

## **How University Teachers Deal with the Challenges while Teaching English Writing at University Level in Libya**

Hameda Hussein Almrabett Suwaed

University of Alzawia, Libya

[hamedasuwaed@gmail.com](mailto:hamedasuwaed@gmail.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

*In EFL contexts, while much research is conducted towards helping students cope with the challenges of writing in a foreign language, studies on how EFL writing teacher deal with the challenges that they face such as students' low motivation and mixed levels are few and far between. Such an imbalance needs to be addressed since how teachers teach might have a direct impact on how students learn. This paper investigates how writing teachers in Alzawia University deal with the challenges they face in three selected colleges. It attempts to answer the following questions: how the university teachers deal with the problems that they face? What are their sources of knowledge about teaching English writing? The findings of the study show that teachers' personal teaching experience and personal development are among the main sources of knowledge.*

**Key words:** contextual factors, self improvement, professional development, teaching experience

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In EFL educational contexts, it is possible that language teachers are teaching writing without being fully aware of what teaching writing requires or how to implement writing techniques. Furthermore, while nearly all language teachers would be expected to have had experience speaking, listening, reading, it is quite possible that few language teachers are frequent writers themselves. Even in English speaking countries, until recently, teacher training program often did not include specific training in the teaching of writing, (Leki, 2001:203), and (Matsuda,2003:22).With few opportunities for professional preparation, teachers of L2 as well as FL writing often depend on textbooks and their previous experience as students as their source of pedagogical information. Moreover, in most of the Libyan universities, usually untrained teachers are assigned to teach writing courses regardless of their academic and professional training.

In addition to the lack of training, Libyan university teachers face challenges 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 aim of this paper is to investigate how the teachers deal with these challenges and what are their sources of knowledge about teaching English writing.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Teaching English in EFL contexts where the exposure to the target language is limited to few hours per week is difficult job for language teachers. The number of studies about how they deal with the situation in their local educational systems is very limited, (Hayes, 2009: 1). Further, the findings from those studies varied according to the teachers' experience and training. For example, Hayes (2009:1-11) investigated how seven Thai secondary school teachers, are teaching English language. He explored their classroom methods in teaching. In the findings he found that in spite of the problems, Thai teachers were creative in their teaching and used variety of methods. With regard to commitment in teaching, the interviewed teachers had a strong value of their work and its importance to their students. They also were good examples that the imaginative teacher can overcome the difficulties of teaching large classes, and using limited materials.

Teachers' past experience of learning and teaching forms their personal knowledge and it is considered an important factor in the way they teach. Especially when the teachers do not receive any training, they tend to apply their own teacher's model of teaching (Winer 1992:62). In addition, teachers gain pedagogical knowledge about teaching through self development such as attending seminars and informal learning through using the internet.

It is assumed that EFL teachers will be more capable of managing their English teaching practices in large classes when they receive good English teaching trainings with a variety of techniques and updated English teaching methods of teaching. In this sense, the main aim of this research will be an investigation of how writing teachers in Libya who also lack good quality English teaching training are dealing with the contextual factors that they face in teaching English writing skills to their students in Libyan context.

## **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 examples and clarifications based on the interviewee' answers.

### **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 resources that teachers' rely on in their choice of classroom teaching practice as well as how do they deal with the challenges that they face. Interview data were initially coded under the broad heading then gradually modified into sub-categories referring, for example, to different resources of knowledge that the teachers mentioned.

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to deal with the challenges that they face, teachers tend to rely on different resources. In what follows, an attempt will be made to highlight the resources of teaching English writing and then to propose some recommendations that might be helpful for English writing teachers.

##### **4.1 Teachers' Previous Learning Experience**

Teachers' past experience (such as their own education and teaching) forms their personal views of learning and teaching (Borg 2003:88; Crandall 2000: 35). Britten (1988) points out that teachers have preconceptions about teaching based on their own experience as students. From their education, they learn content knowledge, and form to a certain extent some pedagogical knowledge by adopting activities used by their teachers.

