

Received 30/09/2011

Published 30/12/2011

## **EFL writing at tertiary level: cognitive and metacognitive aspects**

**Samira ARAR**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Algiers 2 University, Algeria

### **Abstract**

At tertiary level, writing is not only a language learning and testing tool, but also a highly cognitive skill prerequisite for academic success. Nevertheless, in the Algerian University there seems to be no renovation in terms of syllabus content or teaching practices, since writing is still viewed as output, and not valued as possible input which can advance EFL learning, a fact that may be the underlying cause of EFL students' low achievement in both writing and learning. This paper attempts, therefore, to examine the interrelationship between writing, learning and thinking by exploring the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of the writing skill in higher education. The ultimate objective is to readjust the place of writing in the EFL teaching/learning process for a better writing and EFL proficiency.

**Key Words:** EFL writing, cognition, metacognitive, writing for learning, higher education.

### **1- Introduction**

A hundred years after Saussure's "Course in General Linguistics" (1916), there seems to be an agreement that language is both individual and social \_ and ultimately cultural. In addition, in language-related studies, everything is organized into a 'structure' whose particles, as individual puzzles, have to be 'scientifically' considered all together in order to complete the whole jigsaw of what constitutes 'human language'. This is particularly true of writing as it cannot be considered in isolation from other constituents of language learning; in other words, in isolation from other subject-matters in the EFL syllabus, neither from other aspects of learning in general.

Writing is basically the graphic representation of sounds, on paper or on a screen, into words, sentences, paragraphs or larger texts, in order to convey meaning, according to conventions of the written code (or rules). Writing represents an act of communicating, thinking, learning, exploring, and problem-solving. Thus, writing requires from the writer (or the learner) the mastery of conventional writing mechanics in addition to organisational devices in order to write effectively. This multifaceted aspect of writing requires from teachers and learners alike to build awareness about writing on a multidimensional scale: linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical.

Writing is undeniably an important language learning skill and a cognitive competence prerequisite for academic success at university level and even beyond (Creme and Lea, 2003; Northedge, 2005). Nevertheless, in the Algerian University, writing is still considered as a testing or a homework execution medium. In other words, writing is still viewed as *output*, and not valued as possible *input* which can advance EFL learning; a fact that may be the

underlying cause of EFL students' low achievement in both writing and learning. This paper attempts, therefore, to consider the interrelationship between writing, learning and thinking. On the one side, it exposes the cognitive aspect of writing, by linking writing to learning and showing how writing can contribute in *shaping* and building language learning through the writing-for-learning approach. On the other side, it explains the metacognitive aspect by linking writing to thinking about learning, and showing how writing can participate in *regulating* learning, through self-reflection/evaluation. The ultimate objective of this article is to suggest ways of revaluing the place of writing in EFL teaching/learning instruction for a better writing and EFL proficiency at tertiary level.

## **2- Contextual Factors**

Writing is a very important language learning skill. It is a necessity at all levels, but most importantly at university level because of the type of instruction and evaluation, particularly within the LMD scheme. Writing also represents an act of communicating, thinking, learning, exploring, and problem solving. Writing and learning are inseparable and learning to write effectively is a cognitive competence pre-requisite for academic success at university level and even beyond. Nevertheless, writing is often viewed as product or 'output', coming at the end of lessons as homework or in tests/exams. It is not valued as 'input', which can reinforce the learning process, and students are not trained into thinking and reflecting about their writing practice. In addition, there seems to a disconnection between the teachings of different subject matters constituting EFL syllabus; consequently, students display unsatisfactory results in writing and even in EFL in general. However, EFL writing instruction should be strategy-based, targeting both language mastery and language regulation. In order to achieve this goal, we have to consider EFL learners' needs as far as writing and learning are concerned. These needs consist basically in developing their linguistic and cultural competence, having opportunities to compose in different subject matters and different discourse modes, being able to write in meaningful and authentic contexts, and developing their awareness during writing and learning processes in a way to face learning challenges autonomously.

