

The Writing Challenge for Saudi Arabian Students in Western Universities

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ABSTRACT

My research examines some of the issues that teachers in intensive English programs in Western society face when teaching academic writing at the university level to students from Saudi Arabia. When first entering this unfamiliar academic context, these students experience many obstacles related to developing writing skills in English that are appropriate at university level. For example, there is a difference in the cultural view on writing in each culture. The United States places a high emphasis on Academic Writing, while Saudi Arabia stresses concepts of the beauty of writing itself and as a reproduction of ideas from authority figures. Creative writing that reflects individual student ideas is more highly valued in Western academic culture. The beauty of calligraphy and its high value in Saudi society reflects the importance of the written word. The Koran is always an exemplary model. This is evident in a Saudi student's transition to a Western culture that places a high emphasis on writing as opposed to their home culture in Saudi Arabia, which places little emphasis on academic writing skills.

Keywords: academic; ESL; language; TESOL; writers

Introduction

I have been teaching in an intensive English immersion program for the last three years at a four-year university in Tennessee with Saudi Arabian students representing more than three-fourths of our international student population. Having studied Arab culture for several years, I have found it very interesting to watch my Saudi students' learning processes when it comes to literacy. These students often come from a low literacy level in their first language (L1), and I have discovered that many of my students have never read a book or written a long essay in their academic lives.

While often successful in their home academic experience, their educational background is much more rote and places much less emphasis on the written word than we see in Western culture. I

want to explore the possible contributing factors to the challenges of mastering the academic writing process in English for these students and examine possible options to enhance their successful adaptation to academic life in Western university environments.

This paper explores cultural challenges for Saudi students working to master the academic writing process in English. It examines ways to enhance their acquisition of academic writing skills and also facilitate their successful adaptation to academic life in Western university environments. I will explore various teaching methods and strategies based on current research from peer-reviewed journals and textbooks, mainly focusing on writing and literacy for adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, with an emphasis on Saudi and Arab culture. Additionally, I will provide data that has a focus on the university environment, both in Saudi Arabia and in the United States. I will compare and contrast the educational systems of both countries, while paying particular attention to the role of academic writing in each culture.

I feel that an interdisciplinary approach would be helpful with this research because of the complexity of the topic and the sociopolitical realities related to students from strong academic programs in their home country that have low literacy traditions. I would like to draw from research in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, history, linguistics, education, and political science, with particular attention to the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Geert Hofstede's theory of Cultural Dimensions and Stella Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory provide valuable insights into the relationship of academic writing to culture. I will also refer to Steven Krashen's affective filter hypothesis. I hope to use my findings to explore new strategies for Saudi students in their quest to successfully navigate life in Western universities.

The United States and Saudi Arabia have had good diplomatic relations since the 1930s, with mutual respect existing from both sides. Saudi Arabia is a country that is slightly more than one-fifth the size of the United States. It is the third largest country in Asia after India and China. (Marklein). Many of the academic writing challenges that Saudi students face when studying abroad in the United States are based on sociocultural, political, educational, and economic differences between the two cultures. Education, along with its curriculum, values, and structure, is a reflection of culture. For example, Western culture places a high value on academic writing because of its relevance to being successful in a career.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabian culture puts a low emphasis on academic writing because it has little effect on their success in society. While American educational culture stresses writing in all of its disciplines, a Saudi student's educational background relies more on rote learning and places less emphasis on the written word than does Western society (Marklein).

Saudi Educational System

The educational system in Saudi Arabia relies strongly on memorization skills. For example, students are often required to memorize whole pages of the Koran, poetry, or other important works. Almost all higher education in Saudi Arabia is funded by the government, which provides financial aid and free housing for all students. The government also provides meals, transportation and books at a subsidized cost. Islamic ideas are the foundation of Saudi Arabian curriculum. The core elements of Saudi curriculum are the following: 1) Islam and Arabic language; 2) social, economic, and environmental conditions; 3) advances in science and technology, and 4) the Saudi cognitive and moral developmental needs (Ministry of Education).

