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What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know about Arab Gulf EFL/ESL Students' Writing?

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Despite being the least used mode of human communication, writing is of utmost importance as it is the means through which testing and assessment of learning usually takes place. Therefore, it is important to investigate various aspects of Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing performance. Important also is reviewing the studies conducted on these students' writing. Such research can inform teachers of how to optimally meet the writing needs of this student population. Critical reviews of writing research related to this context will help identify what we already know and what we need to know about Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing. Only two review attempts (Abdel Latif, 2008; Al-Hazmi, 2001) were made in relation to this research area. These two attempts are limited in that they paid no particular attention to the diverse areas of research on Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing, and that is why they did not review many studies related to this context. Therefore, a more comprehensive review work is needed that synthesizes the key findings of previous studies, shows how English writing research has developed in Arab Gulf countries, and highlights the questions answered by this research and the ones left unanswered. The present article tries to address these issues by reviewing research on Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing.

Method
The first step in this review work was to identify all the relevant studies in databases such as Proquest, EBSCOHost, and other publications. This survey process resulted in collecting 80 research reports on the EFL/ESL writing of students belonging to the six Arab Gulf countries, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, which make up the Gulf Cooperation Council, and Yemen, which is culturally close to the member states. Then, the key findings of these 80 reports were synthesized. The results of the review are given below. These results are organized in two sub-sections: a) the context of the studies and EFL/ESL writing research development, and b) the main findings reported.

Arab Gulf Contexts of the Studies and EFL/ESL Writing Research Development
Table 1 shows the contexts of the studies reviewed. The studies related to each Arab Gulf context are arranged chronologically. As can be noted, about half of these studies (n= 39) involved Saudi participants. A much fewer number of studies were conducted on the English writing in Emirati (n = 12), Yemeni (n =11), Kuwaiti (n = 7), Omani (n = 5) and Bahraini (n = 4) contexts. Only 2 studies were reported about Qatari students. The table also reflects the quantitative development of the research on Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing. As the table shows, all the reviewed studies were reported in the last three decades except one. Beck's (1979) study was the only one found about the target area before the 1980s. Meanwhile, the number of related studies reported has tremendously increased from one decade to another (11, 23 and 45 studies in each of the last three decades, respectively). It can be argued, therefore, that the 1980s witnessed the real

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beginning of EFL/ESL writing research in the Arab Gulf area. Qualitatively speaking, there have been some changes in the focus of studies conducted. While the pre-1990s studies were product-oriented in that they focused mainly on error analysis and on experimenting with some of the product approach techniques in teaching writing, the 1990s studies made use of qualitative methods (e.g., interview, think-aloud and observation protocols). In addition, an increasing number of writing instructional techniques were tested in the studies conducted in the last 15 years. It is worth noting that only 7 of the 80 studies reviewed (Alhosani, 2009; Al-Majed, 1996; El-Shafie, 1991; Emery, 2005; Kharma, 1985; Mohammad, 2008;

Qoqandi, 1985) addressed the writing of pre-university students, while all the other studies dealt with writing in the university context. This may be because of the fact that most ELT researchers in the Gulf area are university teachers who find the university student population much more easily accessible than the pre-university one. It can also be noted that the vast majority of the 80 studies reviewed were conducted in an EFL writing context rather than an ESL one. Though it cannot be assumed that this is a review of all the studies on Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing, it reflects the research areas investigated and the quality and quantity of writing studies in each of the seven countries.

