TEACHING WRITING IN JORDAN: WHAT SHOULD BE?

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Abstract

In Jordan, writing is taught as part of language teaching in general. Teachers, whose role in the learning process is central, insist on mastery of mechanical skills and are seldom concerned with meaning and creativity. In the context of Jordan, writing is the skill that most students are least proficient in. The research literature reveals that the traditional approach to writing instruction does not work. New methods of teaching should be implemented. If writing becomes a central element in language curriculum, then the writing process approach is likely to play a major role in writing instruction in Jordan. By focusing on the process of writing, as well as the product, teachers can encourage students to enjoy writing and find it relevant to their lives. This will make them more fluent writers. Implementation of such a program will require little money, but much courage and patience.

Keywords: Teaching writing, Arabic teaching, Arabic Writing, Writing teachers

Introduction

Teaching writing in Jordan is part of teaching the Arabic language in general. At the primary level, literacy instruction is based on the combined method, using the sentence and the word. As soon as pupils are familiar with a number of common sentences they begin to analyze them into their simpler components. After pupils understand the letter-sound correspondence they can begin to rebuild words from letters and sentences from words.

The words learned are those chosen by the authors of Arabic-language textbooks, and pupils must learn and write what these authors want them to. Pupils in Jordanian schools appear to unable to write properly. Previously disappointing findings from studies conducted in the writing field in Jordan (Alhaddad, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2009) have led to calls to improve the writing instruction in Jordanian schools. The way in which writing is taught is believed to be a main factor for that. Although the current

Arabic Language Curriculum and its General and Specific Outcomes for the Basic and Secondary Stages (2005) is based upon the communicative approach to language teaching, the practice of teaching Arabic language writing seems to be carried out in the traditional way. Therefore, writing instruction in Jordanian classrooms should be much more effective. Following sections are intended to give the reader a clear idea about how writing is taught in the typical Jordanian classroom, and how Jordanian teachers should teach writing.

Setting
        Jordanian classrooms are similar to one another in the way they are organized. In the front of the room is a large desk from which the teacher exercises the authority of ruling over the class. Pupils' desks are located in three or four rows facing the teacher. Two Pupils sit together at each desk; it is difficult to move the desks around the room. There is a blackboard on the wall, as well as a small piece of wood to serve as a class "magazine"; writing samples are hung here to serve as models for the Pupils. In grades one through three there are usually thirty-five to forty Pupils in each classroom and a single teacher having sole responsibility for educating them.

Research Questions
        The aim of this study is to analyze the way of teaching writing in Jordan and to introduce a new one through answering the following questions:
1. What role do teachers, students, and textbooks play in writing instruction in Jordan?
2. What is the method of teaching writing in Jordan?
3. What does the research in writing reveal?
4. What an alternative method can be implemented to improve teaching writing in Jordan?

Significance of the study
        This study encourages students and teachers to reflect on their own writing practices. More specifically, it is expected to help teachers of Arabic reflect on their methods of teaching writing so that they help their students to write more effectively. Supervisors and parents might also benefit from this study. The Ministry of Education may reconsider the in-service training programs with regard to the teaching of writing.

Method

Since this study is theoretical, the literature review technique, which is a qualitative technique, was used to do this study. Then the data were interpreted to find answers for the questions of the study.

Results
Role of the teacher, students, and textbooks in writing instruction in Jordan

The role of the teacher in the Jordanian classroom is central. The teacher is obligated to teach the students according to the dictates of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry establishes the curriculum and chooses all materials students will learn; the teacher is required to follow the curriculum step by step according to a timetable also fixed by the Ministry. The result of this system is that students receive information from the teacher and have no choices of their own about what they learn. Students in this system are not active but very passive.

Every day the students are required to bring their language textbook (chosen by the Ministry) for reading and writing exercises. Each student also has a copy book for taking notes and writing down solutions to the exercises in the textbook. The language textbook contains chapters on a variety of subjects; students read these inside the classroom. The teacher then explains difficult vocabulary items and Arabic grammatical forms. The lesson unit ends with a paragraph taken from the reading passage for dictation exercise. The language of the textbooks is classical Arabic, and the teacher and students must use only that language during the class period. No other materials are available; the school library plays only a small role, since students depend so heavily on their textbooks.

Method of Teaching Writing in Jordanian Schools

Pupils start school by entering the first grade at 6 years of age. Teachers expect all of them to have the same abilities regarding literacy; teachers are prepared to teach the basic skills of reading and writing. In Jordan, literacy instruction is based on the combined method, using the sentence and the word. As soon as pupils are familiar with a number of common sentences they begin to analyze them into their simpler components. After pupils understand the letter-sound correspondence they can begin to rebuild words from letters and sentences from words.