Islam places a high emphasis on education, and every single person, regardless of their sex, is required to educate him or herself. In Saudi Arabia, men and women receive an equal education, but they are not allowed in the same school. This is carried over into many other activities in life, such as in the Mosques or at formal dinners. Female education in Saudi Arabia has always been taught by mothers or female teachers, whether it was at home in early Islamic generations, or at private schools in the present time. For the most part, the curriculum in Saudi education is the same in every school, with a few exceptions for female schools. For instance, there are no physical activities in female schools (Ministry of Education).

Modern Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Abdelrahman Al-Saud. During that time period, education was not accessible to everyone, and was mostly related to religious education. According to the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, “The objectives of Saudi educational policy are to ensure that education becomes more efficient, to meet the religious, economic, and social needs of the country and to eradicate illiteracy among Saudi adults” (Ministry of Education). In 1953, there was a major reform of the education in the country with the founding of the Ministry of Education by King Fahd, who is called the father of the modern Saudi educational system. This system allows free education for everyone and for all educational levels, in addition to thousands of scholarships to allow students to study around the world (Ministry of Education).

There are several levels of educational systems in Saudi Arabia, with each segregated by sex, as follows: 1) Kindergarten: Children start at the age of five, but can begin as early as two years of age. There are three levels within the kindergarten level, which include beginner groups (four years old), nursery (four to five years old), and preliminary (five to six years old). Until the end of the preliminary level, kindergarten is very similar to daycare programs in the United States. There are also special programs offered for students who are “gifted.” The gifted class schedule generally runs from 8:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. (Ministry of Education).

2) Primary Education begins at the age of six. This runs from 7:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. Here

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March 7 – 9, 2019 , London - United Kingdom

we see the formation of the curriculum in which the Arabic written language, mathematics, geography, science, and art education are introduced. There are major differences in the education of boys and girls. Early on, girls are guided to a type of home economics route, while the boys enjoy physical education (which is not offered for the girls). Students at the primary level must pass final exams in all areas appropriate to their sex to graduate from that level, with these exams being nationally standardized. The school year consists of two semesters, including a two-week exam period. Additionally, students begin to learn the English language at this level (Ministry of Education).

3) Middle school begins for students in Saudi Arabia at around the age of twelve or thirteen years old. English is now a required subject, with an increase in the number of classes from primary. Middle school lasts a total of three years.

4) The last stage of general education in Saudi Arabia is high school, or secondary school. High school, like middle school, lasts three years. Students enter high school at around the age of fifteen or sixteen. Saudi high school students are in school from 7:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. The first year generally consists of various “general education” classes. After this first year, students begin to focus on different fields, or majors, in which they choose to study. Fields include science, arts, economics, administrative/business, medical, and engineering (Ministry of Education).

As for older students, adult education in Saudi Arabia is committed to provide educational opportunities to all illiterate citizens. There are well-established, large numbers of adult education schools in every part of the country. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's literacy rate is above 90% for men, and just over 70% for women (Ministry of Education).

Special Education provides educational opportunities for special-needs students. Special education students have their own school called Hope Institute for Special Education. Blind, deaf, and physically or mentally handicapped students attend these institutes for free.

In addition, older handicapped people can attend other institutions (Ministry of Education). Higher education in Saudi Arabia includes seven universities for men and women, again educated separately. There are also several colleges for women, an institute of public administration for men, along with seventeen teacher-training colleges for men. The Ministry of Higher Education regulates six of the seven universities. The seventh, the Islamic University of Medina, is regulated by the Council of Ministers. Almost all of higher education is funded by the government, which provides financial aid and free housing for all students. They also provide meals, transportation, and books at a subsidized cost (Ministry of Education).

Saudi Arabian curriculum is strongly based on Islamic principles. The foundation of the curriculum is based on four main standards, which are as follows: 1) Islam and Arabic language;

2) social, economic, and environmental conditions; 3) advances in science and technology, and 4) the Saudi developmental needs (Ministry of Education). The objectives in the curriculum include, but are not limited to the following: Islamic law, cognitive development, skills, scientific reasoning, moral development, social behavior, and an appropriate social values system (Prokop 82).

Teachers are highly respected authority figures in Saudi society. Students should never question a teacher's thought process or idea. This is reflected in strict codes of conduct in the Saudi classroom. Saudi students have a very formal relationship with their teachers, in or out of school environments (Ministry of Education).

