

## **Designing an EFL Writing curriculum for Arab students using the tenets of Counselling-Learning**

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**ABSTRACT:** Research reveals that writing is now regarded as the most strategic skill in English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Research has shown, too, that effective writing tuition incorporates as a protocol, the process approach to writing, focusing on skills, not only on writing skills, but, at the same time, the skills of reflection, self-analysis and critical thinking. These should be taught within a certain context - that is, within the context of an egalitarian, humane classroom atmosphere.

A self-analysis of the authors' teaching methodology and the content of the writing courses they teach revealed that a top-down, authoritarian pursuit of mechanical correctness was predominant, a problem endemic to much of EFL writing tuition throughout the Middle East.

The authors trialed a 4-week curriculum to exemplify the principles of accountable EFL writing tuition. They based their efforts on the tenets (though not the methodology) of the Counseling-Learning approach to language learning as expounded by Curran (1972 and 1983). In this paper, they outline the curriculum and materials development that took place, discussing the strategies employed, and their interaction with and response from their students. A significant part of the paper looks at the students' feelings, reactions, likes and value judgments as regards the project, which the authors quantified by means of descriptive statistics as a basis for further research.

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching writing in much of the Arab World, says Asiri [2003 (in press): 41], can be described as guided-composition at lower levels and free-composition at higher levels, with a mixture of both at intermediate levels. The teaching of writing skills, he says, still focuses on a final product and its linguistic features. He goes on to say that a major feature of weakness in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Arab World is that most of the practice given is limited to language use at the sentence level. He outlines further that:

there is no systematic preparation for composition;

naturalness is usually sacrificed for the sake of convenience or practicality; and

guided writing is mainly practised as composition tasks.

In addition to this focus on the sentence level and on the linguistic features in teaching EFL writing in the Arab world, overt teacher-centeredness has a negative impact on the development of the writing of the learners (Liggett, 1983). As a result, EFL learners have problems in self-reflection; in expressing themselves adequately; and in formulating critical and analytical thoughts (Halimah, 1991).

Furthermore, research into EFL writing methodology since the 1980's has overwhelmingly supported the process approach to writing (Krapels, 1991). As Asiri [2003 (in press): 41] notes, modern methodologies of teaching writing in the English as second language (ESL)/EFL classroom emphasise co-operative learning between teachers and learners, and emphasise that learners should be given more opportunities to think critically, to initiate learning, and to express themselves. In her discussion on modern emphases in writing in a foreign language, Leki (1994) states: "... now students are writing about what they are interested in and know about, but most especially, what they really want to communicate to someone else, what they really want a reader to know .... For the most part, writing is easiest to do and is likely to have the highest quality when the writer is committed intellectually to expressing something meaningful through writing."

Liggett (1983) says that learning should not be a threat to the ego; that learning

only takes place when it is initiated by the learner, not when it is demanded by the teacher; that there are fewer limitations than we might imagine to what learners can do if they are actively and mentally engaged in the learning process. Closely related to this, and crucial to this present study, Curran claims that a non-threatening, interactive, caring and counseling relationship provides the optimal environment for language learning to occur. He says the following:

Over a period of the last twelve years ... We found that a counseling model of learning facilitated integrative learning in the self of the learning 'client' .... We came to see that the counseling-learning model facilitated the process of self-integration in and through the material learned. This, in turn, allowed for and facilitated genuine self-investment. As a result, a kind of retention and personal fulfilment was produced that was not simply something memorised or informational, but which involved deep commitment and personally creative concomitants (1972: 12).

Justifying her assertion that writing has now become much more important in the ESL/EFL curriculum, Leki (1994) states that it "is the one language skill where the language student has ... complete control over that ornery, slippery new linguistic code. This feeling of control can be very invigorating and satisfying". It is on this very subject of learner control and empowerment that Brown (1993), quoting Pennycook, reminds teachers of their mission to empower learners, to get them intrinsically involved in their own learning of English as a second or foreign language so as to gain a measure of control over their own lives.

In EFL writing, in the Arab world as in anywhere else, the object of curriculum development has now become one of exploring how to give learners a "feeling of control"; a sense of "personal fulfilment"; a measure of "self-integration in and through the material learned"; the "opportunity to think critically, to initiate learning, and to express themselves"; and to engender an "intellectual commitment to expressing something meaningful through writing". This present study reports on an exploratory four-week project conducted by the authors to lay the groundwork for an EFL Writing curriculum that would seek to accomplish those aims.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

Both authors are writing teachers in the Institute of English and Translation at the King Khalid University, newly established in 1998 in Abha - the first teaching the Writing 010 courses, the second teaching one of the Writing 314 courses. The Institute at present offers only a four-year BA (English and Translation) degree program, divided into 8 semesters (or levels). The initial (entry) level is an intensive general preparation in Reading, Writing, Listening, Grammar and Study Skills, deemed the Language Enhancement Program. Thereafter, in the higher levels, a variety of literature, language study, linguistics and applied linguistics courses are on offer.

Our current student enrolment is 912 students, spread over the 8 abovementioned levels. The Institute's goal is to qualify its graduates to work in all fields related to language such as education and training (for intermediate, secondary and vocational schools); missionary work (known as da'wa); foreign service; and working for local and overseas companies operating and doing business in English.

In the overall program at the time of the present study [before the introduction of the new BA (English and Translation) curriculum last year], there are only four courses that focus directly on the teaching of writing as a skill – Writing 010 (in the first semester), Writing 114 (second semester), Writing 213 (third semester) and Writing 314 (fourth semester). There are, of course, other writing-based courses, like Short Thesis 499, which assume the possession of general writing skills as a given, and focus more on research than on writing skills per se. The authors present here an overview of the first three of the writing skills courses to give the reader some understanding of where the subjects of the present study were in terms of the overall writing curriculum.

The first Writing Skills course that students encounter is in the first semester. They follow a program entitled Writing 010, which, apart from a small free-writing component, focuses mainly on guided writing at paragraph level. The aim of the program is to get students to flesh out a topic via structured questions; to review, edit and revise their answers to these questions; to structure these responses in logical order; to produce a second draft; and to produce thence a suitably titled and mechanically correct paragraph which displays appropriate paragraph form and competent penmanship.