## **3- The Cognitive Aspect of Writing**

In order to cater for learners' needs, we have to consider first the cognitive aspect of writing by linking writing to learning. Many scholars (Emig, 1977; Elbow, 1994; Fulwiler, 2002; Galbraith, 2009; Harklau, 2002) advocated a close relationship between writing, learning, and thinking, and some of them even maintained that higher cognitive functions such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation developed more fully only with the help of writing. By the beginning of 1980s, writing researchers with a cognitivist approach to writing shifted focus from product to process and began to consider writing as a tool for thinking and domain/content learning. This skill began to be seen as a problem-solving process requiring thinking and reflection before, during, and after the act of writing (Hayes and Flower, 1980; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987; Hedge, 2000).

Furthermore, Condon and Kelly-Riley (2004) believe that writing is not only one of the most important skills in the digital age but also a tool of thinking, in the sense that good writing and writing about what we have read is the best way to learn thinking. Therefore, they have developed assessment programs to investigate the relationship between college-level

writing and critical thinking abilities by evaluating student learning along with critical thinking outcomes. Their findings have asserted the belief that writing and critical thinking are inextricably linked.

Researchers started to perceive writing not as ‘output’ but as ‘input’ that serves to improve learning. Thus, writing pedagogy changed accordingly and approaches appeared to advocate the idea that writing instruction should go beyond the composing classroom to integrate all subjects matters in students’ education, at all study levels. A view of writing as a means of learning and reflecting about subject matters has begun to be promoted through a ‘Writing to learn’ approach. Emig (1977), who started the Writing to learn movement, clarifies that writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process-and-product corresponds uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies, and because writing is neuro-physiologically integrative, connective, active, and available for immediate visual review. As has been posited by (Elbow, 1994; Harmer, 1998 and 2004; Kern, 2000), writing serves to:

- reinforce language use and enhance understanding and memory, mainly when the writing assignment is given shortly after a vocabulary or a grammar lesson;
- allow learners create and modify meaning through the manipulation of forms;
- develop learners' ability to express thoughts and organise ideas in accordance with the reader's expectations;
- enhance learning strategies through individual, pair or group work;
- urge learners use dictionaries and grammar books as they focus on accuracy while writing;
- provide time to process meaning (unlike speaking), and so it is less anxiety-producing
- make learners think as they write; they develop their language and resolve problems which writing poses, and so learners learn better.

Inspired by the Writing to Learn approach, Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) can be well adopted to improve writing course content at university level. It is based on the premise that writing can be valued as a method of learning. It also acknowledges the differences in writing conventions across the disciplines (in our case, different subject-matters in the EFL curriculum), and believes that students can best learn to write in these areas by practicing the specific writing conventions of these disciplines. Pedagogically speaking a Content-Based Instruction (CBI) seems appropriate to achieve the goals of authenticity and meaningfulness in EFL writing instruction, since it advocates linking writing to other subjects in the EFL syllabus, and thus avoiding to isolate language from content (Grabe and Stoller, 1997). With CBI, writing tasks become more appealing for EFL students since they practise writing, using content they encounter in different subject matters; consequently, authenticity and meaningfulness are achieved (Braine, 1989 and Johns, 1997). In addition, they would have better assistance to remedy their language and writing weaknesses, and learn to use these skills later to achieve academic and professional success. They would also develop writing competence in the kind of texts and discourse they need during their formation and even beyond, as researchers and international communicators. Such an instruction requires teachers with knowledge that goes beyond narrowly defined specialization to be able to deal with different types of topics relating to different subject-matters. Thus, teacher training and development have to be changed accordingly. However, to make CBI work in an EFL

context, there should be continuous learner needs analysis in order to understand and consider learners' lacks, weaknesses, and priorities.

Another aspect of writing pedagogy is the shift towards genre teaching, which has proven to be more relevant to university writing requirements in terms of rhetorical modes most needed in EFL learning (such as writing essays, summaries, reports, and research papers) (Hyland, 2003, 2007 and Kern, 2000). According to this approach, learners gradually study texts in the genre they are going to write in, before they begin to write; while the teacher (drawing on the Vygotskyian scaffolding principle) provides students with an explicit grammar of linguistic choices to produce texts that seem well-formed and appropriate to readers. Harmer (2001) sums up the requirements for students to write within a genre: "They need to have knowledge of the topic, the conventions and style of the genre, and the context in which their writing will be read, and by whom" (p. 258). Genre pedagogy is criticized to be too prescriptive and static, limiting as thus the originality of student writers; nevertheless, recent work in sociolinguistic, rhetoric, and communication has contributed to an even broader view, in which genres are seen as dynamic enabling learners to make choices and express themselves more easily (Harmer, 2001; Hyland, 2007; and Kern, 2000).

