Ways to Overcome Writing Difficulties in African Civilization among EFL Students.

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Abstract:

Writing is an intricate process that constitutes a deeply crucial issue for teachers and students alike as it interferes with the teaching and learning process. The majority of learners, especially in the Algerian context, conceive of writing assignments as burdensome and tiring tasks, while the minority find the end product, especially if aptly worked out, immensely satisfying and rewarding. Impediments to good writing, in particular in African civilization, stem from a multitude of reasons, particularly weak linguistic competency, poor vocabulary, lack of planning and concentration, and absence of critical thinking. The premise of this paper is to elucidate a number of teaching strategies that could boost critical thinking and writing in the civilization course. The sample population comprises third-year students. A descriptive analytical method was used to undertake this investigation. The findings reveal that the use of diversified strategies such as text analysis, note-taking expansion, and presentations (with material provided by the teacher to avoid plagiarism) could promote learners' writing. The paper argues that teachers ought to use writing assignments in their instruction models so as to develop this skill.

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الملخص:

الكتابة عملية معقدة تشكل مسألة بالغة الأهمية بالنسبة للمعلمين والطلاب على حد سواء، لأنها تتدخل في عملية التعليم/التعلم. إن أغلب المتعلمين (وخاصة في السياق الجزائري) يعتبرون مهام الكتابة مهام مرهقة ومتعبة؛ وفي حين تجد الأقلية أن المنتج النهائي التوصل هو أنشطة مرضية ومجزية للغاية. العوائق الكامنة وراء الكتابة الجيدة، وخاصة في الحضارة الإفريقية، تتمثل في الكفاءة اللغوية، وفقر وعاء المفردات، والافتقار إلى التخطيط والتركيز، وغياب التفكير النقدي. ويهدف هذا المقال إلى توضيح عدد من استراتيجيات التدريس التي يمكن أن تعزز التفكير النقدي والكتابة في مادة الحضارة. ولتحقيق هذا، استُخدمت طريقة تحليلية وصفية.

تكشف النتائج على أن استخدام استراتيجيات متنوعة مثل تحليل النصوص، والتوسع في أخذ الملاحظات، والعروض (مع تحديد المواضيع من قِبَل الأستاذ لتجنب الغش) من شأنه أن يشجع على تنمية الكتابة لدى الطلبة. ويوضح البحث على أنه ينبغي للأساتذة استخدام تمارين الكتابة في نماذج تعليمهم من أجل تطوير هذه المهارة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة؛ عملية معقدة؛ الحضارة الافريقية؛ التفكير النقدي؛ تحليل النص.

Introduction:

Writing, particularly in the context of the civilization course, is an intricate process that requires both time and due engagement on the part of the writer (student) and the reader

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(teacher). It is more demanding than the three skills, which are, to varying degrees, relatively passive. Writing is by no means acquired through a natural process; rather, it is taught in an instructional setting, itself necessitating a set of pre-requisites that ease its grasping. We actually notice a great revulsion among our students when coping with writing essays in African civilization; more striking is the fact that even third-year LMD students who are expected to show a better attitude fail. They do, in a majority, conceive of writing assignments and tests as burdensome and tiring tasks, while the minority find the end product, especially if aptly worked out, immensely satisfying and rewarding. The present article tries to unravel the teaching strategies that can be used in the module of African civilization in order to appeal to students' engagement and foster their writing skill. For that sake, it is important to address the following questions:

- ✓ What are the attributes of academic writing?
- ✓ How is the nature of writing in the African civilization course?
- ✓ What are the reasons behind students' writing shortcomings?
- ✓ Which practical strategies could be used to enhance students writing in the African civilization course?

Definition of academic writing:

Writing is a system to record knowledge, communicate, or assume a professional occupation. Academic writing, more specifically, means the engagement in a knowledge-telling approach (which is the case of novices), or the potential to transform pieces of information into new texts, to convey a set of discourses: narrative, expository, or argumentative (Miles, 2002). It is, generally, this information processing that university students are urged to adopt, and not merely telling

or retelling knowledge. Petraglia identifies one of the skills needed for this process, namely the ability to develop and organize ideas (as cited in. Robertson et al., 2010).