The next course dedicated only to writing skills is entitled Writing 114, a second semester course, where students are expected to build on what they have learned in the previous semester, and build on their knowledge of writing paragraphs according to accepted standards. The focus here is on reinforcing basic paragraph structure such as linear sequencing, selecting and using appropriate connectors, dealing with grammar structures peculiar to certain discourses, and combining sentences.

Students study Writing 213 in the third semester. Intensive work is done in coordinating meaning at word, sentence and paragraph levels in composition to ensure solidly structured discourse. The course is oriented around students' practical writing needs.

In the fourth semester, students encounter Writing 314, which is taught by the second of the present authors. This program serves as an introduction to essay writing, concentrating on the structural components of the essay such as coherence and unity, topic development and organisation. Students deal with various forms of essay writing; definitions and classification, contrast and comparison, cause and effect, persuasion, and so forth.

The authors conducted an appraisal of the contents of the two courses they teach (Writing 010 and Writing 314), plus the dominant teaching methodology in both classes, and concluded that they, like so many writing colleagues throughout the Middle East, followed a top-down, teacher-driven, product oriented, pre-planned and rigid curriculum that "championed analysis, but devalued synthesis and intuition" (cf. Brown, 1991). Indeed, numerous researchers in the field of EFL writing in the Arab world point to precisely this deficit (Liggett 1983; Kharma 1985; Doushaq & Al Makhzoomy 1989; Kharma & Hajjaj 1989; Halimah 1991; Zaid 1993; and Al Hazimi 1998).

The first author was, originally, a remedial language teacher working with LEP (limited English proficient) children. The second author is a qualified Neuro-Linguistic practitioner. It was obvious to them both that there was a dissonance between their current practice and their training. So, they began to look for an educationally accountable, culturally appropriate curriculum that was in accord with the latest research and proven practice. However, a search of the available literature in the Arab world revealed nothing in the way of an English Writing curriculum that was process-oriented, that encouraged self-reflection, and that,

at the same time, was empowering.

What was found, however, was an Oller & Richard-Amato publication (1983) that contains, in Chapter 10, an article entitled Counseling-Learning by Charles A. Curran. After reading Curran's landmark Counseling-Learning: A Whole-Person Model for Education (1972) it became clear there was something in what Curran was saying that resonated with the perceptions and feelings of the present authors about teaching and learning.

### THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As was said above, the authors of the present paper needed to find an educationally accountable, culturally appropriate curriculum that:

had English writing and the development of English writing skills as its primary focus; was process-oriented; was egalitarian in structure; had a flexible and open-ended curriculum; encouraged introspection and reflection; and sought to give their students a sense of power and control over their learning.

The object of this attempt at a reformed - and reforming - curriculum was not to prove anything. The authors were not trying to set up hypotheses, and then devise statistical means to either refute or disprove them. Rather, the attempt was to work cautiously over a period of four weeks with 30 students in the Writing 314 class to see if - and how - a suitable and appropriate curriculum could be organised. The present paper reports on the processes and principles of procedure that were adopted in this foray into curriculum development; what the preliminary results reveal; and what the way forward might entail.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is necessary, at this point, to outline the theoretical underpinnings of the processes and principles of procedure that were adopted in this project. The limitations of space do not encourage an in-depth discussion here of Curran's theoretical arguments and methodology; and, indeed, it is not Curran's methodology in Counseling-Learning that is of really of consequence here. Rather, it is his views on how the learning process takes place - and under what circumstances - that have informed the present study. Still, for the convenience of the reader, basic details of the Counseling-Learning approach to foreign

language learning have been provided hereunder in order to provide a backdrop of information for comparison and reference.

The tenets of Counseling-Learning Curran's counseling-learning approach is a non-directive approach to language learning. It draws on a counseling-therapy tradition, where the relationship between all the participants in a learning situation is intended to ease the learner into independence and confidence in the target language(s).

**In brief, Curran posits that:**

the educational process, whether a personal or impersonal one, is merely a search for adequate life meanings. Any discussion of the educative process must start with the relation of conflict, anger and anxiety to learning. He claims that this fact has been overlooked in present educational systems in that they have become overly intellectualised and competitive; and ignore the feelings and unique perceptions of learners (Curran 1972: 147); to learn another language, says Curran (ibid. 148), means to give up one's security and comfort in the sounds and grammar of one's native language. This kind of surrender to language encounter, he says, contains most of the psychological experiences that any severe social adaptation entails; everyone shares a fundamental need to be understood and to be aided in the search to fulfil personal values and goals. That is, each human being experiences needs and anxieties. Problems and conflicts at inner and unspoken levels often negate motivation at the external level – in terms of academic grades, for instance, and of communicative competence in the target language; one's sense of self is validated in mutual relationships where each participant in a learning relationship can communicate his or her perception of the other's unique worth and dignity; can meet others' needs at the levels of "belonging" and "esteem"; and can help others to form favourable and consistent images of themselves (ibid.: 20); the kind of mutual validation that Curran refers to (cf. item 3 above) takes place, optimally, in "the living dynamics of relating with one another in a common learning task" (ibid.: 29). The implication here is, firstly, that Counseling-Learning is a task-oriented experience. Secondly, it should be a therapeutic one between the teacher and the learner where an open trust exists – a sine qua non for the free communication of one's whole self within a group (ibid.: 30). Thirdly, it suggests the wholehearted engagement of the teacher in the classroom as part of the learning community (ibid.: 32-33; 98-100). Fourthly, it is very much a

group experience. As Curran says, "The word 'community' [...] is intended to envelop a living task-oriented experience between knower-teacher and learner-student, and not simply to suggest a group as such." (ibid.: 30); both the true teacher and the true learner would need to resist the opposite of what is described in item 5 above; that is, to resist the "masking" of one's true feelings, thoughts, weaknesses or fallibility in an attempt to save face. Teachers need to open themselves to the same limiting, at times "helpless", human condition as the learner, and thus divest themselves of their "god-like" role as the all powerful "knower" in the classroom (ibid.: 31; 1983: 158). Curran (1972: 170) believes that "this god-like teacher stance ... is not necessary not only to second language learning but to other forms of learning as well. It may in fact impede learning"; and, finally, that opening oneself to one's ineptitudes and human frailty; and experiencing one's anxieties as a teacher or as a learner gradually lead to a renewed sense of - and value for - the self (1972: 110-111; 1983: 149). In this way, the person is allowed the freedom to learn spontaneously and openly the way a child does (ibid.: 169).

