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The impact of the socio-cultural context on L2 English writing of Egyptian university students

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1. Introduction

Numerous English teachers indicated that the acquisition of writing skills seems to be difficult (Zheng, 1999). In one's second language, it is even more difficult to coherently compose a piece of writing (Nunan, 1999). When the structure, style, and organisation (i.e. rhetorical conventions) of English texts differ from those in other languages, writing becomes more difficult (Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Leki, 1991) and recognizing and managing the differences requires considerable effort. When it comes to the rhetorical conventions of the Arabic as a second language, Mohamed and Omer (2000) see it as particularly true as they attributed the different usage of cohesive devices in English writing to the cultural differences between the English and Arabic speech communities. This helps explain the challenges that Arab students encounter in learning how to write in English as a Foreign Language/Second Language (EFL/ESL).

Students' writing in the EFL classroom context needs to take into consideration the communicative goal, the reader, and the writing context. Although many approaches to teaching writing appeared (e.g. the product approach [Pincas, 1982a; Silva, 1990; Raimes, 1991; Matsuda, 1999; Kroll, 2001], the process approach [Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1991; Matsuda, 2003], genre approach [Swales, 1990; Flowerdew, 1993; Halliday, 1994; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Badger & White, 2000; Johns, 2002; Hyland, 2003] and the post-process approach [Atkinson, 2003; Matsuda, 2003]), EFL writing is still one of the most demanding skills. Egyptian English majors are no exception as they have to succeed in many English courses at university. However, they still encounter a lot of difficulties in their L2 English writing.

Grabe and Kaplan (1996: 24–25) underlined the importance of English writing for students in EFL contexts. These students will need to master a set of skills that ranges from basic writing skills to compose a simple paragraph to advanced skills required to compose well-written essays and articles. In addition, Al Hazmi & Scholfield, (2007) pinpointed that students need to master other genres of writing such as translation of Arabic texts, formal letters, lesson plans, and research reports.

A number of researchers have reported that the composed English writing of L1 Arabic students is not lexically varied and is full of redundancy (Zughoul & Husain, 1985; Sa'Addedin & Akram, 1991). In addition, other research has indicated that students' written texts illustrate problems in their use of cohesive devices, as exemplified in the use of transition, substitution, lexical cohesion and deixis (Al Abed Al-Haq & Ahmed, 1994). Furthermore, Ahmed (2011) reported that Egyptian students have English

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writing problems related to the misuse of articles, incorrect tenses, subject-verb disagreement, lack of linking words, punctuation errors (especially the misuse of commas), and spelling mistakes. These problems are unlikely to be understood outside the context within which they occur; hence the focus of this study on the socio-cultural context in which both society and its culture interact, the findings of which may help explain why Egyptian L2 English majors encounter these problems in their English writing. Good writing is defined by Li (1996:111) as “the splice of multiple linguistic and non-linguistic, cultural and historical strands; of what is written in a piece and the manner in which the piece is written; of ideology and aesthetic; of society and individuals”. In Li’s study, the linguistic context made the American teachers misinterpret the English writing of their Chinese students due to the lack of awareness of the cultural context (ibid). This may also apply to the Egyptian context, where non-Egyptian teachers of English would find the English writing of Egyptian students difficult to understand due to their lack of awareness of their students’ cultural and historical contexts. This is where this current research could contribute to a better understanding of the socio-cultural factors lying behind the instruction and learning of L2 English writing at university in Egypt.

The current study is informed by the Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT). Ratner (2002:9) defines Sociocultural Theory (SCT) as the field that “studies the content, mode of operation, and interrelationships of psychological phenomena that are socially constructed and shared, and are rooted in other social artifacts”. Accordingly, three essential cultural and social factors are believed to organise human psychological processes: activities (e.g. education), artifacts (.e.g. books, paper, pencils, language...etc.) and concepts (e.g. knowledge of the world) (Lantolf, 2006). These cultural and social factors play two roles as proposed by Vygotsky: a mediating role between people, their physical world and people’s inner mental world; and a regulatory role in which biology provides the necessary functions and culture enables people to purposefully and externally regulate these functions (ibid).

As a reaction to the view of writing as a cognitive process, Trimbur (1994) came up with what he called “social turn”. He equated the social turn with the post-process movement that emphasises the shift from cognitive theory of writing to socio-cultural view of writing as “a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others’ subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions” (Trimbur, 1994, p. 109). In the current study, Egyptian university students position themselves in relation to the socio-cultural context within which they follow specific practices that make their writing plausible within their discourse community.

In reference to L2 writing from a sociocultural perspective, Atkinson (2003) views L2 writing not as a decontextualized set of skills or processes used to successfully achieve an academic or professional task. He argues that this decontextualised view of L2 writing appears to exclude many important possibilities of the L2 writing field. Atkinson (2003) furthers his view that when we connect teaching, learning and our use of written language to perform many types of socio-cognitive activities in our world, this enriches the L2 writing field and makes it broader, deeper and more relevant. Therefore, L2 writing needs to pay more attention to the implicit social and cultural practices operated among different contexts of academics and sociocultural groups (Atkinson, 1997). This will establish how significant these cultural practices are for those who are expected to come into contact with them (Atkinson, 2003). The current study coincides with Atkinson’s view in that non-Egyptian L2 writing teachers need to know the socio-cultural specifics of the Egyptian discourse community so that they can correctly interpret and understand students’ writing.

In the same vein of socio-cultural theory, Hyland (2003) contends that writing is context-specific and is driven by the variety in the social activity and the relation between writer and reader. Therefore, L2 writing teachers need to acknowledge that training weak writers in good writing strategies, that are context specific and part of the writing process, is not sufficient to make them good at writing; instead, teachers need to find out ways to scaffold student to help them consciously understand the target genres and how meaning is created in context (Hyland, 2003). This is of quite importance to Egyptian L2 writing teachers as they need not only train students in best writing strategies, but also help students understand how meaning is created in a specific genre.

Other researchers argued that written discourses are socially constructed in some ways (Rubin & Rafoth, 1988 & Williams, 2004). First, images of the social context in which writing is embedded are mentally constructed by writers. Second, writing is perceived as a social process that can create a social context where writers compose texts not in response to their need to communicate, but in fulfilment of the social requirements of this group. Furthermore, writers co-create texts with participants in other discourse communities. Lastly, writers construct a dimension of social meaning to writing through assigning values to writing.

Within the sociocultural theory, writing is seen as a social activity that involves an implicit/explicit written communication between the writer and the reader in a specific community (Nystrand, 2006). In the current study, L2 writing is perceived as a socio-cultural activity within which explicit communication occurs between students and their teachers in an L2 writing course in a classroom setting. Similarly, Hyland (2007) supports the claim that learning to write is a social activity that takes place within a specific context in which communication is purposeful and contextual among a specific audience. Therefore, Hyland recommends teaching writing to students through drawing on, analysing and investigating different purposes and readers (2007: 152). In addition, Bhatia (1993:19) emphasises that the psychological dimension of writing is important as it provides us with “relevant, though non-linguistic answers to the question: Why do members of the discourse community write in the way they do?”. Bhatia (2004: 144) proposes a discursive competence composed of textual competence, generic competence and social competence. In the current study, the researchers have attempted to explore the impact of the socio-cultural context on L2 English writing of Egyptian university students; this will help us understand and gain insight into why Egyptian university students write the way they do. The next section reviews the literature on the socio-cultural factors in different L2 writing contexts shedding light on some socio-cultural practices that pertain to Egyptian L2 writing.

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