

EFL Writing Instruction Research in Morocco: A Historical Overview

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to trace and discuss how writing instruction research has evolved in the Moroccan EFL context over years. It also seeks to show that most EFL scholars were reactive and not proactive in dealing with this skill; they carried out their studies in response to the composing problems Moroccan EFL learners, at the secondary school or university level, face. The ultimate goal has always been the attainment of a research and evidence-based methodology that would render the writing skill accessible and learnable for most learners. Different writing-related topics have been studied thoroughly. But this paper is limited to the salient issues that Moroccan researchers have placed a premium on such as feedback, methodology, scoring and errors. Finally, the paper concludes with the allusion to some defective aspects of these studies and suggests other EFL writing trajectories for scholars to consider in future studies.

1. Introduction

Research on EFL writing in Morocco is not a new practice. It is rather a well-established 'discipline' that goes back to the 1970s (Abouabdelkader & Bouziane, 2016). Since then, a big body of research has been carried out in this respect. These studies were varied in terms of both their methodologies and focuses. Different studies adopted different data gathering and data analysing tools to probe different EFL writing areas. The unifying thread, however, among all researchers has been their quest for remedies for the writing instruction 'illnesses' the Moroccan EFL classrooms still witness. Given the fact that Moroccan students at the secondary and university level find writing inhibiting and challenging, scholars and researchers have been mainly concerned with attenuating the learning and teaching problems of this skill. The findings were informative and had far reaching effects² on writing instruction. A wide spectrum of topics has been covered. But for clarity reasons, in the subsequent sections of this article, I will delineate the issues scholars have dealt with into two categories: learner related issues and teacher related issues. This categorisation is justified because a cursory look at the studies carried so far will show that writing has been approached either as a teaching act or as a learning endeavour.

2. Learner Related Issues

The learner has been a central 'variable' in different studies about writing in the Moroccan EFL context. Study attempts have been made to disclose and scrutinize the problems that manifest themselves in students' writings. Given that writing is a complex cognitive skill for everyone (Nunan, 1989), learners spend a great deal of time grappling with it, and the problems that stand out in the learning process of this skill in the Moroccan EFL classrooms are related to the accurate use of language, syntactic complexity, coherence, content, the influence of oracy and errors.

2.1 Accuracy and complexity

The sentence-level aspects of composition have attracted the attention of Moroccan academia for years and, hence, become one of the most exhaustively studied topics. In his study³, Dahbi (1984) investigated the poor writing of ELT learners at the

² The latest version of the Official Guidelines of English Language Teaching issued by the ministry of education in 1997 make a strong plea for the adoption of a skill-based process approach in the teaching of writing.

³ In this study, Dahbi investigated how Moroccan university students develop English writing skills.

university level. He examined some sentence-level features, namely syntactic complexity and accuracy. He found out that Second cycle students came up with longer sentences. This finding was in line with other studies confirming that as learners grow older, the syntactic complexity of their composition increases (Ortega, 2003). With regard to accuracy, it was reported that the first cycle students made more morpho-syntactic errors. Though this study was mainly concerned with certain linguistic features, it also examined discourse-level features of students' writings. According to the study, linguistic features were important means to gauge the progress of lower- proficiency levels only. At advanced levels, however, discorsal traits should be taken into consideration to measure learners' progress.

Another aspect that adds to the complexity of writing for Moroccan students is cognitive in nature; they are mainly concerned with how they can produce a piece of discourse that meets the expectations of the teacher. The teacher seeks a performance that shows:

Students' acquisition of the formal skills involved in writing and his/her ability to turn an essentially superficial communicative situation into a genuine one. In other words, the student is expected to move between two different roles, that of the students responding to his/her teacher, and that of a writer addressing an audience which is interested in his message.

(Dahbi, 1984, p. 159)

So, the task of the student writer is two-fold. Besides meeting the expectations of the teacher, he/she has to come up with a communicatively purposeful piece of writing that is intended for a certain audience. This challenge of having to deal with two difficulties at the same time constitutes a cognitive task for the learners. Teacher's expectations, however, depend on the type of writing⁴ students are required to carry out.

2.2 Coherence

Mars (1989) attributes the fact that university students come up with grammatically correct sentences but fail to produce coherent paragraphs and texts to two main reasons: lack of teacher training and inappropriate evaluation practices. Most university teachers receive no training at all and end up teaching composition the way they were taught through the sentence-grammar oriented approach. It follows, then, that their approach to evaluating their students' writings is limited to grammar to the detriment of the rhetorical aspects of the product. As a way around this issue, Mars calls for the adoption of a textual approach to the teaching of writing where the rhetorical aspects are brought under focus.

