language taught at schools in countries such as Iraq, it is a key academic and professional instrument that dictates a student's opportunities for further education and employment.

English is a compulsory subject in schools in Iraq from elementary school through high school and postsecondary education. Students typically have more than a dozen years of instruction in English before they enter college. Although such exposure is prolonged, many students graduating from English-medium secondary schools are ill-equipped to communicate well, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. Talking, listening, reading and writing are the four language skills that Iraqi students struggle with the most.

Writing is a complex verbal-cognitive activity that involves the coordination of various processes. Writing involves elaborate planning, organizing, revising, and editing, while speaking allows for on-the-spot modification and contextual support. Generating ideas, organizing those ideas logically, being grammatically correct, using appropriate vocabulary, being coherent, cohesive, and aware of audience and purpose. Writing is even more challenging for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, as they often have very limited access to genuine English input beyond the four walls of the classroom.

In daily life there is no use for English as a means of communication but only as a subject to be taught in Iraq's schooling system. This limited access negatively affects the pace of learning natural language and the amount of practice authentic writing. Students do not acquire genuine communicative competence; rather, they resort to memorizing strategies in order to overcome examinations. Instead of being perceived as an instrument for meaningful expressing, writing is often seen as a mechanical activity focused on language correctness.

The challenge of teaching writing in the Iraqi context is not reducible to students' deficiencies. Rather, they seem to be transient, fluctuating effects of systemic, pedagogical and linguistic conditions. Grammar, restrictions on vocabulary and interference from the L1 are linguistic difficulties students encounter. It is also the case that sentence structure and text organisation are often negatively influenced by the profound differences between Arabic and English rhetorical structures. What, admittedly in the past had been a non-teaching pedagogy—traditional teacher-centred-style, classroom-education—still has a grip. Many instructors advocate how writing should be taught by always including drafting, revision, and peer editing, as well as writing process-based instruction. It is obscured further by institutional pressures. Crowding, brevity, an exam-oriented

curriculum, and scant teacher training all take their toll on writing instruction. Writing is often regarded as a second-tier skill in relation to reading comprehension and grammar activities, particularly in early education. As a result, when students enter university, they possess little confidence or fluency in writing. When it comes to Iraq, solving writing problems has significance beyond graduation. Writing is necessary to engage in global academic communities, research, scholarship, and university coursework.

Therefore, the enhancement of writing instruction is a demand of the society and a serious issue in educational system.

It is a major issue concerning this challenge for Investigating the reasons behind writing difficulties in the classrooms of EFL in Iraq. A “look following” at these factors can also support educates, curriculum developers, and policy makers to bring about focused intervention Referencing to these factors. Drawing on previous research literature and on relevant academic conversations, the study seeks to contribute to a holistic understanding of the key issues related to the teaching of writing in Iraq. : in particular is it aims to

2. 1To what extent do students studying EFL in Iraq have problems with Writing?
3. 2. Critique the teaching problem (methodological/feedback).
4. 3. Study the influence of institutional and contextual elements on writing teachers.
5. 4. Offer constructive suggestions for change in writing instruction in the h Igh er education institutions in Iraq.

This study adds to explanations of writing difficulties on the Iraqi EFL context by conducting a synthesis of research findings and identifying themes. Ultimately, solving these problems will require systemic/inter-systemic intervention at several levels (educational system, school, and teachers). Writing ability can be improved, and Iraqi students can be equipped more effectively to open the gates of higher education and professional life in a world that is becoming more and more interconnected, through curriculum reform, teacher training and application of communicative teaching methods.

Literature Review

Theoretical Underpinnings of EFL Writing Instruction

Practice and pedagogy in writing teaching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts have nowadays been greatly transformed over the past some decades. Writing was viewed as product in the past, in which the focus was on structural and grammatical accuracy. However, according to current perspectives, writing is a cognitive recursive process, and the stages of planning, drafting, editing, and revising are involved. Changing practice from product towards process is proving to be a slow and uneven process in EFL contexts such as Iraq. The focus of the final written product is emphasized in the product approach and it often uses model texts for students to imitate. Students are expected to copy language and structures off examples from the teacher. This method may enhance surface-level accuracy, but not critical thinking or development of ideas independently of others. Writing as a process approach is a view that sees writing as a process and as a product. It encourages involvement with language and topic at a deeper level because it stimulates thinking, planning, drafting, peer review and revision.

According to research, traditional product-oriented training continues to have a significant influence in Iraqi schools. Students' capacity to acquire independent writing abilities is hampered by this reliance on controlled exercises and memorization. As a result, students may do well on assessments based on grammar but find it difficult to complete lengthy essay assignments.