Table 1
Arab Gulf Contexts of the EFL/ESL Writing Studies Reviewed

BAHRAIN	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	KUWAIT	OMAN
Mattar (1990); Qaddumi (1995); Bilton & Sivasubramaniam (2009); Obaid (2009)	Asaad (1985); Taki El Din (1987); El-Shafie (1991); Abdel Fattah (1994) Alreyes (1997); Emery (2005); Hoelker & Hashi (2005); Duthler & Nunn (2008); El Samaty (2008); Glasgow & Fitze (2008); Lewthwaite (2008); Pathare (2008)	Kharma (1981; 1985); Alam (1991); Alharbi (1991); Ameira (1991); Halimah (2001); Mohammad (2008)	Emery (1997); Mahmoud (2002; 2005); Jabur (2009); Monassar (2005)
QATAR	SAUDI ARABIA		YEMEN
Ali (1995); Al-Buainain (2006)	Beck (1979); El-Sayed (1983a); Abdan (1984); Qoqandi (1985); Alhaidari (1992); El-Hibir & Aqel (1992); Abed Al-Haq & Ahmad (1994); Al-Semari (1994); Al-Sindy (1994); Aqel (1994); Aljamhoor (1996; 2001); Al-Majed (1996); Asiri (1996); Jouhari (1997); Al-Amer (2001); Al-Jarf (2002; 2007, 2009); Daoud & Al-Hazmi (2002; 2003); Alnofal (2004); Fageeh (2004); Salebi (2004); Al Fraidan (2005); Al-Qurashi (2005; 2009); Al-Sudies (2005); Grami (2005); AL-Serhani (2007); Shehadeh (2007) Al-Harbi (2009); Al-Hazmi & Scholfield (2007); Alhaysony (2008); Al-Humaidi (2008); Alhosani (2009); McMullen (2009); Alsamadani (2010); Sayed (2010)		El-Sayed (1983b; 1997; 1994); Holes (1984); Shamsher (1994); Al-Fotih (1999); Noman-Yafai (2000); Naef (2003); Al-Zubeiry (2004); Mohammed (2005); Al-Shumairi (2008)

Key Findings of the Studies Reviewed

The 80 reviewed studies investigated a variety of EFL/ESL research areas. These can be classified into four categories: a) error and discourse analysis, b) instructional techniques and practices evaluation, c) writing process, and d) writing assessment. Below are the key findings of the reviewed studies briefly synthesized in light of these four research areas.

Types and Causes of Linguistic Errors and Rhetorical Problems

The reviewed studies revealed some types of linguistic errors made by Arab Gulf students in their English written texts. The grammatical and syntactic errors made by these students include: verbs and verbals, articles, pronouns, nouns, adjectives and prepositions, tenses and tense sequence, copula and auxiliary verbs, relative clauses, fragments and punctuation (Al-Buainain, 2006; Al-Sindy, 1994; El Samaty, 2008; El-Sayed, 1983a). While lexical and

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semantic errors encompass collocations, idioms and word confusion (El Samaty, 2008; Mahmoud, 2005), spelling errors comprise vowel substitution, vowel omission, misordering of vowels and consonant substitution (Emery, 1997). Some studies (Ali, 1995; Beck, 1979) found that spelling errors were the most frequent error type in students' writing. The linguistic errors found were attributed to overgeneralization, false analogy, the complicated nature of the English grammar system, inadequate teaching (Kharma, 1981), Arabic interference (Al-Fotih, 1999; Al-Sindy, 1994; El-Sayed, 1983a, 1997; Mahmoud, 2005), mode of writing (Qoqandi, 1985), defects in students' writing skills and the syllabus taught (Mattar, 1990), incomplete application of rules (El-Sayed,1994), and test anxiety (Salebi, 2004).

The discourse analysis studies reviewed showed that the most frequent rhetorical problems in Arab Gulf students' English written texts are argumentativeness (development, support, organization, persuasiveness of the argument, completeness and balance in arguments and counterarguments), thesis (clarity and qualification of the thesis and the direction the thesis provides for the reader) (Abed Al-Haq & Ahmed, 1994), over-reiteration of the same lexical cohesive devices (Shamsher, 1994), repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices (Qaddumi, 1995), inappropriate expression of contrastive transitions (Monassar, 2005), and redundancy, verbosity, coordination and subordination (El Samaty, 2008). These rhetorical problems were ascribed to students' transfer of rhetorical irregularities of the Arabic discourse or rhetorical duality (Halimah, 2001; Holes,1984), lack of exposure to the target language (Ameira, 1991), interference at the linguistic, cultural and rhetorical levels (Qaddumi, 1995), inadequate grasp of English rhetorical conventions (Halimah, 2001), and faulty methods of teaching (Al-Zubeiry, 2004).