The Saudi Ministry of Higher Education is very strict on its mandate that all Saudi women studying abroad must be accompanied by a male relative when travelling to a university in a foreign country. However, they have made the exception that if a woman is paying for a university with her own money, and not on government scholarship, then she is not required to take the mahram with her. A mahram is the term used to describe a type of escort for a female traveler. Usually that escort is a brother, father, husband, or cousin of the female. Because of the advancement of education for females in recent years, Saudi Arabia has begun to see a much greater field for employment opportunities for its women. Many Arab women now go abroad to pursue their masters or doctorate degrees. One recent exception to the rule of requiring the mahram companion for women is that Saudi women who wish to study abroad need only written permission from a family member (male only) to do so. This permission letter is sent to the Saudi government for final approval and is normally considered an acceptable option for females who may not have a big enough family to provide a male travel escort to the United States (Ministry of Education).

Education in Saudi Arabia is concerned with preserving the "religious foundations of the regime." Religion is a particularly strong factor when it comes to the education and role of women. Women's education was resisted at first, but the government placed their education under the guidance of the religious group called the "General Presidency of Girls." The author Prokop also discussed the Saudi educational curriculum focusing on the role of religion in education. It is one of the main subjects in all levels of education, starting from elementary through higher education. Obedience to authority is another important issue stressed in Saudi textbooks, and this is reflected in their educational system (Prokop 80).

When we consider the fact that thirty percent of the 47,000 Saudi students in the United States on King Abdullah scholarships are women, we can see the newfound appreciation for the education of Saudi women. Additionally, 21 percent of all students who were recipients of a King Abdullah scholarship at universities in thirty different countries are also women. This number is expected to greatly increase over the next few years (Ministry of Education).

Academic Writing

In the United States, academic writing is used both as a means of communicating ideas and a way to evaluate students' knowledge of subject matters ranging from biology to literature. Here, we begin to understand the importance of writing, both academic and creative. We begin to use writing in the United States at a very young age by expressing our ideas, thoughts, and opinions in writing. Children as young as five and six are taught to respond to stories or pictures with their personal viewpoints of what the story or picture means. Many cultures, such as Saudi Arabia, place less importance on this type of writing, and view it as secondary to other core subjects.

Academic writing is highly valued in the United States. Often confused with Business Writing, Academic Writing is a type of scholarly discourse between people who know enough about an issue or subject to engage in an informed discussion and/or debate using sources that are acknowledged by the general scholarly community as credible. Academic papers have a formal, static structure and form and are delineated through traditional titled sections from beginning to end. Format with regard to font, line spacing, and margins in this type of writing also have rigid specifications and requirements. However, in Saudi Arabia, academic writing is used to appropriately express conclusions, ideas, and opinions that are derived from an understanding, and deep appreciation for, the thoughts and words of authority figures (Khan 1251).

Grammar is extremely important in Academic Writing. In most cases, it must be formal, contain no contractions, no figures of speech, or slang because terms and ideas must maintain their agreed meaning to debate in an attempt to prove or disprove their validity. Since terms in these discussions are precisely defined, omission of a comma may confuse or make incomprehensible a point being made (Fender 31).

Cultural Differences Between U.S. and Saudi Arabia

American and Arab societies are extremely different from one another. The United States is a democracy that promotes capitalism and individualism. There is a large middle class in the United States where anyone can strive to achieve success. In Saudi culture, there is limited socioeconomic mobility and less emphasis on individual success. America's diverse society reflects a strong Judeo-Christian heritage, while Saudi Arabia's diverse communities reflect their Islamic heritage. (Prokop 82)

Geert Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture Theory helps us see the contrasting values of these two societies, along with those values' effects on their respective educational systems. Hofstede's original theory used four dimensions to analyze certain cultural values for a type of comparison/contrast of different countries' values. Originally included were the following:

individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity-femininity. (Ting-Toomey 68). Hofstede has since added the fifth and sixth dimensions of long-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint. I will be focusing on three of these dimensions in my research: Power Distance, Individualism, and Uncertainty Avoidance (The Hofstede Center Online).