The above is a summary of the principle tenets of Counselling-Learning. What then are its procedures, protocols and methods?

### **The methods of Counselling-Learning**

Curran's research involved the learning (rather than the teaching) of four European languages at the same time by groups of 6-12 participants who would meet for several hours every day over a period of time. The participants were volunteers with various levels of knowledge of some of the languages, but few with knowledge of all four (Curran 1983:150), so that "people could switch around and so experience various levels of linguistic difficulty, anxiety and conflict in communication, in proportion to their competence" (ibid.: 153). To help each participant communicate in a target language, a number of counselors were present who were usually native speakers of the target languages.

The participants would sit in a closed circle, facing one another, with the counselor(s) on the outside of the circle. The principal activity was free conversation in the languages being learned. At first, a learner would decide what to say in his or her mother tongue, say it aloud to the counselor, who, in a warm and accepting way, would help the learner phrase the utterance in the

target language (Curran 1983: 155). At first, learners would stick to simple topics or merely explore vocabulary items. After a period of time, they would begin to speak more freely about more relevant topics, and would start voicing their language difficulties, fears and insecurity. Afterwards, as the counseling atmosphere intensified, and as the experience of being accepted and understood settled in, the learners would try to express themselves without waiting for the counselor to help them - the counselor assisting only as and when there was hesitation, or a direct appeal for help.

As the sessions progressed over a period of time, the learners began to talk directly to the group participants in the target language. It was at this stage that the counselor would intervene more directly, without an appeal for help, to correct grammar errors, mispronunciation, or to supply more elegant constructions.

At the more advanced stages in the learning process, Curran (1983: 161-163) reports that learners began to cross over the "language threshold" – that is, they experienced a "turning point" in their language learning, when the initial feelings of anxiety and uncertainty gave way to a sense of personal belonging, of positive identification with the target languages, of greater self-confidence, and of the need to speak about complex issues, personal feelings and insights. At the achievement of this final stage in the language acquisition process, a significant number of participants became quite proficient in two, or more, of the languages studied. As a result of the security and enthusiasm they had acquired, states Curran, many decided to go overseas - to the source of those target languages - "for an even more complete linguistic and cultural experience" (ibid.: 163).

## METHODOLOGY

The authors of the present paper were aiming for a Writing class could be a personal process; that is, a search for meaning, a process of acknowledging the students' need to be understood, indeed, a protocol of communicating one's perceptions. They were excited by the possibility of learning about their teaching from their students, as much as the students learned (God willing) about writing from their teachers. It was important for the individual lessons within the new, experimental curriculum to be a "communication event", based on a common theme, as Ur (1995:90) suggests. This would enable students to

engage with subject-specific language and meaning in context, clearly relevant for the purposes of the new curriculum design. Thus, the topic "Writing about Writing" was chosen. They wanted a teaching strategy that would include teaching the skills of writing a first draft, and, at the same time, would involve counselling and a reciprocal communication of impressions.

It should be noted that there was no purpose in emulating Curran's teaching/ learning/ counselling process in anything but theoretical inspiration. Firstly, Curran's methodology involved a much longer period of time than the present authors, at this time, were able to spend on action-based curriculum development. Secondly, whatever experimentation with the curriculum took place could not, for logistical reasons, interfere with other colleagues who were teaching other groups of the same Writing 314 course. Thirdly, with a class of 30 students, the authors did not have the human and material resources at their disposal that Curran had. Fourthly, as any literature review on whole-language learning will reveal, Curran's findings on the psycho-social context of language learning are widely cited. His methodology (see The methods of Counselling-Learning above), however, has been subject to some debate. The present authors decided to stick, as far as possible, with a less controversial teaching methodology that would still meet the aims of the new curriculum.

A questionnaire was devised that, as Seliger & Shohamy (1989: 172) report, would collect data on the students' attitudes, motivation and self-concept. As these authors suggest (ibid.: 173) it was necessary to try it out first, so a questionnaire was composed comprising general, open-ended questions in the students' mother tongue, to be answered (in Arabic) in class in discussion groups of two or more. The decision to start the process in the mother tongue was prompted by the fact that there was little time to counsel the students in the way that Curran methodology would require. There was the risk that the abstract content and context of the discussion might be too challenging in the target language. The project needed to be launched as quickly, and in as non-threatening a way as possible.

The authors devised questions of their own, drawing stimulus from similar questions in White & McGovern (1994) plus questions from other researchers investigating the same field of study (Deming 1987; Hawisher 1986). The questions focused on student perceptions of writing in the English Writing and Arabic Writing classes at the university. It focused on the difficulties they face

when writing; the writing tasks they considered the most difficult to do; and the difficulties they experience in revising their first drafts. The same questions were asked about writing in English as about writing in Arabic in order to bring the students' perceptions of writing in English into greater relief.

A teacher assistant colleague was asked to join the classes to encourage active student interaction and to move from group to group, discussing the criteria used in the questionnaire, counseling, giving advice and observing (cf. Curran 1983: 153-154). Students, in group discussion, gave their oral responses, then wrote their answers at home.

It should be pointed out that this was an exploratory exercise only – to test the waters, as it were – and so the students' responses, although interesting, need not be of concern here. In a future article, it is hoped that the results of the general, mother-tongue discussion can be compared with the investigation that will briefly be described hereunder as a basis for further investigation.

Having set the tone of the work over the remaining 3 weeks, the next thing done was to discuss the process approach to writing. As Rogers (1980: 292-299) suggests, traditional teaching is abstracted, depersonalised and product oriented. In a similar vein, Curran brands traditional teaching as cognitive at the expense of affect (ibid.: 74-77). Because the process approach to writing is, by nature, a self-critical one, it lends itself to the kind of introspection that would prompt students to communicate their feelings about what they knew, what they were doing, what they were struggling with, and how they were experiencing their learning.