Teachers draw a word on the blackboard and ask the pupils to pronounce the word. Then they ask them to copy the letters of the word down in their copybooks, which the pupils do many times on the page. It is my experience that teachers believe their pupils will recognize and know a letter best if they copy it many times.

Then after a period of time, they start teaching them to write full sentences. Teachers focus on the spelling more than the meaning; it is considered very important for teachers to push their pupils to reach a high level of spelling proficiency.

In the elementary basic grades pupils have no opportunities to write on their own. The writing focus is on sentences and paragraphs from the textbook and on taking dictation. There is no special class period for teaching how to write. Teachers focus on writing skills (spelling, grammar, punctuation, and handwriting) to the exclusion of almost everything else. Besides spelling, teachers also teach pupils how to organize a piece of writing into introduction, presentation, and conclusion, though the main focus remains on spelling and grammar skills.

When the students reach seventh grade, teachers start to ask them to write paragraphs describing, for example, a bird, the class, a car, and so on. Students write to their own, and are not allowed to share with others to get help, teachers consider that cheating. After perhaps 20 minutes, the teacher goes among the students to see their writing, reading each student's work and putting red marks on the spelling errors. The teacher then has the students rewrite their paragraphs using the correct spelling. In grades ninth through twelve, teachers have students write journals (of about one to three or four pages) about what they have read in the textbook or about historical events or places. Students write in their journals either in the classroom or at home as homework.

After finishing an assigned topic the students turn in their homework and their teachers evaluate it, putting red circles on instances of wrong spelling or grammar. Teachers will not accept a paper with many errors ("many" varies from five to more); they believe that if the spelling is bad then the writing is bad as well. Only after they have made sure that their students have reached a high enough level of spelling skill do they begin to focus on meaning. But by that time many students may have already developed negative attitudes toward the red pen and toward writing. Thus teachers may have problems improving the student's ability to create meaning, instead they producing students who do not write but who know how to spell the word "alkitaba" in Arabic which means writing.

No more than one period of class time each week is devoted to writing during all the school years in Jordan. Students take that time to think and to write and to edit. Unfortunately, they have not actually learned much about these processes, which every writer must learn. Sometimes teachers ask students to read their writings aloud to the class, but there is no discussion afterwards between reader and audience, the sole purpose of the reading is to have the student talk to a group and to improve oral reading.

This is the way Jordanian students learn writing. Is this method

sufficient for their needs? Should we continue with it or should we look at research findings to improve Jordan- teaching methods? Let us look at the research.

Teaching Writing: What the Research Reveals

Goodman (1986), rejecting the skill-based perspective, advocated an approach to literacy instruction that deemphasized the rules and skills of writing and reading. He argued that teachers make learning more difficult "by breaking whole (natural) language into bite-size, abstract little pieces unrelated to the needs and experience of the child" (p. 7). For Goodman, language, including written language, is learned within a context of use. The basic assumption behind Goodman's view is that learning to read and write is just as natural as learning to listen and speak.

New learning depends on what the child has already learned, and this is rooted in his or her life experience. So, children should have experienced situations that prompted them to write letters, express opinions about events, and write some fiction (Graves, 1991a). Thus, what is already known determines what will be learned and how a learning task will be perceived (Shuell, 1986). By this argument, writing tasks that draw on the child's background and experiences decrease the demands for knowledge generation and increase the child's writing fluency, allowing the child to focus more on form and syntax. In addition, the more teachers look for a child's potential, the more they can enjoy teaching (graves, 1991a).

Supporters of sociocognitive theory favor writing tasks that pose a greater intellectual challenge to the learner. Using instruction that is based on this theory, teachers try to engage learners in developmentally appropriate writing tasks that may create significant intellectual problems for the learners to solve. This implies that children can be taught the skills necessary to approach writing as a problem -solving process. In the classroom, students can write to share the good news of discovered ideas, to explain their interpretations of theories, and to illustrate theory to practice (Needels & Knapp, 1994; Jones et al., 2012).

Writing involves children with the real happenings of their hearts and minds. They must be able to connect their writing to their lives. When people find approval and acceptance for telling what is in their thoughts and dreams then respect for the technical skills of expression grows, creative thinking flowers and self-awareness and self-acceptance bloom, giving kids the freedom, support, and tools to let their voices be heard (Frank, 1979; Graves, 1994).