1. Power Distance (PD)

This refers to the degree of inequality that exists, and is accepted, among people with and without power. A high PD score indicates that society accepts an unequal distribution of power. It refers to people accepting and understanding "their place" in the system. Low PD means that power is shared and spread out over society. It also means that society members view themselves, for the most part, as equals (The Hofstede Center Online).

2. Individualism (IDV)

This dimension refers to the strength of the ties people have to others within the community. A high IDV score indicates loose connections.

In countries with a high IDV score, there is a lack of interpersonal connection in some areas, and little sharing of responsibility beyond family, and maybe a few close friends. A society with a low IDV score would have strong group cohesion, and there would be a large amount of loyalty and respect for members of the group. The group itself is also larger, and people take more responsibility for each other's well being (The Hofstede Center Online).

3). Uncertainty/Avoidance Index (UAI)

Chart 1

This dimension relates to the degree of anxiety that society members feel when in uncertain or unknown situations. High UAI-scoring nations try to avoid ambiguous situations whenever possible. They are governed by rules and order, and they seek a collective "truth." Low UAI scores indicate the society enjoys new events, ideas, and experiences. Low UAI scores involve a society that values these differences. There are very few restrictions on experiences, and people are encouraged to discover their own truth (The Hofstede Center Online).

Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimensions

CHART 2: (From <http://geert-hofstede.com/united-states.html>)

(BELOW)

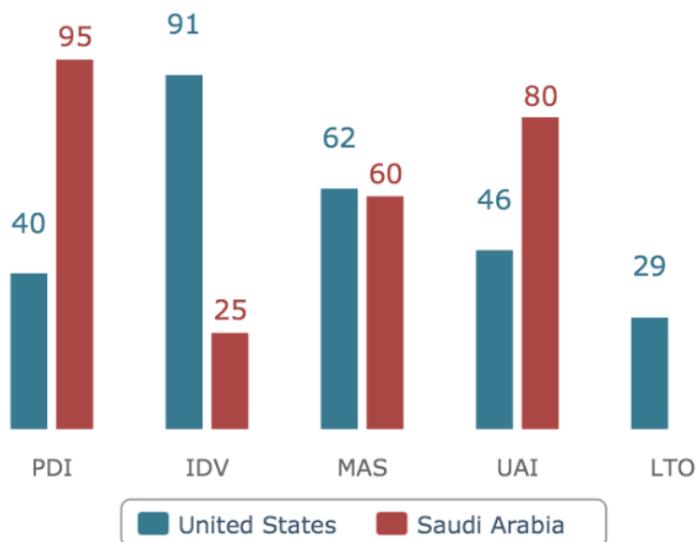
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March 7 – 9, 2019 , London - United Kingdom

Characteristic	United States	Saudi Arabia
Power Distance	Low	High
Individualism vs Collectivism	Individualistic	Collectivistic
Uncertainty Avoidance	Low	High
<i>Masculinity versus Femininity</i>		
<i>Long-term vs Short-term orientation</i>		
<i>Indulgence vs Restraint</i>		

United States

in comparison with the below



As you can see in the above charts, the United States and Saudi Arabia have opposite value dimensions in several categories. In reference to individualism versus collectivism, the United

States has a low power distance of 40, and Saudi Arabia has a very high power distance of 95. Americans rate higher in assertiveness, while Arabs rate higher in Uncertainty Avoidance (The Hofstede Center Online).

This can sometimes lead to cultural problems. For example, what we consider plagiarism, they consider “sharing.” My colleagues and I have had many conversations over the years about how to curb plagiarism among Saudi students. For instance, when I ask students to explain their knowledge of a grammatical concept, they will often not produce their own idea, but repeat an idea that I have just stated. Additionally, many of our Saudi students copy information directly from Wikipedia to turn in as a paper. This highlights the Saudi cultural expectation to give deference to authority figures.

T.I.E.P. and the Saudi Scholarship Program

After teaching seven years in the public school systems of Tennessee and New York as an ESL teacher, three years ago I began a new job as an Intensive English Instructor at the University of Tennessee at Martin in their Tennessee Intensive English Program (T.I.E.P.). I currently teach an average of 80-90 students from Saudi Arabia per year in the T.I.E.P. program.