To introduce the topic, students were given a 10-minute overview on the writing process, and then were given a reading comprehension on the subject, which was adapted from White & McGovern (1994: 1-2). This was done to reinforce the content of what the process approach to writing entails. Students, in pairs, wrote their answers on the handout. A paragraph was set on the topic How I write an English paragraph, emphasising that this was to be a self-reflection on how they normally write, then comparing that with the process approach. Students, in pairs, fleshed the topic out in class, took notes, and were asked to complete the first draft of the assignment at home.

Now came the problem of advising and counseling students as to how their writing had been perceived and assessed. In his investigation into university

Arab EFL teacher's feedback on written compositions, Asiri (1996: 208) notes:

The teacher's feedback should not be concerned wholly or mainly with the correction of errors as there are other features of the students' writing that need to be dealt with as well. Moreover, errors should be pointed out indirectly and selectively, depending on the type of errors and on the students' level and needs, rather than direct correction of all errors.

He also suggests that teachers provide the kind of feedback that gives a realistic picture of how students' work is progressing, and how they can improve it (ibid.: 215). A tall order indeed, especially since Curran's states that when a teacher presents information to students on what their role should be, there is an inevitable anxiety and tension in the communication (1980: 147 & 152). Normally, when students' work is returned, it drips with the red of the marking pen. This is not because the teacher enjoys the desecration, but, as Curran (1972:140-141) says, the teacher is deeply invested in the success of students, and therefore it is important to the teacher to be understood. In the EFL writing class, one must, amongst other things, deal with technical elements like style, logical development of the topic, coherence, grammar, spelling, and punctuation - so the teacher's "investment" is founded on a solid basis of linguistic prescription, with a much more defined sense of right or wrong. Therefore, in feedback, it is even more important for the teacher to be understood than otherwise would be the case. The teacher needs to explain, and the learner needs to know. Blocking either of these processes leads, as Curran says, to "defeat on both sides" (1973: 181). To honour Curran's dictum that true learning is where the self is validated in reciprocal communication of perceptions, without affront to others' unique worth and dignity (ibid.: 94), it was apposite that some way of reducing the judgmental nature of, and element of rebuff in, the feedback.

One solution, in terms of awarding a grade, was to assess the drafts according to the evaluation criteria using the ESL Composition Profile evaluation instrument (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel & Hughey 1981: 90) and provide students with an adapted, condensed version of this instrument so that they knew exactly how the evaluation was arrived at. Another solution was to "soft-pedal" observations and recommendations for change. Because of the enormous, time-consuming task of writing up affirming, instructive and gently-couched comments, a record of these were kept on computer and recalled on

the computer's <Merge File> function during the correction and grading process. It was thus possible to attach a personalised letter to each graded paragraph. Here is a shortened example of such a computer-generated letter:

Dear Abdulatif

Thank you for your assignment. Sometimes we needed to comment on a word or section in your paragraph, so we underlined and numbered it, which correspond with the numbers you will find hereunder.

Article: What article is missing here? Can you see your mistake?

Capitalisation: This requires a capital letter. Can you think why? Please ask your partner if you do not know. If that doesn't help, ask us.

Explanation required: We are not sure why you have used this word. Please look at it again. Maybe it is in the wrong form, or it is the wrong word altogether. Consult with a partner, and then ask us if you need further help.

Idiom: The phrase/word you have used here makes sense, but there is a more idiomatic (more grammatically correct, and more suitable) way of saying it – a way that English usage, and the English ear, prefers.

Missing words: There are words missing here that would make sense of your sentence. Think again, and ask your partner for help if you need it.

Noun: Is this word a count or a non-count noun? Think about it. Remember that non-count nouns do not have a plural form. They also do not take a/an.

Preposition: You are missing a preposition here. Can you see why? Do you know what it is?

Verb Form: What part of the verb form is missing here? Ask your partner first, then ask us if you do not know.

We enjoyed reading your assignment, and we liked what you wrote. But you were not always true to the topic. We were frustrated because you have written too much about how you SHOULD write a paragraph. We were hoping that you would concentrate on how you NORMALLY write. We need to know what you think. We need to know what you do. We could learn so much – and you would, too.

**We arrived at your marks by using the following table:**

CRITERION	SCORE	CRITERION	SCORE
CONTENT (30%)	EXCELLENT 30-27	LANGUAGE USE (25%)	EXCELLENT 25-22
	GOOD 26-22		GOOD 21-18
	FAIR 21-17		FAIR 17-11
	POOR 16-13		POOR 10-5
ORGANISATION (20%)	EXCELLENT 20-18	MECHANICS (5%)	EXCELLENT 5
	GOOD 17-14		GOOD 4
	FAIR 13-10		FAIR 3
	POOR 9-7		POOR 2
VOCABULARY (20%)	EXCELLENT 20-18	OTHER COMMENTS	
	GOOD 17-14		
	FAIR 13-10		
	POOR 9-7		

If there is something that you do not understand, or you feel that we have not understood what you have written, please consult us.

Regards

Dr Salem bin Daoud & Dr Sultan Al-Hazmi

These first-draft paragraphs were taken back to class, and one period was spent discussing with the students their impressions of their grades, the feedback, the amendments they had to make, and whether or not they had benefited from the new style of teaching-counseling, communicating and method of feedback. Encouraged by the positive oral response, it was possible to proceed with a 10 minute overview on an essay that would incorporate the insights they had gained (a) while answering the questionnaire (which they had done in Arabic), (b) the reading comprehension and (c) the improvements they needed to make

to the paragraph that had just been returned to them. Students, in pairs, were asked to talk about and plan an outline for the essay entitled How I normally write an essay, to be completed at home. To focus the students' attention, the essay was required to have three paragraphs, with the content being the students' response to a series of questions:

**Writing as a Process:** What is my understanding of the process approach to writing? Why could (or could not) the process approach work for me?

**My Writing Process:** How do I normally work? How did I work on the paragraph we wrote? How am I working now - on this essay?

**My Writing Difficulties:** What are the difficulties I normally face? What were the difficulties when I wrote the paragraph? What difficulties am I facing now?

