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Contextual Challenges to Egyptian Students' Writing Development

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Abstract: This study is part of a wider investigation that aims to explore Egyptian students' essay writing difficulties. The focus of this paper is to shed light on the different socio-political and socio-cultural challenges deemed to have substantial impact on Egyptian students' essay writing development. Within a social constructionist theoretical framework that informed my investigation, I conducted the current study using mixed methods; namely, questionnaires, in-depth semi-structured interviews and semi-structured classroom observation. Findings of the study suggest that Egyptian different contexts are forceful dimensions in students' realisations and reproductions of their writings; an indicative of writing challenges that Egyptian students encounter. Findings of the study revealed that Egyptian students encounter various writing difficulties in planning, coherence, cohesion, style, unity, mechanics and revision. Socio-political and socio-cultural challenges were two main challenges contributing to students' difficulties in essay writing. Findings of the current study indicated two socio-political challenges: namely, suppression of students' voice in writing and the lack of accountability. Moreover, some socio-cultural challenges have influenced students' writing development such as students' previous learning experiences, lack of reading habit, and L1 interference in L2. In reference to students' previous learning experiences, stereotyped writing topics, the use of written clichés, rote learning and memorization, lack of critical and creative thinking, competitive learning environment, and exam culture have been reported as factors affecting students' writing development.

Keywords: FL/SL essay writing difficulties, socio-cultural factors, socio-political factors, student teachers of English, Egypt.

1. Introduction

Students' writing in a FL classroom context should show their awareness of their own communicative goals, of the reader, and of the writing context. Despite numerous approaches to the teaching of writing (such as the product-based approach, the process-based approach, and the post-process approach) having evolved from different teaching methods, tackling EFL writing is still one of the most challenging areas for teachers and students. Egyptian student teachers of English at Helwan Faculty of Education have to pass many academic courses in English. Nevertheless, these students still experience many difficulties in their essay writing as indicated by the results of the preliminary essay writing questionnaire administered to one hundred students and the informal interviews with six students.

1.1 Problem of the Study

A growing challenge in education is to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for student-teachers of English to effectively write essays in English. The importance of essay writing for student teachers is undermined by Grabe and Kaplan (1996: 24-25) who mentioned that students in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts will need English writing skills ranging from a simple paragraph and summary skills to the ability to write

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essays and professional article. In addition, being required to write effectively in the course and exam compositions of expository, argumentative and narrative types, students are in need of writing formal letters, research reports, lesson plans, and translations of Arabic text (Al Hazmi & Scholfield, 2007). Moreover, students' mastery of these writing skills will help them transfer this acquired essay writing knowledge and skills to their future students when they graduate as English language teachers.

Essay writing, which constitutes a problem for many ESL/EFL students worldwide, is a major challenge for many student teachers of English at Helwan Faculty of Education in Egypt. To the best of my knowledge, most of the Egyptian studies conducted in the field of essay writing at the university level are, however, quantitative. Therefore, the problem of the current study is concerned with exploring the different socio-political and socio-cultural challenges contributing to Egyptian students' essay writing difficulties.

1.2 Aim of the Study

In accordance with what has been reviewed, the EFL essay writing of Egyptian student teachers of English has been undervalued resulting in encountering some writing challenges. Taking Egyptian students' writing difficulties into consideration, the current study attempted to explore the different contextual challenges affecting Egyptian essay writing development from two dimensions: socio-politically and socio-culturally.

1.3 Questions of the Study

Taking this aim into account, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1- What are the contextual challenges affecting Egyptian students' essay writing development at the university level?

2- How can the different contextual challenges cause Egyptian students' essay writing difficulties?
   a) How can the socio-political context affect Egyptian students' essay writing difficulties?
   b) How can the socio-cultural context hinder Egyptian students' essay writing difficulties?