Saudi students represent the majority of more than 75 percent of our international student population, as their numbers are also increasing in intensive English programs across the United States. I have taught both beginning and intermediate Writing courses, along with intermediate Grammar and advanced Reading. Saudi Arabia has an interesting background when it comes to the history of Saudi students studying in the United States. In April of 2005, King Abdullah (then the crown prince) visited President George W. Bush at his ranch and discussed the issues surrounding Saudi students studying in the United States. A joint statement was issued from both parties indicating a desire to "increase the number of young Saudi students to travel and study in the United States." The following summer, the Saudi Education Ministry announced a new scholarship program for Saudi students wanting to study in the United States (Marklein).

The Saudi government had been working on relations with the United States in an urgent fashion since the September 2001 attacks on the twin towers in New York City. The report that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi led to more hostility in the United States toward Saudis. International students were often victims of mistreatment from fellow students and community members. Originally under a five-year contract at its inception in 2005, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) received short extensions in 2007 and 2009. A major extension was announced in 2010 that will keep the program running to 2020 (Marklein).

Many universities, including my employer the University of Tennessee at Martin, now have additional Saudi student enrollees. The T.I.E.P. Program at U.T. Martin has been in existence

since 1977, and over the years has experienced a dramatic increase in Saudi enrollees. Currently, around 150 students in the T.I.E.P. program at Martin are Saudi.

According to the Institute of International Education, there were 5,579 Saudi nationals enrolled in United States institutions of higher education in the 2001-2002 school year. The September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks took place near the beginning of that school year. In little over a decade, the Saudi student population in the U.S. has experienced a dramatic increase of more than 500 percent. With 34,139 students, it is now the fourth largest group of international students studying in the United States (Open Doors).

Before students exit the TIEP program, one of our goals as teachers is to stress to the students the importance of citations and paraphrasing, as opposed to direct copying of information from other sources. Since we have six levels of Writing at UTM for the intensive English program, students have six six-week semesters to work on this and learn to use the Western style of Academic Writing, along with the styles of MLA and APA.

The T.I.E.P. program focuses on teaching the English language in an intensive format with classes being held five-six hours per day. Four basic classes are taught, along with several supplemental classes, such as test preparation and pronunciation classes. The four basic classes offered are Grammar, Reading, Writing, and Listening. Grammar is a double class with two hours each day instead of one. Classes are set up with six levels each ranging from 1-6. Level One is an entry level in which a student will speak little or no English. Level Six is considered the final and highest level. Most students in Level Six speak English fluently and have a solid grasp on reading, writing, and speaking in English. When the students complete Level Six, they are prepared to take the TOEFL exam, which is the most widely used English exam. TOEFL stands for Test of English as a Foreign Language. The TOEFL is offered at U.T.M. six times per year. This semester I am teaching Grammar Level One, Writing Level Five, and Listening Level Three.

Cheating Vs. Sharing

Many of my students seem to be ill prepared for study abroad in the United States. They often have a stereotypical view of the United States and its people. In addition, the majority of the Saudi students that I come across initially have little understanding of what would be considered appropriate conduct in an American classroom. Additionally, many things that are ingrained in our minds through our years of a United States education are not part of the Saudi student mindset. An example of this is the concept of cheating. Cheating and plagiarism are highly punishable and looked down upon in most universities throughout the United States. Saudi students seem to have a very different concept of what constitutes “cheating.” What the United

States would consider “cheating” is what Saudi culture might consider “sharing” of information. Many of my senior colleagues have explained to me that in Saudi Arabia, many of the teachers do not forbid students from “helping” each other on tests and reports.

Bouman presents case studies as evidence that different cultures have different conceptions of intellectual property. Additionally, he offers strategies grounded in contrastive rhetoric for approaching ESL students you suspect of plagiarism. My co-workers and I see this constantly with new students from Saudi Arabia at UTM, and I found the author’s ideas very helpful (Bouman 46).

Language and Literacy Issues Faced by Saudi Students

There is quite a large gap between language and literacy proficiency of Arab students of English as a second language. Arab students often score significantly lower on spelling and comprehension tests, but relatively well in listening and speaking skills in comparison to other ESL students.

One study by Fender addressed in his article focused on the particular needs and challenges that Arab ESL students face in acquiring English. Studies show that students entering into English programs with literacy in an L1 using a Roman alphabet are more familiar with the characters and uses of them. They can more easily understand the letter-sound relationship.