As with the paragraph, observations and comments were recorded on computer, and a personalised, computerised commentary was attached to each graded essay. The summarised version of the ESL Composition Profile was used so that students had an idea how their grades were compiled in case they needed to query the assessment. After a class-period discussing their strengths and weaknesses, the next stage of the project could be embarked upon – which was to do a quantitative assessment of the students' feelings, reactions, likes and value judgements about writing generally, and about the 4-week project so far.

The students sat in pairs, and first discussed, then answered the questionnaire. The teachers moved from group to group, counseling, giving advice and observing while they worked their way through the questionnaire. Recall that the object of the questionnaire was not to collect data to refute or validate hypotheses – the aim was to explore students' feelings, notions and experiences to get them to reflect on their learning (see the conditions for optimal learning discussed in the subsection The tenets of Counseling-Learning above). The next section will give a brief overview of the findings.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA

The questionnaire was divided into sections: the first, consisted of 22 questions exploring how the student experienced writing in English in general; the second comprised 11 questions investigating the student's feelings about writing and

revising English tasks; the third contained 14 questions inquiring as to how the student normally responds to English writing tasks; and the fourth section had 7 questions, targeting how the student deals with the writing tasks and revision.

In all the questions, the following scale was used to register the student's response:

Definitely "Yes!"		Mostly "Yes"		Maybe		Mostly "No"		Definitely "No!"	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

The SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to analyse the data and produce the tables that appear in this paper. In all of the questions, the lowest standard deviation of 0.84 was in Section A (Q1), and the highest deviation of 2.78 was also in Section A (Q5). Because of the large dispersion in the ratings (from 1-10), the standard deviations are not considered to be of any significance.

Most responses (that is, in 34 of the 54 questions in total, or 62.9%) lay in the "maybe" range (5 or 6). This might have been influenced by making a "strong" and a "weak" interval to each category (being, "definitely no"; "mostly no"; "maybe"; "mostly yes"; and "definitely yes"). Indeed, Scholfield (2001), in his review of the data produced, pointed out that the way the 10 point scale had been used was not ideal, and there was the possibility of error in seeing any significance in, say, a "weak maybe" and a "strong maybe" score. Still, in all the responses, the students had circled the numbers – not the supporting wording, so this might serve as evidence to suggest that reading some difference between a "strong maybe" and a "weak maybe" might be correct.

The section that provides tangible "meat" for discussion is Section A, which deals with how the students feel about writing. Provided here - as is the case for the other sections – is an abridged version (in table form) of the questions asked for the reader's perusal, plus the relevant descriptive statistics.

Talking about feelings:

The first section (Section A) deals with how the students perceive themselves, English and writing in English.

**Descriptive Statistics Table A: How Arab EFL students see writing in English**

Variable	mean	Std. dev.
1. Do you like English as a language?	8.66	0.84
2. Are you a happy and confident person?	7.44	1.65
3. Are you happy to be studying English at this university?	7.27	2.10
4. Are you happy to be studying non-English courses at this university?	3.94	2.15
5. Have you changed as a person because you studied English?	5.17	2.78
6. Do you think you are good in English?	6.35	0.93
7. Do you ever feel embarrassed because you are good in English?	4.06	2.71
8. Do you think you are bad in English?	3.30	1.41
9. Do you ever feel embarrassed because you are bad in English?	4.83	2.13
10. Do you ever feel angry/hostile about people in your class who are better than you?	2.25	1.98
11. Do you ever feel lost and alone in your struggle to learn English?	5.66	2.19
12. Did writing courses you have done at university help you?	5.66	2.00
13. Did your teachers try to understand and help you with writing problems in English?	6.11	1.93
14. Did your classmates try to understand and help you with writing problems in English?	4.11	2.05
15. Are you more confident in your writing ability having done English Writing at university?	6.29	1.75
16. Are enjoying Writing 314 this semester?	5.52	2.29
17. Have you enjoyed the last four weeks while we looked at the	8.27	1.22

Variable	mean	Std. dev.
writing process?		
18. Do you think that our sessions in the last four weeks have helped you in any way?	7.72	1.17
19. Do you think writing in English will be important for your future or your future career?	9.16	1.09
20. Do you think of writing as communication with another person?	7.27	1.90
21. Do you ever write just for yourself?	3.44	2.00
22. Do you write down personal problems you might have, or try to solve them on paper?	2.77	1.47

It can be seen from the results that they like English as a language (Q1, mean 8.66) and are pleased to be studying English at this university (Q3, mean 7.27). They see themselves as happy and confident people (Q2, mean 7.44) and believe that writing in English will be important for their future or future career (Q19, mean 9.16). They do not see writing merely as an exercise, but think of writing as communication with another person (Q20, mean 7.27). Interestingly enough, students are not happy about studying the non-English courses (religious subjects and Arabic), which they have to do as part fulfilment of their degree (Q4, mean 3.94). Their confidence in themselves is also reflected in their somewhat positive regard for their achievement in writing – more than half report that they are growing more confident in their writing ability in English, and they feel that they have improved since coming to university (Q15, mean 6.29).

Still, despite this growing confidence, they do not see that learning English has changed them, as people, much (Q5, mean 5.17). This was, looking at it now, perhaps an ill-advised question to ask, especially since it might have been interpreted as politically loaded. Unfortunately, sometimes the West (and English, as the dominant language of the West) is perceived negatively, and perhaps students felt that by admitting to a changed personality, their responses would have been seen as tacit approval of occidental values.

The results in the foregoing paragraph tie up with the confidence they feel – and the latitude they allow others – as regards their achievements in English so far. More than half of the students feel that they achieve in the language (Q6, mean 6.35) and do not feel embarrassed because of this (Q7, mean 4.06). This correlates with the fact that not many think they underachieve in the language (Q8, mean 3.30), or feel unconfident about their ability, or feel embarrassed about their lack of achievement (Q9, mean 4.83). Very few feel angry or hostile about others in the class who might be better (Q10, mean 2.25).