This view is supported by three interviewed teachers, T1, T2 and T9, who mentioned that they adopted some techniques that their teachers used because they believe that they are beneficial in teaching writing. This is consistent with Johnson's (1994) findings in which she found out that teachers' selection of materials and activities very often was based on their personal learning experience.

*i) 'I can say I go back to my previous study at university'. (T1)*

Nine teachers mentioned that they use activities from their MA/ PhD courses.

*ii) 'Some materials that our teachers gave us from where we graduate and get our masters. Some of the activities they are few but useful ones'. (T12).*

*iii) 'Actually because I studied this when I went for a PhD, I took some courses on how to teach writing'. (T8)*

In addition to their education, teachers learn different techniques through experience in teaching and self-development. With regard to training, all the participants mentioned that they do not receive in-service or pre-service training in Libya.

*iv) 'I have no preparation course when I started teaching writing' (T1)*

By contrast seven out of the eight non Libyan teachers mentioned that they received pre-service training courses in their countries. However, as T14 mentioned that they were not trained to deal with contextual factors as they need to adjust their knowledge to the Libyan culture.

*v) 'We have not been trained as teachers to go with this kind of enrolment so learn by our own and it requires some time to learn'. (T14)*

##### **4.2 Self Improvement**

All the interviewed teachers mentioned different ways that they used to develop their teaching skills such as using *the Internet, their teaching experience, reading books and attending workshops*.

The resource that is commonly used among the participants is the internet. According to Chen (2008:1016) the internet is one of the effective resources for EFL teachers. However, in a follow up question about examples of websites that the teachers use, only three teachers gave examples. T10 mentioned [www.cambridgeelt.com](http://www.cambridgeelt.com). The other teachers, search in Google and use whatever they find, which not necessarily to be the most suitable to use for teaching considering students' level and culture.

i) *'Different resources not only from books but depending on the internet'. (T5)*

ii) *'It is a matter of chance. I go to common websites Google for example and write writing materials'. (T1)*

With regard to *teaching experience*, 6 teachers mentioned that they learn from their teaching experience. This is similar to Crookes and Arakaki (1999) who found that teaching experience is the source cited often by ESL teachers. According to Richards and Lockhart (1995:31), teaching experience is the main source of beliefs about teaching. By trial and error, teachers know what works best for their students.

iii) *'the teacher is always like some one who is going to handle something. If he try one method and it does not work so he has to try another method'. (T10)*

Furthermore, teaching experience enables the teachers to develop critical reflection on their teaching to evaluate the activities that they use. For example T7 attested to the advantages of using pre writing activities after noticing some improvement in her students' writing. Reflecting on her teaching helped the teacher to test the knowledge that she had from workshops and the internet in her class and this lead to changes in her selection of tasks. According to Borg (2003:95), 'cognition not only shapes what teachers do but is in turn shaped by the experiences teachers accumulate'. Crandall (2000:36) adds that reflection on practice helps the teachers to move from theories that they learned in their education to views of teaching consistent with their understanding of their situation and students.

iv) *'Like what I said before the traditional way of teaching was not really helpful, we noticed that all students' levels were the same and would not improve at all. And has not developed at all but when we started using brainstorming and techniques like pair work or group work and the internet etc. we noticed that they have improved a lot'. (T7)*

In addition, teaching experience enables the teachers to develop pedagogical content knowledge which does not seem to develop from teachers' education courses (Hashweh 2005:279).

The third resource that the teachers mentioned was *reading books* about writing. Casanave (2004) points out that reading is important resource for language teachers to get more knowledge about the issues related to their field. The participants mentioned different books that they use.

v) *'Generally do not forget books. I usually read some books new series of books about teaching writing and developing your skills in teaching writing. I believe reading is the most important for teachers to improve them'. (T9)*

It was remarkable that some teachers refer to textbooks of teaching writing, not books about how to teach writing as sources of their knowledge. The textbooks that they have mentioned provide content knowledge about writing genres and structure rather than pedagogical knowledge about how to teach writing.

vi) *'I depend on the internet and some textbooks. I use this book 'Learn to Write' and 'College Writing'. (T2)*

In addition, in discussing the selection of books the teachers tend to refer to their personal views rather than theories or books. This is common in Libya because using academic terms is usually considered to be showing off. Another possible reason for

this is the difficulty that Libyan teachers face to relate theoretical theories to teaching practice because, the theoretical and practical knowledge are not integrated in the learning process.