Academic writing involves basically five things, notably the audience, the context, the message, the purpose, and the type of documents/genres used (Lennie, 2010). The audience refers to the teacher of the academic subject; the context means a specific type of assignment or an exam dispensed by the teacher to assess the learning situation; the message has to do with the students' interpretation of what they have learned; while the purpose pertains to the acquisition of a good grade.

Nature of writing in the context of the civilization course:

Writing in the context of the civilization course involves essentially critical-solving skills. In other words, the ability to construct an expository text is related to the use of reasoning and logical tools such as the comparison of ideas, determination of cause-effect nexus, recognition of the most momentous idea, and generalizations. The latter involves either an inductive generalization (from a set of examples to a specific idea), or an analogy (generalization from relationships among related concepts) (Lennie, 2010). Students are, therefore, expected to formulate a reasoned response supplemented with strong arguments, coherency, and a disciplined study that displays the tacit paradigm of an essay (an adequate introduction, a good development, and an appropriate conclusion). All throughout the essay, grammatical correctness and a stance of logic should be used, such as asserting an idea and then backing it up with a solid argument.

A question worth asking with regard to critical skills is the reason that underlies their instruction. In fact, students are called to read different kinds of documents, which bring an important array of information that must be sifted and evaluated. Critical thinking ought to be embedded within a context, not in an isolated way. In other words, it should be integrated within the lecture as part of students' in-class engagement (Savish, 2009).

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Stages of the writing process, requirements, and challenges:

The writing process involves three stages, namely pre-writing, planning, drafting, pausing, and reading (see table 1). Pre-writing is the stage whereby learners think about the outline. Planning refers to the reflection process engaged by the student to decide on what ideas should be developed. It should take into consideration a clear formulation of the thesis and a good sense of organization. Drafting refers to the composition of the text on the basis of the ideas developed, paying heed to an adequate use of grammar and a convenient choice of vocabulary. Pausing and reading are the last steps where learners revise the text with a view to locating any writing anomalies.

Having deciphered the phases of the writing process, let us now hover over its requirements. To write effectively, one needs to have a good command of the language, critical-solving skills, and due engagement. As to the first one, it has to do with the facility of grammar, vocabulary, and spelling; the vocabulary should be sufficiently extensible to allow for an array of topics to be adapted. As to the second, it pertains essentially to the generation and organization of task-relevant ideas (Paul Dean et al., 2008). The latter are nurtured essentially in the reading comprehension course, which emphasizes such strategies as interpreting, inferring, analyzing, and evaluating. In fact, good reading generates the compilation of an array of information and its storage in memory. It equally ensures the judicious comprehension of the exam instructions that facilitates the sorting out of the key elements. As to the third criterion, students should have at least an intrinsic motivation, signified by the acquisition of a good grade. Some students display an extrinsic motivation, which is the need to show one's capacities to their classmates.

But our current student community (third-year EFL students) lacks, inextricably, those highly and externally motivated students.

It is clearly apparent from the above notes that the challenges encountered by students while writing are associated with difficulties to reflect clearly, organize appropriately, and formulate tangibly their ideas. It should be safe here (as will be documented later) to state that the students, alone, do not account for such problems; the instructors are equally responsible. In conjuncture with those problems, one notices a number of errors (nurtured in long class observation) such as word repetition, non-concord between subject and verb, fragment sentences, non-parallel structures, poor vocabulary, lack of planning and concentration, and absence of critical thinking. A pertinent question with regard to students' non-proficiency in writing, particularly in civilization, is the reasons behind this situation.

Table 1. Writing stages

	Definition	
Pre-writing	Generating ideas, strategies, and information for a given writing task.	Prewriting activities take place before starting on the first draft of a paper. They include discussion, outlining, free writing, journals, talk-write, and metaphor.
Planning	Reflecting on the material produced during prewriting to develop a plan to achieve the aim of the paper.	Planning involves considering your rhetorical stance, rhetorical purpose, the principal aim of the text, how these factors are interrelated, and how they are connected to the information generated during prewriting. Planning also involves selecting support for your claim and blocking out at least a rough organizational structure.