#### **4- The Metacognitive Aspect of Writing**

The second main aspect to consider when teaching writing is metacognition. According to Flavel (1976) and Rai (2011), metacognition refers to one's thinking, monitoring, and self-regulation of one's cognitive process and an ability to retrieve learnt strategies in new contexts. Most researchers agree that cognition and metacognition differ in that cognitive skills are necessary to perform a task, while metacognition is necessary to understand how the task was performed (Garner, 1987).

A good learner is "one who has ample metacognitive knowledge about the self as learner, about the nature of the cognitive task at hand, and about appropriate strategies for achieving cognitive goals" (Devine, 1993, p. 109). A point of view shared by Wenden (2001) who claims that metacognitive knowledge is not only essential for successful learning but also has a direct impact on all students' decisions about learning. Additionally, Zhang (2010) finds that learners' metacognitive knowledge base is not strong, and that successful employment of metacognitive knowledge helps EFL learners' writing proficiency. Swartzendruber-Putnam (2000) even believes that the ability to reflect on writing tasks is the essence of the difference between 'able' and 'not so able' writers. In fact, Zhang's research results (2010) corroborate those of Kasper (1997) and demonstrate that a good command of metacognitive knowledge can empower EFL learners in their English writing and cultivate their learning autonomy in English learning. In addition, Angelova (2001) indicates that the quality of the written product is affected by the students' knowledge about their method of planning and about the conventions of writing in the target language. Angelova explains that failure in EFL writing is due to the lack of conscious knowledge about the complexity of writing as a cognitive task; thus, she urges teachers to find appropriate pedagogical tools to help their students become aware of the different factors that shape their writing.

In fact, the metacognitive aspect in writing instruction means building students' awareness during the writing process with the purpose of guiding them to write and reflect on what and how they are writing. These students would develop

*Person knowledge* by helping them perceive their strengths and weaknesses in their compositions and in their peers’,

*Task knowledge* by helping them have a better understanding of writing, the purpose of writing, and of the standards of evaluation in writing, and

*Strategic knowledge* by encouraging students in

- following the three steps of the writing process (prewriting, writing, and rewriting)
- revising their outlines in line with the ideas that come to their minds while composing
- reflecting and then editing their works using specific rubrics
- reflecting on their peers’ written products and providing them with comments and evaluation
- evaluating and monitoring their progress in writing using evaluation grids

In practical terms, this could be achieved with self- and peer-editing and evaluation rubrics, interviewing and conferencing, collaborative writing, and holding a writing diary or learning journal. In this vein, Swartzendruber-Putnam (2000) suggests workshop activities including learning logs, reflective letters and portfolios as an opportunity to practise writing techniques, and conjointly to practise reflection in order for students to become better writers and thinkers. Moreover, Angelova (2001) advocates an explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies and characteristic features of the writing task as part of the instructional activities in a writing class. She maintains that students should be sensitized about their writing style and attitude to writing through questionnaires, discussions, and reflective journals. She explains that such activities will help students to change their metacognitive model of writing and thus become more competent writers.

## **5- Conclusion Pedagogical and Implications**

This paper has attempted to shed light on writing as important language skill in university EFL instruction. More particularly, it tackled the cognitive and metacognitive aspects that should be the building blocks in EFL writing pedagogy

In order to introduce innovation into EFL writing instruction at tertiary level, both cognitive and metacognitive aspects of writing have to be taken into consideration. Consequently, students’ needs are

- training in collaborative writing and learning, through pair and group work.
- solving the problem in linguistic weaknesses via a more authentic teaching of grammar and vocabulary
- training to write in content modules and so raising students’ awareness about the link(s) between writing and other content subjects matters to succeed in both.
  - receiving helpful tutoring from teachers
  - integrating subject matters in the EFL syllabus
  - building their metacognitive awareness in both writing and EFL learning

By considering their cognitive and metacognitive strategies in writing, students are more likely to improve their academic achievement in writing and in EFL learning, as well as attain autonomy of learning. In final words, developing the cognitive aspect helps to *shape* learning while developing the metacognitive aspect helps to *regulate* learning.

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