Hellalet (2013) investigated the coherence relations university students use in writing. She found out that the use of coherence relations is proportionate to learners' proficiency level; as learners grow more proficient, coherence relations such as interpretation, cause, condition and purpose become frequent in their writings. Macro-relations, which affect the overall coherence of the whole text and of which sequence, elaboration and evidence are good examples, are not used until the third-year level. This shows that students at this level become more concerned with making their writing globally coherent.

2.3 Influence of oracity

Another issue that has been of great concern to Moroccan teachers is the oral-written language relationship. Bouznirh (1987) addresses the effects spoken language has on students' written products. She holds that spoken language is more of a hindrance than a help in the learning of writing. She, hence, calls for a reconsideration of the pre-writing stage. Instead of moving directly from an oral discussion to writing, a reading activity should be inserted in between as a way of "spacing the spoken and the written language to avoid direct reproduction" (Bouznirh, 1987, p.38). Accordingly, the pre-reading stage should consist of two stages: the oral work stage, stage A, at which learners brainstorm the topic and plan their writing, and the reading work stage, stage B, where learners carry out a critical analysis of a model text. Learners answer the comprehension questions in writing, extract the main ideas and summarize the main points. The model text should be about the same topic as the one learners are required to develop. Only then, can students move to the composing stage. So, such a novel reading activity, Bouznirh claims, will alleviate the obstructive influence the oral brainstorming activity has on composing.

2.3 Content

⁴ In narrative writing, where students are required to use their imagination and tell stories which are not true sometimes, the teacher expects students to demonstrate mastery of the form, such as grammar structures or a certain layout. In argumentative writing, however, the teacher concentrates more on the content to see what arguments and genuine ideas the student puts forward to defend his/her stance.

Composition teachers at the university level constantly show dissatisfaction with the quality of ideas students come up with in their writings. Bouznirh (1998), relying on her long experience as a teacher of composition, holds that students at the tertiary level come up with composition products that are impoverished in terms of content. The quality of ideas students cite and the arguments they put forward are below the standard. This lack of ideas is attributed to the fact that students do not read as much as they should, which is mainly a cultural problem. Students belong to a culture that does not encourage reading at all. Actually, reading feeds into writing, and good writers must be good readers. Smith (1983) holds that "it could be only through reading that writers learn the intangibles that they know" (p.558). In the same line, Krashen (1989) argues that reading exposure enhances different aspects of the learner's competence; through reading, learners can build a rich vocabulary repertoire and improve their writing styles. So, Bouznirh (1998) calls for the use of RAP⁵, RAP 1 and 2, as a way of alleviating "the unknown content syndrome experienced by EFL students at an advanced level" (p.51). These two reading components should be integrated into the advanced composition course. The purpose of RAP1 is to familiarise students with the rhetorical techniques and tools writers use in the message-construction process. For this end, students are provided with model texts to analyze. Rhetorical aspects such as defining and contrasting are highlighted. Put simply, the course is intended to train students on the know-how of writing at the level of rhetoric. In RAP 2, however, the focus is mainly on the content. Students are provided with some content areas to search and read about. They can even compile files on the suggested topics. This way, students' desire for reading will be aroused; they will read more, which will reflect on their writing.

These two reading courses stand as facilitating writing tools; while RAP1 trains students on the writing know-how, RAP2 encourages them to read as much as they can about the suggested themes to upgrade their ideational content.

2.4 Errors

Fati (2013) carried out a study about the effect of writing proficiency on the type and amount of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students at the high school level. She reached the conclusion that errors of punctuation, capitalization, tense and spelling, to name a few, are frequent in students' writings. But the degree of frequency varies among students depending on their level of writing proficiency. Low proficiency level students make lots of errors, many of which are serious ones. Middle proficiency level students, however, show a great deal of improvement and make acceptable errors in terms of type and amount. As students reach the high proficiency level, errors tend to dwindle; they produce fewer errors and their writings become clearer and simpler.

Instead of focusing on local errors, Ouauicha (1989) analyzed the global errors Moroccan EFL learners make in writing; he found out that the writing anomalies witnessed in students' writings at the level of rhetoric and syntax are due to negative transfer from Arabic, their mother tongue.

3. Teacher Related Issues

The teacher, as a writing instructor, has attracted the attention of the Moroccan academia over years. His role is primordial in accompanying students throughout the different stages of the writing process. Some teaching classroom practices, however, have been thrown into question because they have proven to be ineffective. Researchers have made attempts to uncover issues related to scoring students' papers, the adopted methodologies, the way feedback is provided and the extent to which the threshold level hypothesis is taken into account and, hence, acted upon as a basic premise in teaching writing.