The tools of writing are not writing. The mechanical tools of spelling and grammar are necessary for effective writing, but by themselves they do not communicate. The message is of primary importance, structure,

grammar, and spelling are aids to make the message clear. If students know that their writing will be evaluated with a heavy emphasis on mechanics and spelling, they will use only words they are sure they can spell and they will keep sentences simple to avoid making mistakes. That will lead to no stretching, no risk-taking, and little growth. If students have the freedom to write and write and write, knowing that they can go back later to change and correct, that they will have help with editing, and that their ideas are more important than mechanics, that is, knowing they will not be "failures" if they need to rewrite, then they can make the changes that lead to growth in their writing (Frank, 1979; Hayes & Flower, 1986; Saddler & Graham, 2005).

If teaching a writing course is to be effective, research in pedagogy demands that the class be structured more like a workshop than like a traditional classroom. Teachers and students in a workshop establish a community of meaning, a system whose purpose is to help learners learn. Success must rely on active interaction among and engagement of those who are supposed to be learning (Atwell, 1987; Courts, 1991; Jones et al., 2012).

If we think of a text as something made of letters and words, then learning to write is nothing more than learning to make letters and to combine them into words. But studies have suggested that young children learn to write through a process that is really quite the opposite. It appears that children attend first to the whole and only much later to the parts (Temple et al., 1988; Hinkel, 2006).

The writing process is a way of looking at writing instruction in which emphasis is shifted from students' finished products to what students think and do as they write. What writers do as they write is at least as important as the products they produce. In a process approach students learn a variety of writing strategies, including ways to gather and organize ideas about a topic; develop introductions or leads that grab a reader's attention, read a rough draft critically, make revisions, and proofread to identify mechanical errors. A five-activity writing process is necessary. The activities are prewriting, drafting, revising; editing, and publishing. Revising and editing should not be done at the same time, for when this is done the emphasis of both teachers and students tend to be on editing. The two activities should be separated so that neither is neglected. It is crucial to introduce students to the writing process, whether they are first or eighth graders; and to help them learn what is involved in each activity (Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Ray, 2001; Tompkins, 1994).

In process-writing classrooms teachers attempt to create an atmosphere where even a professional writer would feel at home. In this classroom students write best about topics that matter to them, to audiences that are interested in their ideas (Graves, 1991b; Nathan et al., 1989).

The social process of writing can occur in a variety of settings, where

children and parents, students and teachers, students and peers, teachers and parents, as well as authors and readers meet to communicate ideas. If writing is the process of constructing meaning with print, then setting up a risk-free classroom environment is the first step in getting pupils to enjoy writing without fear of having to spell every single word correctly on the first draft. By encouraging invented spelling, or spelling words the way pupils think they are spelled, teachers will be helping their students to become fluent composers. Pupil's writing vocabularies will include more standard spellings as they gradually internalize the spelling patterns in adult language through wide reading (Heller, 1991, Roe & Ross, 2006).

In recent years, the emphasis in writing instruction has shifted from the product of writing to the process involved in creating that product. Then, the process approach is one of the most popular approaches for teaching writing (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). For the writing to be transactional, it must be read, spoken, or listened to by someone else (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Implementation

Improving the way writing is taught in Jordan will take courage and patience. It will take courage to address the new way of teaching based on research in the writing field. Courage is necessary because the new way requires someone first to believe in it, and then to present it to others who have grown up with and who learn and teach in the traditional way. The traditionalists believe only in the teacher and his or her obligation to teach; they do not realize that pupils have the ability to share in and take responsibility for their own learning. Those who take responsibility for change must face these beliefs and must have courage and a clear message so they can convince others to share in what they believe is a better way to teach and learn.

They must also have patience. Patience is very important because after teachers are convinced they must be trained, and this will take time. Training in the new approach requires time, effort, and sharing in solving the problems teachers may face. Patience is very important for those who want to change traditional ways of teaching. The journey may be long, but with courage and patience we will reach the goal we have set for the future of teaching writing in Jordan.

The next question that must be raised is: once we have courage and patience, how we can start to improve the way writing is taught in Jordan based on what we have learned from the research? First of all, changing the mentality and attitude of teachers is very important for success in this effort. While preparing teachers in the university to get their B.A.s the educational faculty can introduce courses about new approaches to teaching language. University students will then learn about new research and their

responsibilities toward their own future students.

Another step that must be taken is changing the way the inspectors evaluate the learning/teaching operation inside the classroom. School inspectors, under the authority of the Ministry of Education, and the educational faculty at the universities, all work closely together, and so will easily form a network through which change can be made. By workshops in-services, training, and informal discussion, network members can exchange ideas about how to improve the procedures for evaluation of teachers inside the classroom. By looking at both the product and the process of teaching, without focusing on the product only, inspectors can better evaluate teachers. Currently, inspectors in Jordan expect the teacher to be the most important person in the classroom: they expect the teacher to give lectures and to talk more than the students. This is a result of the attitude; mentioned earlier, that Jordanian students are to depend mostly on the teacher for their learning. This attitude toward teaching must be changed in both inspectors and teachers, but at the same time, parents must be involved in this improvement.