Arabic students are taught to speak and write in two different styles that practically are two different languages. They speak with a different dialect than Modern Standard Arabic, which is what they read and write in. There are differences in vocabulary, phonology, and grammar between the two. Arabic is written from left to right in cursive form, words are combined when possible, and vowels are nearly absent from Arabic writing. With these patterns, it is easy to see how the patterns of the English language are highly confusing to Arabic students. The Fender research article also included instructional methods that are useful in addressing these specific struggles. When they are able to recognize spelling-sound relationships, literacy and fluency are more quickly attained. This highlights how different the alphabet and patterns of Arabic language are from English (Fender 33).

While the Saudi education system focuses more on rote learning, the U.S. educational system stresses individual thought process, problem solving, discussion, and discovery learning. Many of my Saudi students definitely take time adjusting to these new educational ideas. After a while in the United States, Saudi students learn to “think outside the box” and experience learning in a whole new light.

Other problematic issues faced by some Saudi students are more than likely cultural issues. For example, “Saudi time” is very different than “U.S. time,” and being late for class can sometimes be somewhat of an epidemic for the Saudis in an American classroom. Other

noteworthy concerns are mobile phone usage during class, talking while the teacher is talking, and a general lack of basic study skills. They are often unmotivated to study independently outside of class and projects are often turned in late and incomplete.

Hofstede gave us a way to look at the values, and Ting-Toomey gives a way to understand how to renegotiate their student identity in a new cultural context. Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory comes in to play here with Saudi students having to put on a new and unfamiliar "face" in this new Western academic context. In her theory, Ting-Toomey states that every human being has so called "multiple self-identity images." These images can be cultural, social, or personal identity images, which exert influence both on people's communicative motivation and the sense of identity coherence, which can stem from a low or rather high personal self-esteem.

According to Ting-Toomey, all those aspects have impact on the process of identity negotiation. She stresses that people from individualistic and collectivistic societies have a greater possibility of these different "faces" generating conflict. With Saudi students, they often take a longer adjustment period to develop the skill set necessary to negotiate a space in which students are allowed to question their own work, that of their teacher, or that of their peers (Ting-Toomey 110).

Writing Strategies That Help Saudi Students

Peer editing is often a new concept for Saudi students and many of the issues that arrive from peer tutoring can be traced back to Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory. In Saudi Arabia, the students are taught to receive information and recite, and rarely have to give and/or generate new or creative information. It takes some time for these students to become comfortable in the steps of the writing process and learn how to give constructive criticism to their peer's writing. Once they begin to develop this skill, they can then in turn learn how to better self-edit and rely less on the teacher, and therefore become a more independent writer (Campbell 55)

In her book, Campbell gives us the philosophy that writing should be taught in conjunction with social and cultural expectations. It teaches a variety of writing strategies, such as self-editing and portfolio writing, and provides practical advice on assessing writing and providing constructive feedback to English as a Second Language learners (Campbell 57).

One of these strategies is reading aloud. It is often not effective to ask the student to read the paper aloud as the student may not have the intuitive sense necessary to assess his or her own writing yet. Instead, you might read the paper aloud dramatically to note when the reader stumbles, pauses, fills in missing articles and modifiers, or reads smoothly (Matsuda 52).

One of the articles I researched stated that their research panel concluded that explicit literacy instruction was a very promising and effective intervention that is valuable to use with low-literate adult ESL learners. Explicit literacy can be defined as a type of multistep model that is focused on developing a learner's ability to engage in thinking skills and actions necessary to

perform complex tasks. This type of learning is very student-centered and Freire-based in many ways. I feel that this article once again points to how using a student-entered or Freire-based classroom model is beneficial to ESL learners, and especially to adult ESL learners. I think that adult learners need the critical aspect of learning, especially since most adults take longer to learn a second language than children do. Adult ESL students should have the advantage of all of the research-based methods and funding that ESL children's programs have been provided with (Burt 4).

When referring to Arabic language in the home country, several authors in my research pointed out the weaknesses of Arabic discourse reflected in second language writing as a major cause for students' failure to reach the set goals of writing courses. They advocated that the old educational policies were the main factors for students' problems. It has been realized that students of ESL classes were unable to adopt a professional style of writing because essay writing from first draft to final draft is a stressful task for nonnative learners. These problems led several other authors to suggest that academic writing needs to be more focused on the organization part of the discourse (Fender 39).