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Drafting	Producing words on a computer or on paper that match (more or less) the initial plan for the work.	Drafting occurs over time. Successful writers seldom try to produce an entire text in one sitting or even in one day
Pausing	Moments when the students are not writing but instead are reflecting on what they have produced and how well it matches your plan. Usually includes reading.	Pausing occurs among successful and unsuccessful writers, but they use it in different ways. Successful writers consider how well the text matches the plan, how well it is meeting audience needs, and overall organization.
Reading	Moments during pausing when the students read what they have written and compare it to their plan.	Reading and writing are interrelated activities. Good readers are good writers and vice versa. The reading that takes place during writing is crucial to the reflection process during pausing.

Williams, J., D. *Preparing to teach writing: Research, theory, and practice* (3rd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003.

Background behind students' writing shortcomings:

Generally, two parameters should be invoked to explain students' apprehension and lack of enthusiasm towards writing. At the outset, the environment has a great share in this negative attitude: students live in a digital age where

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multimedia and audiovisual tools play a momentous role in
their lives. It is a world in which non-verbal, and image-based
forms of electronic communication are extremely paramount
(Mehrabian, 1995, as cited in Lapakko, 2007). Practically,
their lives revolve around the internet, and all its byproducts,
such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. It is there that they find
inspiration, enjoyment, and enthusiasm: they can chat, write
short messages, intervene in blogs, produce their own videos,
and diffuse them on the net. Their writing patterns don't
necessarily involve complex composition; they can simply
express what they feel by dint of dialectal Arabic, which is
much easier than writing in Arabic or a foreign language.
hence, a great departure from the old-style letter-writing.

Besides, the abundance of information on the internet
makes no room for developing one's thinking as search
engines and ready-made critical essays are available there
with a simple click, altering completely old conventions and
giving birth to new cultural forms. No wonder then that the
burdensome and challenging task of writing in a standard
language, in particular English, seems like a very archaic
activity. Furthermore, this conviction is further nurtured by a
disrespect of discipline, and rigor, and a waning of good
values, above all responsibility. At this level, we can hardly
claim that a two-year study of the written expression module
will suffice to figure out this situation.

Yet, this new environment alone does not account for
the total failure of students' writing. Teachers do account,
enormously, as they have (or scarcely) adapted themselves to
this new milieu. They make slender progress in engaging
themselves in integrating technology into their teaching. They
keep believing that university students should be totally
independent, and engage properly in their assigned work.
They do not provide well-weighted and balanced instructions
and tasks that promote the development of all the skills. Most
of the instructions simply deal with bits of language rather

than writing in real contexts (such as passage completion, jumbled sentences, etc.). However, reality makes it clear that unless due coaching, and a sound commitment from teachers (to create favorable conditions of learning) are provided, students' attitudes towards writing will remain the same.

This was, broadly, a mapping out of the writing situation, which urges sound engagement on the part of teachers. What follows is an exposition of a set of practical strategies grounded in years of experience.

Practical writing tasks in African civilization:

The boosting of writing in the African civilization course is not an easy task. It requires constant adaptation to meet students' needs. At the outset, the lecture should not be a "dry" sequence where students' negative stands keep soaring, but rather an active learning course that involves students' engagement in questioning and answering. This means, essentially, the intensification of knowledge-transformation tasks wherein adequate inputs increase students' interaction with the writing situation. Miles (2002) explains here that four ingredients of input are required: input frequency, the nature of comprehensible input, learner output in interaction, and the processes of collaborative discourse construction. Before dwelling on the examples of tasks, it is significant first to see the type of exam instructions that students should respond to.

In the African civilization exam, students are generally required to respond to implicit or indirect questions. These include two types of questions: (a) closed-writing assignments, and (b) semi-open writing assignments. Examples are stated below.

(a)-closed-writing assignments: in the context of West African civilization, students have been introduced to the examination of the three West African empires (Ghana, Mali, and

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Songhay), involving different aspects of organization in each political entity; the question then was to decide who among the Africans or the Europeans played a significant role in the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade.

(b)-semi-open writing assignments: one typical question could be formulated as follows:

In light of what you have seen, discuss both of the political and economic organizations in the West African empires. (This requires a deep analysis with a view to determining the similarities and differences between the empires).