The first thing that should be done to create a new environment for teaching is to reorganize and rearrange the classroom. This may be done by introducing the principles of cooperative learning and team practice. Students work in 4 or 5-member learning teams, of mixed ability, to master the materials presented by the teacher or textbook. A team member will obtain a good grade if all the other members also get good grades (Stevens et al., 1987). This method helps change the student attitude about cheating. At present, most Jordanian students believe they have to work alone and that if they work with others they will be considered cheating; every student is expected to depend solely on him- or herself. The new way of teaching enhances cooperation among students and decreases selfishness. This is necessary to create a new environment for the teaching of writing, and to start building a new life in the classroom based on workshops.

Students must also be allowed to help in arranging the desks and tables. It should be clear that the physical arrangement of the classroom can be used to create the workshop groups. This step is necessary and it will be easy to implement in Jordanian classrooms.

The new way of teaching writing is based on the workshop.

The writer's workshop is the heart of the writing class. Materials needed for workshop areas are writing utensils, paper, scissors, staplers, paper clips, and folders. Each writer needs two folders: one a daily folder for work in progress, the other a folder for all the work done previously (Atwell, 1987).

Atwell (1987) stressed the point that all writers need time, ownership, and responding. First, writers need regular chunks of time. In Jordan, teachers can start by devoting two class periods for writing instruction (it is

best to have them on consecutive days: Monday and Tuesday, for example). In these two periods teachers can give their students enough time to write. Another thing writer's need is ownership. Writers need to choose their own topics. Every student must write about something he or she is interested in (from personal experiences). Here, I should mention that "writing" is not synonymous with "stories" or "essays." There are many kinds of writing that pupils should be in contact with and which they should be able to use in their own writing. Writing must be viewed as a kind of communication that involves the written word, so all forms and topics that touch pupils' lives must be considered. Freedom to choose from different forms is especially useful if pupils find it difficult to organize their experiences. They might then choose, for example, to write an advertisement for something they like (Frank, 1979; Jones et al. 2012).

The teacher can use the mini-lesson to discuss chosen topics and let pupils know what the teacher has observed during writing time. Mini-lessons are brief daily meetings of 5 to 10 minutes where the whole class addresses an issue; the benefit of the mini-lesson is in the sharing of personal writing experiences with the class.

In Jordanian schools it is necessary to change the idea that students must start and finish a writing assignment during a single class period. Teachers must instead focus on the writing. Teachers must also support students' ideas and focus on meaning. They must teach their students the five activities of writing; editing must be at the end of the process. Students must be allowed to write a first draft, revise, and edit their writing with help from classmates and teachers. If teachers want their students to grow up with the ability of create meaning and not just collect letters together they must not focus on spelling issues during the first stage of writing. Doing that will kill the natural writing talent which everybody has. When students finish their first drafts they can discuss them with the teacher, then move on to write second or third drafts, improving the work by incorporating the teacher's comments.

Finally, writers need responses to what they write. The teacher should respond in a way that gives help without threatening the writer's dignity. Teachers must respect the written word, must share and enjoy with their students as many kinds of literature as they can, and should remove obstacles to writing by letting the students write without stopping them for corrections. Making responses during the writing process may affect the writer's thinking; while writing, ideas come fast and thick and the teacher should not interrupt with responses.

When the students finish their topics they can keep them in their writing files for later evaluation. The teacher can look over these files to see how much progress has been made during the semester. Teachers can also

add a sheet to the file specifying how many grade points each project is worth. Teachers are concerned with how well each child progresses. To measure such progress teachers must establish ways of gathering information on each child, based on the aims of the particular course, and finally must determine whether or not course goals are being met. All of these strategies are ones Jordanian teachers can use without difficulty; little money or effort is necessary. All that is needed is a new attitude toward writing instruction.

These are my thoughts on writing education in Jordan. There will always be room for improvement, but the most important things are to have a proposal, to think through the proposal carefully, and to have the courage and patience to change things for the better.

Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier I do not think Jordanian schools will need much money to start teaching based on the writing processes approach. Jordanian teachers and students mostly need to change their attitudes toward the role of teacher and student in order to establish a new relationship between them and a new and better environment in the classroom based on the workshop. Once this is done I will be able to say that the vision of the future presented in a present research is not far away from Jordanian schools.

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