The fourth resource that the teachers rely on *is workshops*. Workshops are considered one of the resources that the teachers use to improve their teaching skills. Richards and Farrell (2005:24) point out that ‘a workshop is intended to enhance teachers’ practical skills and help resolve problems, rather than simply improve theoretically understanding’.

One of the issues that those teachers mentioned is that the workshops that they usually attend in the British Council and the Academy of Higher Studies in Tripoli are for a different context. Therefore, they need to think about how to adapt the ideas and techniques mentioned to the Libyan context.

*vii) ‘I think what we need is how to apply these kinds of workshops in the class’.*  
(T9)

Those workshops are usually not about teaching writing in EFL contexts. Rather they are about teaching English writing in English speaking countries that might not consider the difficulties that the teachers in Libya face such as the large number of students.

It was noticed that the participants did not mention any discussions with other colleagues and do not participate in any professional development activities in their departments. This might be related to teachers’ limited time during their work. However the exception is some teachers such as T7 and T9 who work in language centres besides their work at the university. T9 mentioned asking colleagues as one of the sources of his knowledge.

*‘Sometimes I used to ask my colleague who has very good experience in teaching writing; the way and his style of teaching writing. So this is the way that is helping me in developing me in my skills in teaching writing’.* (T9)

Those teachers work with experienced and trained teachers who are usually from native speaking countries and that helped them to be involved in discussion with their colleagues. According to Shimahara (1998:457), ‘one important way for constructing the image of teaching is the interactions with colleagues in the form of conversation’.

## **5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Besides their previous learning experience, the teachers depended on different resources include reading books, using the internet and attending workshops. Using these resources reflected different abilities among the teachers. It was noticed that some teachers were more familiar with using internet resources than others. This indicates that there is potential for the participants to share their experience about using internet resources to select useful materials to their students’ level and interest.

On the basis of the findings of this study, I would recommend that 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

- Borg, S. (2003) 'Teachers' Cognition in Language Teaching: A Review of Research on What Language Teachers Think, Know, Believe and Do'. *TESOL*: 36:81-109.
- Borg, S. (2006) *Teachers Cognition and Language Education: Research and Practice*. London: Continuum.
- Britten, D. (1988) 'Three Stages in Teacher Training'. *ELT Journal* 42(1):3-8.
- Casanave, C. (2004) *Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction*. Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press.
- Chen, Y. (2008) A Mixed Method Study of EFL Teachers' Internet Use in Language Instruction'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 24:1015-1028.
- Crandall, J. (2000) 'Language Teacher Education'. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. 20: 34-55
- Crookes, G. and Arakaki, L. (1999) 'Teaching Idea Sources and Work Conditions in an ESL Program'. *TESOL Journal*. 8(1): 15-19.
- Hashweh, M. (2005) 'Teacher Pedagogical Constructions: A Reconfiguration of Pedagogical content Knowledge'. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*. 11(3): 273-292.
- Hayes, D. (2008) 'Non native English Speaking Teachers, Context and English language Teaching'. *System*. 37 1-11
- Johnson, K. (1998) *Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leki, I. (2001) 'Material, Educational, and Ideological Challenges of Teaching EFL writing at the turn of the century'. *International Journal of English studies*. 1(2), 197-209
- Mastuda, P. (2003) 'Second Language Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Situational historical Perspective'. In Kroll, B. *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language writing*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- McDonough, J. and McDonough, S. (1997) *Research Methods for English Language Teachers*. London: ARNOLD.
- Richards, J. and Lockhart, C. (1995) *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. and Farrell, T. (2005) *Professional Development for Language Teachers: Strategies for Teacher Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shimahara, N. (1998) 'The Japanese Model of Professional Development: Teaching as Craft'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 14(5): 451-462.
- Winer, L. (1992) 'Spinach to Chocolate': Changing Awareness and Attitudes in ESL Writing Teachers'. *TESOL Quarterly*. 26(1), 57-80