Despite this positive regard for the language and for writing in it, however, the students do not write much beyond what is absolutely necessary, or write just for themselves (Q21, mean 3.44), in terms of keeping any kind of personal journal or personal diary. Nor do they write down personal problems or try to solve them on paper (Q22, mean 2.77). Such a finding supports Liggett's observation (1983) of Arab EFL writers who do not initiate their learning but respond only when directed to – a situation that pertains where both the teaching and the learning process are teacher-directed, teacher-centred.

The last domain of this section produced results that were, if not critical of, then not particularly appreciative of the efforts of their writing teachers. The students were undecided as to whether they felt lost and alone in their struggle to learn English (Q11, mean 5.66). Many feel that they did not receive much understanding or help with their problems in writing from their class members (Q14, mean 4.11, and were equally divided as to whether the English Writing courses they had done at the university were helpful, interesting, challenging, or exciting (Q12, mean 5.66). Their teachers to date received only a slight nod of approval as regards whether or not we had tried to understand and help them with their problems with writing in English (Q13, mean 6.11). The Writing 314 course fared not much better, with a lukewarm “maybe” to the question as to whether the students had enjoyed the course during the semester under review (Q16, mean 5.52).

Still, there was an encouraging “mostly yes” response as regards whether the students had enjoyed the last weeks of the 4-week project (Q17, mean 8.27) and as to whether the sessions over the last four weeks had helped them in any way (Q18, mean 7.72).

The second section (Section B) deals with task-related feelings regarding the

writing process, that is, the students' feelings about writing and revising English tasks. All the responses received – bar one – were in the 5-6 (“weak maybe” to “strong maybe”) range.

**Descriptive Statistics Table B: How Arab EFL students feel about writing and revising English tasks**

variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Do you ever feel nervous/worried if your teacher asks you to write something in English?	5.05	2.07
2. Do you ever feel angry/hostile when you are asked to do an English writing exercise?	4.16	2.25
3. Do you feel happy/excited when your teacher asks you to write something in English?	5.55	1.85
4. Do you feel indifferent when your teacher asks you to write something in English?	5.35	1.86
5. Do you feel positive about your ability in English when you start doing the task?	6.17	1.46
6. Do you feel positive about yourself in English when you start doing the task?	6.00	1.69
7. Do you feel positive about your English during the process of writing the first draft?	5.82	1.62
8. Do you feel positive about yourself during the process of writing the first draft?	5.75	1.52
9. Do you feel positive about your ability in English when you finish the first draft?	6.23	2.16
10. Do you feel positive about yourself when you finish the first draft?	6.81	1.90
11. If you revise your first draft, do you feel positive about revising what you wrote?	6.00	1.73

On the higher end of the “maybe” scale, students reported that they felt somewhat positive about their ability in English when they commence a task (Q 5, mean 6.17) and about themselves (Q6, mean 6). There is a drop in

confidence in their English ability as they begin the process of writing (Q7, mean 5.82) and in themselves (Q8, mean 5.75). They return to being “somewhat positive” about their ability in the language once they have finished the first draft (Q9, mean 6.23) and about themselves (Q10, mean 6.81). When they revise their first draft, they feel less positive than when they finish the first draft (Q11, mean 6).

Students could not commit themselves as to whether or not they felt nervous or worried when they were asked to write something in English (Q1, mean 5.05), nor whether or not they felt happy or excited (Q3, mean 5.55). Indeed, they were neither for nor against writing tasks in general (Q4, mean 5.35). What is assured, though, is that they are neither angry nor hostile when asked to do an English writing exercise (Q2, mean 4.16).

Talking about process:

Once again, there were many con-committal responses to this third section (Section C), with all the responses – bar four – lying in the “maybe” range.

**Descriptive Statistics Table C: How Arab EFL students tackle English writing tasks**

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Does your writing process compare with the process approach we spoke about at the beginning of this series of lectures?	5.00	1.74
2. Do you plan your first draft?	6.88	2.05
3. When you write in English, is your main concern correctness (grammar, spelling, etc.)?	6.61	2.17
4. When you write in English, is your main concern content?	7.70	1.61
5. When you write in English, is your main concern organisation?	6.64	2.14
6. Do you spend quality time on writing things you do not like?	6.05	1.66
7. Do you spend quality time on writing things you do enjoy?	6.64	1.57
8. Do you revise your first draft of a writing task?	6.76	2.30
9. Do you revise all your writing efforts, or only the important	7.08	2.19

ones?		
10. When you revise, is your main concern correctness (grammar, spelling, etc.)?	8.23	1.30
11. When you revise, is your main concern content?	7.15	1.34
12. When you revise, is your main concern organisation?	6.76	1.73
13. Do you spend quality time on revising tasks you do not enjoy writing about?	5.76	1.78
14. Do you spend quality time on revising tasks you enjoyed writing about?	6.14	1.795

Significantly, students would not commit themselves for-or-against on the question of whether their own writing process compared with the process approach that had been spoken about at the beginning of the project (Q1, mean 5). To the higher end of the "maybe" scale, they reported a somewhat positive response to planning their first draft before writing (Q2, mean 6.88), and seemed not to make too much of the difference between spending quality time on writing things they did not like (Q 6, mean 6.05) and things they do enjoy writing about (Q7, mean 6.64). Interestingly, the students show a positive interest in Content (ideas about what to say, writing something interesting) (Q 4, mean 7.70), though this is not supported in the literature to date (Liggett 1983; Kharma 1985; Doushaq & Al-Makhzoomy 1989; Kharma & Hajjaj 1989; Halimah 1991; Zaid 1993; and Al-Hazmi 1998). Indeed, these researchers indicate that Correctness (the mechanical, superficial, manifest elements of writing) is the feature that students focus mainly on. This is probably because, as the abovementioned researchers report, teachers themselves concentrate mainly on these features in their teaching, and give feedback principally in this area.

The students reported interest in Content (ideas about what to say, writing something interesting) is followed by a concern about Correctness (grammar, spelling, punctuation) (Q3, mean 6.61), and Organisation (having an interesting beginning, an appropriate ending, and a smooth flow of ideas) trailing at the end (Q5, mean 6.64).