3.1. Scoring

Scoring composition has always been a bone of contention because there is always a degree of subjectivity involved. As evidence for this claim, different teachers assign different marks to the same composition product. Sadiqi (1986) calls for the use of scoring rubrics⁶. She also makes a plea for self-correction; teachers are advised to train learners on how to self-correct. This way, learners will grow aware of their mistakes and develop autonomous learning mechanisms and techniques. Sadiqi (ibid.) warns teachers against the negative effect of over correction; there is no need for teachers to correct all the mistakes. For example, mistakes that are due to carelessness should be overlooked. Filling the learner's paper with red ink will be certainly discouraging to learners and might thwart their ambition. Teachers, however, are recommended to use explanatory remarks as a correction technique. This technique helps learners understand their mistakes and provides them, sometimes, with alternatives they can use to improve their writings.

⁵ Reading for Academic Purposes

⁶ A list of elements that the quality of writing will be checked against, such as grammar, mechanics, organization, etc. Each element will be assigned a share of the mark. The total of the shares constitutes the total mark.

Najji (1987) maintains that scoring is somehow objective in controlled and directed writing, but it is highly subjective in free writing. To reduce subjectivity in the scoring of composition, he advocates the use of double scoring⁷ and the adoption of the analytic method. This method allows teachers to delineate certain skills and gauge them objectively. He suggests the use of two schemes; one for high school and the other for the university level. While the high school scheme focuses on language-level issues such as mechanics, grammar and vocabulary, the university-level scheme places the onus on beyond-sentence-level issues such as coherence, organization and style. The analytic method is flexible in the sense that it is up to the teacher to decide on the elements to include depending on the nature of the composition task, the level of the learners and the sub-skills targeted. Dahbi and Britten (1989) state that composition at secondary schools has always been scored according to the traditional approach; most teachers score composition impressionistically. They attribute this practice to the lack of training. Teachers receive no pre-service or in-service training on scoring methods.

3.2. Methodology

The advent of process writing in the 1990s triggered a number of studies and academic contributions in the Moroccan EFL context. Effort has been made to gauge the effectiveness of this approach and the extent to which it will help learners develop their writing skills. Abouabdelkader (1999) investigated teachers' conceptions, knowledge and practices in teaching writing. He found out that teachers hold different conceptions of writing. Three groups have been identified. The first group considers writing as a cognitive process; it is a thinking process learner indulge in to generate ideas. The second group, however, conceives of it as a mere practice activity of the previously-learned structures. It is an opportunity for students to experiment with and reinforce their mastery of the grammar and the language items they have been exposed to before. For the third group, writing is an activity whereby learners try to communicate messages appropriately.

Abouabdelkader (ibid.) stresses that teachers do not have solid background knowledge about the theory underlying the teaching of writing in general and process writing in particular. This reflects on their actual practices. For instance, they do not implement the stages of process writing conveniently. Accordingly, Abouabdelkader attributes the difficulties students face in the learning of composition to the inappropriate implementation of process writing and a lack of theoretical understanding on the part of teachers (Ziad, 2015). These findings are by no means surprising however. Given the newness of the process approach then, teachers were still struggling to master its peculiarities and practicalities. They might have been in need of more training to better implement it.

3.3 Threshold level

Bouziane (1999) argues that the first year of university constitutes the threshold level in learning writing. Below this level, learners still have a limited linguistic knowledge, which is manifested in the types of mistakes they make; tense, preposition and cohesion errors, to name a few, are recurrent in students' writings at this stage (Meziani, 1984). As a suitable approach, Bouziane (ibid.) suggests the combination of both process and product approaches with a slightly bigger room for the latter depending on students' needs. Above the threshold level, however, students do not make serious linguistic errors, but they have problems of the rhetorical type (Dahbi, 1984). Thus, process writing instruction will adequately respond to students' needs at this level.

The threshold notion helps us categorize students according to their levels and adopt the appropriate approaches accordingly. There are, however, exceptions to this line of thought, which should be taken into account. For instance, some students above the threshold still make mistakes of the linguistic type; they make errors at the sentence level. In this case, there is no harm in alternating between process and product approaches, instead of sticking solely to process writing, to better suit students' needs.