Linguistic Difficulties in Iraqi EFL Writing

Grammatical Weaknesses

One of the most well-documented issues with Iraqi EFL learners is grammatical errors. (Fadhala, A. K., 2025) found common mistakes in the use of verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, and sentence fragments. Surprisingly, these errors persist even at the senior level in university, indicating that learning of basic grammar rules may not be successfully retained.

Similarly, (Yahya, D. H., 2018) indicated that students had difficulties in constructing complex sentences, especially compound and complex sentences. The complexity of student academic writing is constrained, and cohesion/textual consistency is eroded when simple sentences are overused.

Vocabulary Limitations

Writing well depends so much on having a good vocabulary. Conceptual thinking and reasoning what learners can say are restricted by what vocabulary they have. Iraqi students have a tendency to rely on simple sentences and frequently repeated words. Mahmood, D. K. (2016) Poor paragraph development and undefined paragraphs result from such vocabulary.

A generally low level of vocabulary is commonly related to limited reading habits and lack of contact with authentic English literature. It is challenging for students to acquire the lexical density essential for writing academically, when there's little access to academic materials for reading. Positive and negative language transfer is a strong influence on the writing of students from Iraq. Long phrases, repetition everything for reinforcing the idea behind, and indirect thesis staisment are norm in Arab rhetoric writing. These traits could

also be the cause of less coherence and less clarity in writing in English. And even the students could be translating terms from Arabic word for word, leading to awkward phrasing and odd expressions. This interference appears at two levels in the confrontation of the discourses, linguistic and cultural.

Cognitive and Psychological Factors

Writing performance is influenced by cognitive, emotional, and linguistic factors. Writing anxiety is a prevalent problem among EFL learners. The majority of Iraqi students claimed that they reduce the length of the sentences because they are afraid of making grammatical errors. Creativity and fluency are reduced by anxiety. Weak critical thinking skills prevent one from coming up with ideas. It is thought that education systems based around high stakes examinations may not best encourage students to think, to analyse and to synthesize, as required in academic essay writing. Because students are conditioned to memorize not to think critically, they get stuck when they try to write novel written output. Motivation is also necessary. Writing assignments as observed by students in this study may be such that their primary purpose is to assess rather than communicate, and students may not be intrinsically motivated to improve as writers.

Pedagogical Challenges in Teaching Writing

A teacher-centred approach is used in the majority of Iraqi schools wherein the students perform controlled tasks as the teachers explain the grammar rules. This method prevents students from interacting and collaborating with one another. In order to improve writing performance, formative feedback and interactive teaching tactics are crucial (Algburi, E. A. & Razali, A. B., 2024). However, process-writing techniques like peer feedback and group drafting are rarely applied methodically. The use of these techniques is still uneven, though.

Limited Writing Practice

Sustained and purposeful practice is necessary for effective writing development. Writing tasks are rare and brief in many Iraqi schools. Instead of lengthy essays, teachers frequently emphasize sentence-level tasks. Students cannot improve their writing fluency without consistent drafting and revision exercise. Due to time restrictions, homework assignments may also not receive adequate monitoring or feedback. Students thus do not receive enough instruction to enhance their writing abilities.

Feedback and Assessment Practices

Feedback is crucial for assisting students in identifying and fixing mistakes. However, studies indicate that marking errors without providing an explanation is a common kind of remedial feedback in Iraqi classrooms. Pupils may obtain red marks on their exams, but they are not given much advice on how to get better. It has been demonstrated that formative feedback techniques, such as teacher conferences and peer review, improve writing performance. However, putting such techniques into practice necessitates more instructional time and lower class sizes. Effective writing instruction is severely hampered by large class numbers. Giving thorough, personalized criticism becomes unfeasible when a teacher is tasked with grading dozens of essays. In order to lessen the workload associated with grading, writing assignments may be reduced.

For assessment purposes, reading comprehension and grammar proficiency are frequently given top priority in the Iraqi national curriculum. Exam writing assignments may concentrate on brief, standard compositions. Critical and creative writing are discouraged by this exam-focused system. Additionally, chances for process-based writing instruction are diminished by the short amount of time allotted to English education.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Specialized pedagogical knowledge is necessary for effective writing training. Some teachers may not have received enough training in modern writing strategies during their preservice education. It may be that professional development workshops are also lacking, particularly in rural areas. Without ongoing instruction, it is possible that teachers would continue to use methods that are effective rather than trying new approaches.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- 1. Studies done in the colleges or universities in Iraq,**
- 2. Writing skills is the predominant focus of the study,**
- 3. Review or rigorously analyse the problems of teaching.**

In conclusion, the following salient points were taken from the review of previous studies:

1. Iraqi EFL learners are liable to repeatedly commit grammatical and lexical errors.
 2. Lack of interaction with real writing in practice severely hinders skill development.
 3. Writing instruction is overwhelmingly based on conventional teaching methods.
 4. Redrafting skills are insufficiently or ineffectively fostered in the feedback modes.
 5. Teachers' ability to provide differentiated instruction is limited by curriculum mandates and large class sizes.
- These findings suggest that writing problems are not just related to the learners, but also the teaching methods as well as the educational system.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate the challenges in teaching writing in the EFL context of Iraq. Results of this research, drawn from teacher interviews, students' written work and questionnaire data, indicate that writing-related challenges faced by Iraqi learners are systemic and multifaceted, and that these challenges are interwoven rather than segregated or incidental. The results show that multiple institutional, psychological, and

pedagogical barriers, along with language competence limitations, contribute to students' inadequate writing skills.