When it came to the revising process, there was a 6.76 mean on question 8, dealing with whether or not first drafts were ever revised, indicating a not all-too-positive attitude to revision. The 6.76 ("strong" maybe) score is surprising,

since overall studies of Arab EFL writers showed (a) little or no revision and (b) that students view writing in English as a one-draft process (Halimah, 1991). Our students answered that when they do revise, they often tend to revise all their writing efforts, not just the important, easy or pleasant ones (Q9, mean 7.08). It seems that the students, when they do revise, spend less time on revising tasks they did not enjoy writing about (Q13, mean 5.76) than on tasks they did enjoy writing about (Q14, mean 6.14).

This revision process has a main focus on Correctness (grammar, spelling, punctuation) (Q10, mean 8.23), though content enjoys a lot of attention (Q 11, mean 7.15), with Organisation (having an interesting beginning, an appropriate ending, and a smooth flow of ideas) coming in last in line (Q12, mean 6.76). These results are supported, in the main, by studies of Arab EFL writers that show that when they are prompted to revise, students focus on structure (the correctness of surface linguistic forms) – a situation reflecting their teachers' emphasis (Doushaq and Al-Makhzoomy, 1989).

The foregoing results are born out by the fourth section (Section D) of the questionnaire dealing with how the students deal with difficulties they might experience with writing tasks.

#### **Descriptive Statistics Table D: Difficulties Arab EFL students face writing English tasks**

variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. You do enjoy doing easy tasks.	7.27	1.99
2. You do mind if the topic is difficult.	6.35	1.65
3. If the writing task were easy, you would revise it.	5.16	1.94
4. If the writing task is difficult, you leave the task for a while, and come back to it later.	6.55	1.72
5. If the writing task is difficult, you ask someone for help	6.58	2.23
6. If the writing task is difficult, you refer to notes, books, newspapers or other sources.	6.35	2.62
7. If the writing task is difficult, you give up, do what you can, then hand in the work.	5.37	1.85

As would be expected, the students certainly enjoy doing easy tasks (Section D,

Q1, mean 7.27), though they do not seem to have an equal and opposite reaction to difficult or boring tasks (Q2, mean 6.35).

What is disturbing is that the students' method of dealing with difficulties is most inadequate. Surprisingly enough, only half of the students would revise a task if it had been easy (Q3, mean 5.16). One would think that an easy task would be the thing that students might have the least resistance to revising - but this supposition is not supported by these data. Furthermore, half the group stated that if the task were difficult, they would give up, do what they could, then just hand in the work (Q 7, mean 5.37). Slightly more indicated that if the writing task were difficult, they would leave it for a while, and come back to it later (Q4, mean 6.55), ask someone for help (Q5, mean 6.58), or refer to notes, books, newspapers or other sources (Q6, mean 6.35). This leaves a substantial proportion of students not confronting their difficulties in writing. Obviously, students' response to the difficulties they encounter is problematic and much has to be done to rectify what is clearly a major impediment to their writing proficiency - in EFL contexts or in any other.

### Summary

The inquiry into the students' perceptions of writing was disturbing in that the majority of responses (62.9%) were in the "maybe" range. On the one hand, their diffident, "neither-here-nor-there" responses, devoid of any strong feelings this way or that, indicate that the researchers in the field who claim that students handle their writing tasks poorly might have reason for their claims. On the other hand, this same diffidence could be indicative of the fact that students are not confronting the issues raised by the questionnaire sincerely. For instance, our experience in the classroom indicates that students at Writing 314 level are notoriously loath to revise and review their work before handing in. In the light of this experience, a mean of 5.00 to a question like Does your writing process compare with the process approach we spoke about at the beginning of this series of lectures? (Section C; Q1) is surprising. One would have expected a "mostly no" (3 or 4). For similar reasons, a mean of 6.88 to a question like Do you plan your first draft? (Section C; Q2), is also surprising. Curran (1972:30) says there should be a therapeutic relationship between the teacher and the learner where an open trust exists to engender free communication of one's self

within the whole group. If students were not freely opening their feelings and perceptions to inspections in their response to the questionnaire, the “therapeutic relationship” between them and their teachers becomes far more difficult to achieve than one would at first imagine.

Still, what was achieved was student involvement in their learning, in the active expression of their strengths and weaknesses, in teasing out the nuances innate in their perceptions about learning generally – all of this communicated (mostly) through the medium of English. In addition, the present authors – by means of their analysis of the data - were able to learn a great deal more about their students than was hitherto the case.

Curran (1983:151) states that, in the groups he dealt with, when one person possessed superior knowledge of a language compared to others, it was not a superior knowledge that was securely experienced. Happily, not much evidence of this was detected in the results, with not many students thinking they are bad in the language (Section A, Q8, mean 3.30), or feeling embarrassed because they perceive themselves as competent in the language (Section A, Q7, mean 4.06). Curran (1981:152) reports, too, that negative dynamics can be created when students band together defensively against an “enemy” who knows too much. The present study shows that very few students feel angry or hostile about others in the class who might be better (Section A, Q10, mean 2.25), even though they do not receive much help or understanding from their fellow students (Section A, Q14, mean 4.11).

With regard to students not receiving much help or understanding from their fellow students (Section A, Q14, mean 4.11), it is clear that they feel positive about the encouragement they get from their teachers (Section A, Q13, mean 6.11), but that this response is only a “strong maybe”. So much for clear evidence of the “empathic understanding” (Rogers 1980: 272) and the “mutual personal investment” (Curran 1983: 140) that are necessary for optimal learning conditions! Despite this somewhat damning evidence against prevailing teaching methods and attitudes, the new curriculum received a nod of approval in the form of the “mostly yes” response to the inquiry as to whether the students had enjoyed the last weeks of the semester looking at the writing process (Section A, Q17, mean 8.27) and as to whether the sessions had helped them in any way (Section A, Q18, mean 7.72).

## CONCLUSION – AND THE WAY AHEAD

This paper has been an attempt to outline a curriculum development project that took place over a four week period at the end of a semester of the course entitled Writing 314, a course which focuses uniquely on EFL writing skills for fourth semester students. It commenced with a brief overview of some of the criticisms made of writing tuition in the Arab world, focussing mainly on the critique of curricula that are top-down, teacher-driven, non-interactive, and product-driven and that make little or no attempt to get students to reflect on the context of their learning, or on their writing strengths or weaknesses.