2. Literature Review

EFL teachers and students face certain problems in teaching and learning writing. As many teachers of English have noted, acquiring the writing skill seems to be more laborious and demanding than acquiring the other three language skills (Zheng, 1999). In fact, Nunan (1999) considers producing a coherent piece of writing an enormous challenge, especially in one's second language. This is magnified by the fact that the rhetorical conventions of English texts—the structure, style, and organization—often differ from those in other languages (Leki, 1991) as they require great effort to recognize and manage the differences. This is particularly true of the rhetorical conventions of the Arabic language.

In many Arab countries including Egypt, the education systems emphasize writing for taking tests. For many students, the only reason to practice writing is to pass examinations or to get a good grade in the course. This focus on writing to pass examinations reduces writing from the students' viewpoints to developing a product and receiving a grade from the teacher. This approach is not likely to make students interested in writing, which becomes decontextualised

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and artificial, giving students no real sense of purpose or perspective of a target audience. In this respect, some studies in the Arab world and a few Egyptian studies were conducted offering different approaches and remedial programmes to overcome the decontextualization of writing and develop some of the EFL essay writing skills. Some of these studies in the Arab world arena are Khalil (1985), Sa'adeddin (1989), and El-Hibir & Al-Taha, (1992). Reviewing the literature, a number of factors were reported to affect the development of students' education in general and writing in particular. First, socio-politics affect students' education (Yamato & Bray, 2002). Second, the development of ESL/EFL writing is influenced by a number of socio-cultural factors including students' rhetorical patterns, expressing social values in writing, L1 transfer into L2 and the incomplete understanding of the socio-cultural background target language (Al-Khatib, 2001; Lee, 2008; Fernsten, 2008 and Uysal 2008; and Hinkel, 2009).

In terms of the factors affecting the writing patterns and the writer identity, Uysal (2008) examines the writing patterns of eighteen Turkish participants' texts. The results revealed that some rhetorical preferences are transferred bidirectionally from L1. However, educational context, L2 level, topic, and audience were reported to account for these patterns and their transfer. Similarly, broad based topic accessibility also implies reliance on writers' personal experiences and socio-cultural background knowledge that can lead to a greater topic-effect on L2 writing (Hinkel, 2009). In harmony with that Fernsten (2008), tried to clarify how embedded ideologies and power relations shape understanding of ESL writer identity. Using a poststructural and sociocultural perspective, Fernsten highlights the politics of language and the teaching of writing, in relation to students' racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds when different from the dominant culture of the school.

Some researchers support the claim that understanding the socio-cultural aspects of the target language plays a great role in language development. For example, Al-Khatib (2001) argues in his study that the incomplete understanding of the sociocultural background of the target language might result in certain peculiarities, often seen as errors, which are the result of the contradiction between the Arabic and the English learning cultures. Similarly, (Qaddumi, 1995 and Mohamed & Omer, 2000) argue that the cultural, rhetorical and linguistic background of Arabic is presented as variables affecting students' performance in writing in both Arabic and English.

Investigating the pedagogical, social and personal complexities influencing EFL classroom processes, Lee (2003) qualitatively analyzed two teachers' pedagogic practices and their students' purposes in the Korean EFL context. It is concluded that teachers and students' beliefs, purposes and views relating to processes of teaching and learning EFL writing should be taken into consideration to deal effectively with EFL writing classrooms. Exploring the effect of socio-cultural backgrounds on students' use of linguistic and textual resources in meaning construction, Castro (2004) pinpointed that Filipino college freshmen writers with shared socio-cultural backgrounds employ similar linguistic and textual features in their writing. This, in turn, shows how writing practices are of socio-cognitive nature. In other words, writing practices are not only cognitive processes in which the mind is engaged to produce a piece of writing, but they are shaped by social and cultural factors as well. In a similar EFL context, Chen (1994) indicated that considerable difference was found between native and non-native speakers of English in their writing development, reflecting cultural

influences in writing styles and thought content, but no significant difference was found in contextual influences, individual factors, or perceptions of effective writing instruction.
Thus, the researcher conducted the present exploratory study to explore the gap in the literature by investigating (1) the different contextual challenges affecting FL essay writing of Egyptian student teachers of English, and (2) how these contextual challenges can cause students' difficulties in writing.