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Effectiveness of Instructional Techniques and Practices

Most of the interventional studies reviewed proved the effectiveness of the instructional techniques they tested in enhancing students' writing. For example, Taki El Din (1987) found that integrating sentence combining practice in an EFL writing course improved UAE students' overall writing quality and the written syntactic maturity. Similarly, the explicit instruction of English verb tense use provided by Glasgow and Fitze (2008) to UAE students reduced their writing errors with the target verb tense. The results of these two studies suggest that students' written grammatical accuracy can be fostered through providing grammar instruction prior to independent writing. In addition, the computer-based techniques of teaching writing proposed by Al-Jarf (2002, 2007, 2009), Al-Harbi (2009), and Sayed (2010) helped Arab Gulf students produce better English written texts and provided them with a non-threatening learning environment.

The reviewed studies suggest that Arab Gulf students perform better when they receive group feedback (Shehadeh, 2007) and write collaboratively in teams (Duthler & Nunn, 2008). Positive effects were also found for using dialogue journals (Abdel Fattah, 1994), culture-bound reading-writing activities (Alreyes, 1997), counselling-learning approach (Daoud & Al-Hazmi, 2003), portfolio assessment (AL-Serhani, 2007), expressive writing (Bilton & Sivasubramaniam, 2009), process approach (Alhosani, 2009; Jouhari, 1997; Naef, 2003) and writing strategy instruction (McMullen, 2009) on Arab Gulf students' English writing, and for applying user-friendly activities on developing their spelling accuracy (Pathare, 2008). Additionally, the positive effects Al-Sudies (2005) found for using metacognitive awareness training in developing Saudi EFL writing student-teachers' skills suggest that real changes occur in writing instruction when teachers change their pedagogical beliefs.

As for feedback studies, they showed that direct correction was the most utilised technique for providing feedback, and that surface-level aspects (grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics) were the most incorporated type of feedback while organisation was the least incorporated one (Asiri,

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1996; Daoud & Al-Hazmi, 2002, 2003; Grami, 2005). Unclear suggestions and difficult questions were found to be two main problems hindering Saudi students' understanding of their teachers' written feedback (Asiri, 1996). As for students' most preferred types of feedback, Asiri (1996) reported that direct correction was their most preferred method of feedback. In Al-Hazmi and Scholfield's (2007) study, neither peer feedback nor using a revision checklist were found to direct Saudi university students' attention towards essay organisation and content. This led the two authors to surmise that students were not ready to abandon the traditional surface error focus of their classroom. Contrary to the above results, Yemeni students were found to be more responsive to indirect feedback than to direct feedback (Mohammed, 2005), and to instructional comments than to evaluative comments or questioning comments (Al-Shumairi, 2008). Some of the reviewed studies yielded varied results regarding the effect of feedback on English writing classrooms. For example, while Al-Qurashi (2005) found no significant effect for peer feedback on Saudi students' perceived support in English writing classes, Al-Qurashi's (2009) subsequent study showed that students had positive perceptions and attitudes towards peer feedback and reported it helped them in improving their texts. It is worth mentioning that the results of the reviewed interventional studies, most of which found positive effects for the experimented instructional technique, should be cautiously interpreted due to the intervening variables involved in experimentation.

The results of the very few studies on the evaluation of teaching practices of English writing to Arab Gulf students reflect a dire need for bringing about a change in these practices. For example, Mohammad's (2008) study indicates that an alternative approach to teaching writing in Kuwait first grade classrooms may be more appropriate and more effective in the current curriculum context. Likewise, Obaid (2009) found that the Business English writing program at the University of Bahrain ought to be improved and updated to meet the demands of workplace writing through conducting a systematic needs analysis.

Writing Process

The reviewed studies revealed some aspects of the Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing processes. The Kuwaiti students who took part in Alam's (1993) study were found to use Arabic in all writing stages and to make more frequent use of it at the vocabulary level. Similarly, Fageeh (2004) found that his Saudi participants resorted to Arabic to develop their ideas and rehearse their English text. In Al-Humaidi's (2008) study, pre-writing planning helped Saudi students write more text than the within-task planning.