3.4. Feedback

Other studies have tried to find ways of how to better maximize the efficiency of the process approach by focusing on its sub-processes. To help first year university students overcome the writing difficulties they face, Haouacha (2012) maintains that while feedback is crucially important in learning writing, it seems that it is not properly delivered in our classrooms. In her study, Haouacha (2012) calls for the development of a writing course where students are "...exposed to different types of feedback on multiple-draft writing" (p.73). Throughout the writing process, students should be exposed to self-monitored feedback through the use of annotations, peer feedback using sheets and teacher written and tapped feedback. This way, students will be well equipped with collaborative tools to improve the quality of their writings. This study, however, does not

⁷ A composition task is scored by two teachers. The student's grade is averaged out of the two marks.

provide us with a comprehensive understanding of process writing because it focuses on one single sub-process to the neglect of others.

Bouziane (2019) holds a broader view of feedback. He argues that there are six ways of giving feedback to students' writings: teachers' comments, the treatment of errors, peer reviewing, reformulation⁸, conferencing⁹ and scoring. Apart from the last one, the other five ways are non-linear; they can be used at any stage of the writing process whenever deemed appropriate. To implement these varied ways of delivering feedback in the Moroccan EFL classrooms systematically, Bouziane (ibid.) calls for the training of both teachers and students.

Bouziane's view on feedback seems promising, but some problems might arise at the implementation stage. For instance, given the large classes we have, it would be tiresome and time-consuming for the teacher to hold a conference with every single student. Besides, the scarcity of native speakers in the Moroccan context would make of reformulation a hard task to do. In this case, I suggest having recourse to an authority who has a good command of the language to do it instead.

In a recent article, Ziad and Bouziane (2020) stress that feedback pays off better when it is varied. They make a plea for teachers to alternate between self-, peer- and teacher-feedback in their teaching of writing.

As a matter of fact, however, feedback is still delivered in an inefficient manner in our EFL writing classrooms. As an ELT supervisor, I have constantly noticed during the classroom visits I pay to teachers that the teacher is always the sole source of feedback. Teachers respond to writing as a final draft and their feedback takes the form of prescriptions, remarks and directives that students sometimes find difficult to understand. Besides, they concern themselves much with problems and errors that are language-specific. Teachers, on the contrary, need to respond to writing as work in progress instead of evaluating it as a final product (Zamel, 1985).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present paper highlighted the major research contributions to the teaching of writing in the Moroccan EFL Context. It provided detailed accounts of the findings of various studies. It traced the two major trajectories researchers have taken. While some researchers put under scrutiny learner related issues, others placed a premium on the teacher related ones. Paradoxically enough, however, writing still stands out as the most difficult skill for learners to grasp. Substantive evidence for this claim comes from the national Baccalaureate exam's results; students perform poorly on writing compared to reading comprehension and language sections. Put differently, the problems associated with the learning and the teaching of this skill still persist despite the progress research has made in this respect. It seems, then, that research has no bearing on the classroom practices.

To reverse this situation, research on writing instruction should dig deeper into the classroom learning and teaching practices. The teaching methodology of writing, for instance, needs further scrutiny and a nationwide consensus should be reached about a methodology model that is relevant to the Moroccan context and considerate of students' needs. Strikingly enough, some teachers of English still conceive of writing as a drilling exercise for learners to practice previously learnt structures! Others deal with it as a final product to be graded. These methodological inconsistencies among teachers are mainly due to the lack of in-service training. They are denied the right to update and upgrade their teaching knowledge and practices. Another area for scholars to invest interest in is the free writing activities and how such activities help learners develop their 'writing fluency'. They provide opportunities for learners to release their thoughts and emotions and let their imagination run wild. Free writing also lowers the teacher's expectations of perfection as the focus shifts from the accurate usage of language to the meaning making process. Finally, interdisciplinary and interlingual dimensions of writing have not yet constituted an obsessive preoccupation for EFL writing researchers in Morocco. This trajectory, however, is worth investigating because students do a lot of writing in Arabic and French but they seemingly cannot transfer those writing skills to the English class.

⁸ A native speaker reads the student's paper and reformulates so that it seems more natural. Both versions, the original and the reformulated ones, are handed to the student to read. He is required to attend to similarities and differences.

⁹ The teacher holds a meeting with the student to discuss with him/her the strengths and the weaknesses of his/her paper.

About the author

Mustapha RAKRAK is an ELT supervisor and trainer. He supervises high school teachers of English in the region of Ouezzane. He accompanies them throughout their journey of continuous professional development; He holds pedagogical meetings and facilitates workshops for them about various EFL issues. He had worked as a high school teacher of English for twelve years before. He is currently working on a Ph.D. thesis about the combination of process and product approaches in the teaching of writing in Moroccan high schools. His areas of academic interest are writing, curriculum development and learner training.

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