Regarding the strategies that could be used in the civilization course, the researchers' teaching experience showed the efficacy of the following strategies:

1.Developing critical thinking skills through questioning: how do civilizations emerge, do they persist, and for what reasons do they collapse? Here, students should use a sound reflection process by dint of the teacher's guidance. Students, for instance, were first introduced to different civilizations in Africa (Nile Valley civilizations, West African civilizations, East African civilizations, and South African civilizations); they were then asked to analyze those civilizations and see whether they shared the same patterns of rise and fall.

2.Presentation of different perspectives that relate to the definition of a given concept, and asking students to study those views carefully with a view to determining points of similarities and differences. In this respect, Shanahan remarked that the use of multiple texts entails an overall improvement in student critical thinking skills and in their level of intellectual sophistication (as cited in. Van Fossen &

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Shiveley, 1997). Once this process was terminated, students were required to write down their findings.

3.Concept definition or word stretching: For instance, a given concept was written on the blackboard (civilization, slavery, colonization, globalization, etc.), and then students were involved in a brainstorming process. For the term "civilization," students might come up with the following words: wealth, organization, architecture, science, and progress. Each word was, in turn, questioned and evaluated; this activity was also termed the "top-bottom approach."

4.Text analysis: students were involved in a collective detailed reading to see how ideas were structured, how coherency and transition were accounted for, and above all, how arguments were developed. This task, also called the immersion approach, generally took a long time as each idea was explained separately. The study text concerned extracts from J.D.Fage's book, *A History of West Africa*

*5.*Giving students two counteracting views and asking them to find out which one is more reliable, such as views about the impact of colonialism (was European colonialism a blissful act on the Africans or not), or African commitment to the Atlantic slave trade (to what extent were the Africans committed to the African slave trade?).

6. Teaching within a concrete context through drawing analogies between items taught and their corresponding images in real life. For instance, while introducing the notion of slavery, students were asked whether slaves existed in contemporary times, and, if so, how they were viewed.

7. Giving students a series of words/expressions and asking them to find the link or the logical equation between them, for

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instance: power, persuasion, coercion. All throughout those assignments, students were guided step-by-step as to the figuring out of the problems.

8. In the post-exam period, students could be made aware of their errors and clearly identify how they should cope with instructions. As an illustration, instructors could select the most common errors and induce students to identify them, and provide adequate corrections. It should be noted here that certain writers, as Semke affirmed, don't significantly increase writing skills (1984), and that the learner's achievement is enhanced by practice alone (Cohen, 1987).

9. Students should be handed over their exam sheets with due remarks inscribed on them, so as to permit the learners to locate their mistakes, and have trust in the teacher (it should be mentioned at this level that certain students can simply lose confidence and don't engage themselves because they believe teachers care a little about their papers and consequently are not fair when attributing grades).

10. Sample corrections should be dealt with thoroughly within the course, and not simply displayed on the notice board. This might, indeed, be insightful by explaining clearly the instructions, and how students should proceed.

Conclusion:

This paper tried to canvass the different ways that help overcome writing difficulties in African civilization for third-year EFL students. Writing in this subject requires primarily critical thinking skills. Yet, experience demonstrates that learners apprehend deeply this task. The reasons behind this attitude are related firstly to the heavy influence of a digitized world where non-verbal and image-based forms of

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communication are prominent. Secondly, there is a great waning of values, essentially responsibility. Thirdly, teachers are also at fault for this negative attitude as they do not conceive suitable strategies that engage learners and promote their reflective thinking.

The tasks proposed in this study are by no means magical tools to develop good writers in African civilization exams, or any course dealing with culture and civilization. They remain, at best, personal endeavors to cope within a teaching environment, not necessarily similar to other settings. In fact, the promotion of writing is a gradual process that requires a coordinated effort on the part of all the teachers; they should all integrate writing assignments within the academic subjects they teach. It is only through integrative teaching that good results can be yielded. It is evident that writing can only prosper through constant practice, and reading, but this is, intrinsically, linked with aiding students to appreciate writing and long-process reflection. It is also important that the academic subject of reading comprehension be taught through deep instruction, involving the adequate choice of reading texts alongside the appropriate elaboration of exercises that promote inference, interpretation, and evaluation. Surface MCQ (Multiple Choice Questions) should be banished because they simply generate passivity and do not reflect well the students' internalization process. Students should also be stimulated to make frequent use of the dictionary with a view to developing their stock of language.

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