As for revising the text, El-Shafie (1991) found that UAE students substituted, added, and deleted far more often than they expanded, reduced, and moved their texts and that their syntactic revisions were more frequent at the word, surface, and phrase levels than at the clause, sentence, and multi-sentence levels. On the other hand, Saudi students were found to add to their texts more than they deleted when they revised their summaries, and to make grammatical and informational changes more often than mechanical ones (Alhaidari, 1992). Al-Amer's (2001) study showed that students' surface and meaning revisions differed significantly between word-processed and pen-and-paper English texts. These revision process results seem to be consistent with the ones highlighted above about focusing on surface-level changes in students' responses to teachers' written feedback.

Results also revealed some difficulties encountered by Gulf students in their EFL/ESL composing processes. These difficulties include: cultural and linguistic problems (Jabur, 2009; Noman-Yafai, 2000), competence in using word processors (Al-Amer, 2001), lack of writing strategies and mechanical, vocabulary and grammar knowledge (Aljamhoor, 1996; Fageeh, 2004), and inability to employ writing self-regulation processes effectively (Al-Humaidi, 2008). Some similarities were also revealed between Gulf students' Arabic and English composing and revising processes (Al-Semari, 1994; Alhaysony, 2008; Alnofal, 2004; Alsamadani, 2010), though Saudi students tended to make more formal, grammatical, mechanical, reorganization and deletion revisions when writing in English than in Arabic (Al-Semari, 1994).

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Assessing Writing

The results of the very few studies on writing assessment have uncovered some implications for testing English writing in the Arab Gulf area. For example, the results of Asaad's (1985) study suggest that using a writing performance test and an analytic scoring procedure provides a high degree of objectivity in evaluating the communicative writing performance of EFL students while a multiple choice test only assesses receptive writing ability and is not recommended for EFL classroom use. Instructors' cultural-linguistic background was found to be the most influential factor in evaluating EFL students' writing while their teaching experience correlated positively with the rigidness of their evaluation. In other words, experienced instructors are likely to be more rigid in their evaluation of EFL writing than less experienced ones (Alharbi, 1991). On the other hand, Al Fraidan's (2005) study revealed non-significant correlations between Saudi university students' performance on direct (essay, letter and summary writing) and indirect (editing) writing assessment tasks, indicating that writing and editing are different skills, and showed that university instructors and students reported similar frequency of using editing and summarizing in class and in real life. Finally, Lewthwaite (2008) found a strong overlap between what students and staff thought was needed in a writing course and what the IELTS writing tasks require.

Conclusion and Future Research

The reviewed studies have answered some questions about Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing particularly those related to their errors. However, many questions are yet to be answered. Specifically, little or almost nothing is known about the following issues of English writing:

- English writing assessment and teaching practices
- Description of what is taking place in English writing classrooms at the pre-university stages
- Pre-university students' English writing difficulties
- Graduate students' academic English writing performance
- Affective variables related to students' English writing

- Students' handwriting and computer-based composing processes, and their learning how to write strategies
- Students' responses to innovative techniques of teaching writing
- Arab Gulf scholars' English publication practices
- English writing in the workplace
- Evaluation of the English writing materials and course books used
- Gender-related individual differences in English writing performance
- English writing teachers' pedagogical beliefs and actual practices

Addressing these issues in future research will provide a clearer picture of Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing needs and how optimally they can be met. Special attention should be given to investigating these issues in the Gulf contexts especially where few research reports are available such as Qatar.

The above review shows that some important issues related to Arab Gulf EFL/ESL students' writing have been addressed in previous research. Writing teachers need to take the key findings synthesized above into consideration when dealing with their students' needs. These findings can also stimulate future writing researchers to pursue relevant issues. Though the increasing number of studies conducted in the last three decades used a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods, and dealt with varied issues, there is a need for some new orientations of EFL/ESL writing research in the Arab Gulf countries. Overall, despite the increasing number of studies reported, changes in the research areas investigated and the data collection methods used, EFL/ESL writing research in the Arab Gulf countries is quantitatively and qualitatively still lagging far behind similar research conducted in some parts of the world such as Western Europe, North America and South-East Asia. Accordingly, Arab Gulf EFL/ESL writing researchers need to conduct more studies that make use of a variety of research methods, particularly qualitative ones, and to address neglected research areas.

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