Another article showed a theory that a diverse make-up of ESL learners created practical problems for both teachers and learners. Additionally, they viewed increased problems in multi-ability classes when both native speakers and beginners studied together. Diversity led to engagement and management problems on both ends. Additionally, in the same article, there were ideas regarding the performance and the problems of Arab students from private and public school backgrounds that are involved in Academic English writing courses. The author identified several daunting challenges for the program's success, such as the following: organizing teaching materials and resources, allocating peer work, and students' attitude and difference in their level of understanding (Khan 1252).

Generally, research shows that it is not common to have the same level students in a class. All ESL classes have mixed-ability to one degree or another, which poses a challenge to the teachers. Writing and tutoring programs would be helpful in improving and changing students' deep-rooted cultural attitudes to learning new language. The study concludes that the difference of the L1 ability and reasoning of the students coming from different school background leads to problems both in teaching and learning (Ferris 134).

One interesting point that Fender makes is that teachers need to be aware of the fact that many of their adult language learners are from extremely varied cultural and educational backgrounds. Some students may come from a culture with a low emphasis on literacy and may be non-literate, or have limited literacy skills in their native language. (Fender 27). I have definitely found this to be true at UTM's TIEP immersion program, as many of my Saudi students have told me that they have never read a book (novel of any sort) for school in their academic careers.

Author Tindall gives a great Freire-type solution to this problem of teaching ESL literacy to adult students with so many diverse backgrounds. The authors suggest that it is best for teachers to employ scientifically-based strategies and make adjustments to those strategies based on all of the unique linguistic and cultural distinctions of each individual language learner.

This would suggest a bottom-up pedagogy would benefit the adult language learners while they are struggling with the difficulties of becoming literate in a new language. Teachers should make the language learning meaningful and relevant to these new adult language learners and have them question their own learning process (Tindall 7).

The Internet, Social Networking, and Writing

Many of my Saudi students at U.T. Martin have a personal Facebook page. However, there is still some fear and uncertainty when it comes to expressing new thoughts and ideas that could be viewed as offensive by friends or family members back home in Saudi Arabia. The males seem to care very little about what pictures, status updates, or ideas they post online. The females, however, rarely write about anything personal. They usually just post general comments about school life, and never post any photos of themselves or their female friends. They still feel the pressure of their home culture to dictate what can be seen of, or expressed by, Saudi women. Many of my Saudi male students post pictures of their American girlfriends or American buddies without fear of being looked down upon.

Internet around the world has led to major social changes. Many of those social changes have begun through people blogging from all over the world and from all walks of life. Blogging has recently become a new way of driving change in Arab society. Bloggers are becoming more and more prevalent in the Middle East. A recent survey suggested that over 35,000 people are now blogging in Arabic, plus countless others who use Facebook, Twitter, or other social sites to communicate over the Internet. Many of these bloggers are educated Arab females, who have studied abroad (Spack 45).

There has been much debate about the extent to which this type of media is reshaping public discourse and undermining censorship. However, the main importance of blogging in the Middle East is that people who previously did not have a voice in social reform now have a voice with a worldwide audience. The traditional "ideal" of an Arab society is one that is strictly ordered, where everyone knows his or her place and nobody speaks out against authority, which takes us back to Hofstede's Power Distance with Saudi Arabia having a high power distance. Social media in these countries has allowed both women and youth to be given a new voice. It also gives students a strong motivation to practice and develop their writing skills because of the use of social networking sites (Spack 45).

ESL Classroom Writing Strategies

In Saudi Arabia, learning English as a Second or Foreign Language is valued almost as much as getting a quality education. Being a common business language, and an important tool of communication, English is very important in a developing country like Saudi Arabia. There are varieties of factors that affect the learning of English, but with the help of knowledgeable educators who understand their students' individual learning styles and struggles, it can help to smooth the way for a much easier journey in learning a new language (Kahn 1253).