Review was made of recent research that indicates that a more efficient writing curriculum would be one that is affective, somatic and holistic, focusing on the students themselves and their psycho-social experiences. A brief summary was presented of the tenets of Counseling-Learning as expounded by Curran (1972 & 1983), whose tenets were felt by the present authors to harmonise with an EFL Writing curriculum that would engage the interest of students, prompt interactivity, encourage self-reflection, and allow students to participate in the process of the curriculum development.

Having established the background of, and the context within which, this curriculum development project took place, a discussion was engaged on the process and strategies of the project engaged upon over the four week period, explaining how students were encouraged to talk and write about their experiences, perceptions and reactions to writing and the tasks that are normally associated with the writing class (preparation, drafting, editing and correction, responding to feedback, rewriting). The authors explained what protocols were used, referring at the same time to the teaching and learning materials and the time that was allocated to each protocol.

One of the major strategies used to engender student discussion and writing about their perceptions of writing, the processes they use to do so, and the strategies that they use to revise and redraft was a questionnaire that had been designed specifically for the purpose. The data derived from this questionnaire were quantified, analysed and commented upon in order to put into some relief, both for the present authors and the reader, how the students in the Writing 314 class at the King Khalid University see EFL writing as it has been presented to them during the course of their degree studies and how these same students

perceived the change in direction over the 4-week project.

As writing teachers and EFL educators, the present authors are forced to look back over the four-week project and ask themselves: What was achieved? Was the project worth it in terms of the Writing 314 course? Did the project have value as a vehicle by means of which students might access EFL writing skills?

The answer is, on the surface of it all, a reasonably confident "yes". The students had done a great deal of pre-writing discussion, most of it in English. They had learned more about the process writing approach, and had been forced to use its subject-specific vocabulary. They had written substantial answers to a reading comprehension, and had worked through a lengthy questionnaire in which they were introduced to more vocabulary and to new thoughts about their writing. They had written a paragraph, which they had revised, then incorporated, together with their responses to the questionnaire and the reading comprehension, into an essay. Examination of the resultant essay indicates that the writing was of a higher standard than it would have been had they done the essay "cold" - without the necessary preparation. During the process, a novel, student-friendly way of assessing students' work was found. Preliminary, orally pronounced, results indicate that the students greatly appreciated the personalised computer commentary.

Still, properly conceived and scientifically administered pre-test/post-test protocols need to be instituted to see whether or not such a curriculum has any bearing on students' learning and on their EFL writing skills. Further, much more time needs to be allocated to the new curriculum. It is obvious that a four-week project is not nearly enough to substantially create permanent, lasting change in student writing behaviour and writing strategies. Indeed, a whole lot of previously-learned writing behaviour acquired over years of inadequate writing tuition has probably to be unlearned before more apposite and more effective behaviours can be put in place.

As reflectors on the educative process, though, the present authors need to pose different questions: Did we move closer towards an empathic feeling for our students? Did we provide them with the optimal learning environment for learning to take place?

The response here needs be modest, because it is not based on scientific objectivity. Carl Rogers (1980: 263) wrote:

I deplore the manner in which, from the early years, the child's education splits him or her: the mind can come to school, and the body is permitted, peripherally, to tag along, but the feelings and emotions can live freely and expressively only outside of school.

He (ibid.: 272) goes on to say, with regard to his note on the necessity of "empathic understanding" in the classroom:

When the teacher has the ability to understand each student's reaction from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of how the process of education and learning seems to the student, then, again, the likelihood that significant learning will take place is increased".

It would be impossible to prove that students' feelings and emotions had been addressed significantly. Still, the responses to the questionnaire - even though tenuous and to be viewed with some reserve - allow both authors to venture the guess that they had acquired some insight into how the process of education and learning in the Writing 314 course seems to the students.

Curran states (1983: 147) that, in a traditional mode of education, students are presumed to be able to learn best in an intellectualised and individual way, with little or no consideration given to their emotional, personal or affective involvement in the learning process, and with little or no consideration given to their need for a community experience that can be shared with other people in a rich, humane, committed dynamic. By implication, a reforming curriculum would be the opposite of this. The present authors are unable to make any claims about whether or not they achieved these optimum conditions for learning that Curran talks about, nor are they able to assert that they unswervingly taught to a unified concept of humankind. Furthermore, the project under discussion was a brief, and possibly inexperienced, departure from a traditional mode of writing tuition that has allowed only a superficial, and, as yet, scientifically unsubstantiated insight into whether the students' linguistic skills were benefited in any way.

Still, the authors have been encouraged by the response received from the students of the Writing 314 class. They were encouraged by the students' positive attitude, and felt that they were beginning to learn more about students' and their learning process. Indeed, they felt that they were beginning to learn more about themselves as teachers.

A great deal of work lies ahead before definite and substantiated answers can be recorded for any of the questions raised by the present study. It will be imperative to set up more rigorous and accountable tests with regard to the overall parameters of the investigation, that is, as to whether this new approach to EFL Writing for Arab students could create the right kind of classroom environment that leads to the acquisition of EFL writing and language skills. Critically, pre- and post-test treatments will have to be set up to measure the effect of this new method on students' performance to arrive at firm, scientific and objective conclusions as to the benefit of the new approach, rather than the impressionistic ones that have been garnered so far.

Honing this first-draft EFL Writing curriculum (the subject of this paper) requires further effort in terms of going back to the drawing-board, in allocating more semester time to the project, in revising and tightening up the teaching materials used during the project, and in doing further research and experimentation. By doing this, it is hoped that it will be possible to provide the evidence required to confirm or refute the belief of the present authors in the tenets of Counseling-Learning as a salutary underpinning of an EFL Writing curriculum for students at the university. By doing this, it is hoped that we will be able to produce (a) a culturally and socially appropriate curriculum; (b) a worthwhile and accountable writing tuition classroom methodology; (c) increased self-reflection on, and involvement in, the learning process on the part of both teacher and learner; and (d) the culmination of (a-c) in substantial language acquisition and improved EFL writing skills in our students.

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