Limitations in grammar and vocabulary still affect the linguistic level. Students generally make errors in sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, verb tense consistency, and the use of articles. A restricted lexical range enables these problems become worse, as it is a challenge for students to talk about complex or abstract ideas. Grammar and organization were the lowest-rated aspects on the writing task, which also supports the argument that the latent language ability has a considerable influence on a student's writing ability. Learners' worry level associated with their performance in writing was negatively correlated. This result entailed that besides technical aspects, affective matters should be taken into account in writing instruction. A very recent contribution to the field is the work of Takala and Kairaluoma (2008), who propose that a positive classroom climate, risk-taking and less severity in penalizing errors may help reducing anxiety in writing and promote risk-taking in writing. With respect to pedagogy, the report highlights the dominance of traditional product-oriented teaching in Iraqi classrooms. Rather than stressing the recursive nature of brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing, writing instruction often highlights controlled practice and grammatical accuracy. Speaking accuracy is important, but by focusing too much on error correction could interfere with students' development in productive competence and fluency. Development of abilities is also hindered by limited use of formative feedback, collaborative writing, and peer review. The importance of the practices of constructive and explanative feedback were emphasized by the statistical analysis suggesting a positive association between elaborate feedback and improved writing performance. The efficiency of writing instruction is at least as sensitive to institutional constraints. Packed classrooms discourage teachers from giving students individual attention. More importance is given to covering grammar topics than to having meaningful writing sessions during the study and the education assessment system is geared towards the test. Writing Teachers have too few resources and too little time to meet with students individually or implement process writing approaches. Furthermore, a few teachers indicated they had only minimal/none professional training in contemporary methods of teaching writing, indicating a want for additional professional development possibilities. Together the two result suggest that a complex and systemic intervention is needed to improve writing teaching [in Iraq]. It is unlikely that isolated changes, like assigning more writing without also changing instructional methods, will lead to big gains. Instead, change is needed on multiple levels:

1. Reforming the curriculum: Writing should not be viewed as an afterthought within language education, but the education authorities should recognize it more prominently as a key skill. Writing goals have to mean more than "use good grammar," writing has to promote critical thought, argument, and coherence.

2. 'Process-Based' Instruction: Teachers are advised to modify process writing stages (e.g., outlining, brainstorming, drafting, peer review, and revising).

This method fosters student independence and deeper engagement with the content of the course.

3. Towards Better Feedback Practices Feedback should aim to inform rather than to tell the recipient what to change, and why and how, as opposed to just what is wrong. Writing can be very effectively enhanced through formative feedback techniques.

4. Teacher Professional Development: Long term professional development which addresses technology integration, assessment rubrics, feedback strategies, and contemporary writing pedagogy should also be developed.

5. Neither class climate nor emotional support: Writing anxiety can be diminished only in a positive climate in which errors are treated as a natural part of learning. Confidence and motivation may be enhanced by the use of collaborative learning.

6. Integration of Technology: Using technology and other digital tools to enable revision in real time, provide immediate feedback and facilitate peer review can assist in mitigating time constraints. Despite the strengths of this research, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted at one university, which may limit the generalization of the findings to all the Iraqi higher education institutions. Further research could extend the sample to include secondary schools and a number of institutions from different locations. It would also be useful to conduct longitudinal research investigating the impact of process-oriented intervention on the writing development. The efficient ways of teaching could be also better defined in an experimental study in which the traditional and the communicative writing method would be compared.

In conclusion, writing remains a difficult skill to master for Iraqi EFL students, as a result of the combination of various linguistic, curricular, psychological, and institutional factors. On the other hand these problems can be solved. Comprehensive advances in writing can be achieved by a combination of factors, among them are curriculum reform, teacher education, better feedback systems, and learner centered approaches. Writing education could be considered as the door-key for the Mathematics class success of students and the way for removing their writing dilemma up to the level that they can write in different academic and non-academic fields. Therefore, to remediate the deficiencies in writing is at once to make a strategic investment in the future vitality of Iraqi higher education and to respond to a pressing pedagogical need.

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