Author Scott's book discusses ways to better understand the cultural differences that affect foreign language writing. It is possible to use a type of contrastive rhetoric if you suspect that cultural differences are shaping the paper. For example, ask the student how he or she was taught to organize an argument. Engage in a discussion of how personal and audience expectations differ here. Ask the student to find errors, underline them, and correct them before you even read the paper. This type of instruction helps the student to analyze his or her own learning processes (Scott 49).

Matsuda argues that instructors should emphasize an awareness of context in writing classes. For example, a good idea is to give writing assignments, such as asking students to write a critical review of one another's essays. Then, have someone else share it with the whole class, including the author of the essay, allowing the writer to see how the intended readers react to his or her text and how other people approach the same task (Matsuda 58).

Freire proposes a kind of educational system that is in contrast to what we see in many places, including the United States. He proposes a highly student-centered environment; in which he stresses that students do more than simply reproduce the words that already exist. It requires that they create their own words, while using words that allow them to become aware of reality in order to fight for their own emancipation. Without this, some people acquire a kind of naïve consciousness in which they are aware of their situation, but don't make any effort to change it. They may begin to take a conformist stance and consider their situation something normal, even to the point of supporting it themselves. Other individuals construct their own reality and liberate themselves from oppression, only to go to the opposite extreme and become the antithesis of what they were fighting against. Freire desires education that liberates the individual as a conscious act by the individual (Freire 45).

Conclusion/Findings

Overall, my research suggests that a variety of methods work best when teaching Academic Writing to second language learners. One idea that was proposed was that teachers should increase the number of writing tasks in all lessons, including reading, science, history, etc. The authors believe that by doing so, they would strengthen the students' abilities in academic writing. Also, the authors stated that most Saudi students strongly desired more feedback from teachers on academic writing tasks. Writing outside the classroom and in new environments was an idea suggested by the author to stimulate students' interest in academic writing (Al-Khasawneh 19). I found this study very interesting considering many of my Saudi students struggle with writing and motivation for writing in the English language.

The majority of my research leads me to believe that there is no best process, and teachers need to be able to adapt and adjust to the individual ESL academic writer, much as one would with native English speakers. As a teacher, it is important to become familiar with as many different writing instruction methods as possible. Also, Freire's method of teaching students to think freely and become free from their oppressors in a conscious way is very important and relevant to ESL students needing to break out of their shell with writing about their own experiences.

Another study investigated whether Saudi ESL students' writing competence was related to their Arabic writing proficiency. The study also examined the possible relationship between Saudi students' first language (Arabic) and second language (English) writing competence and their self-regulatory abilities. Studies were done on university students and the data analysis revealed a strong correlation between participants' L1 (Arabic) writing proficiency and their L2 (English) writing competence. The study also revealed that Saudi students who scored high in L1/L2 writing had high self-regulation abilities. The findings clearly indicate the necessity for communication between classroom instructors within a program, with regard to what is valued in writing, since students may be being presented with two very different sets of expectations (Atkinson 543).

As far as tutoring academic writing goes, most of the research encourages a type of Socratic Method when it comes to tutoring students, which refers to letting the students figure out the answers by themselves with you giving them thoughtful questions to guide them along the process. This method will help the students to learn to self-regulate in Academic Writing (Blau 29).

To conclude, I would like to run through a list of some of the top strategies that have been used effectively to address the issues that Saudi writers face in Western university settings. These include the strategies of:

*Facilitate peer to peer review by example.

*Encourage the individual's critique of his/her own paper.

*Lower the affective filter of students, which refers to Steven Krashen and his hypothesis that if a student has a high level of anxiety because of the classroom or learning environment, then he or she will be less likely to learn language affectively.

*Focus on content at first, grammar errors later.

Implications for Future Research

I would like to use these findings to explore new solutions to provide Saudi students with a more successful transition to academic life in Western universities that require a high emphasis on literacy. Additionally, a follow-up could be to monitor student progress based on TOEFL scores in Writing and use this information to plan future writing curriculum for adult learners in intensive English Programs (IEP). I hope to use these studies to help with a carryover to their Reading and Academic Skills classes.

Finally, I would like to share this info to network with my co-workers and other ESL writing teachers at the university level.

I would like to end with a quote by Wade Davis, that says, *“The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you, as they are unique manifestations of the human spirit.”*

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