3. Methodology

The methodology of the current study is of an exploratory nature where the researcher thoroughly probes the phenomenon under investigation. This, in turn, provides insights into and comprehension of the essay writing challenges through using a range of data and an overall interpretive methodology that attempts to gain an in-depth understanding of the essay writing challenges as encountered by Egyptian student teachers and as reported by their essay writing lecturers. This interpretive methodology attempts to justify why the participants hold different views.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The current study is informed by the interpretive paradigm which seeks culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social world in which we live (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivism is defined as "an approach that assumes that the meaning of human action is inherent in that action, and the task of the inquirer is to unearth that meaning" (Schwandt, 2001:160). In view of the exploratory nature of the current study, and its context-specificity, the naturalistic orientation of interpretive, qualitative research is an appropriate choice. The interpretative approach aims at understanding the context within which participants act, and understanding the process by which events and actions take place telling us from the emic's view why things have happened (Maxwell, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This includes developing a description of an individual or setting by looking at the issue from different perspectives, analyzing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusions about the meaning personally and theoretically (Wolcott, 1994). In other words, the interpretive approach will help the researcher explore and understand the context within which essay writing in English is taught and learnt at one of the most pioneer Faculties of Education in Egypt. This, in turn, will help the researcher reveal the challenges and difficulties that Egyptian student teachers of English encounter in their learning of FL essay writing.

Within the interpretive paradigm, knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In the same vein, the current study is conceived by social constructionism (Clark et. al, 2003). In the current study, Egyptian student-teachers of English compose their essays in the light of the shared beliefs, backgrounds, culture and perceptions of the Egyptian community within which they lived, learnt what is socially acceptable, interacted with each other and shared different experiences. If they try to construct their written essays in a way that contradicts with the community social consensus, they will be socially irrelevant and epistemologically unacceptable for the Egyptian community.

In the same vein, the current study is conceived by social constructionism which underscores the significance of both culture and context in understanding what takes place in society, resulting in the construction of knowledge (McMahon, 1997; Derry, 1999). As a social constructionist researcher, I understand that each participant in my study is of a different entity, leading to different interpretations of the world where they live. These different interpretations are the result of a number of interacting contextual factors that are indispensable and complementary. This applies to my study which aims at exploring the EFL essay writing challenges of Egyptian student teachers of English. In this context, my participants have their own different constructions about the challenges they face in their learning and writing experiences. These constructions differ due to the difference in many factors including their education, gender, background, social class, family education and so on. Writing is not produced in isolation, but it is the outcome of the interaction between writers and their surrounding environment. It is a socially constructed process not only because it reflects thinking, but it shapes it as well. This stance is known as Social Constructionism in composition studies. Social constructionist approaches to composition as Clark et. al (2003) pinpoint, underscore the role society plays in shaping the written discourse and the significance of having the society expectations in mind when working with students.

Rafoth & Rubin (1988) and Williams (2004) argue that writers socially construct their written composition in a number of ways. First, writers construct mental representations of the social contexts in which their writing is embedded. Second, writing as a social process or system can create or constitute social contexts. It suggests that writers compose texts as a reaction to the social requirements of these groups, not in response to an instinctive need to communicate. Besides, writers create texts collectively with other participants in discourse communities. Finally, writers assign consensual values to writing and thus construct a dimension of social meaning. This mental, social, and contextual construction of writing could be clearly seen while Egyptian student teachers of English compose their essays starting from ideation in the brainstorming stage, to paragraph development and ending up with editing, proofreading and providing feedback on each other's pieces of writing.

3.2 Research Methods

In compliance with the exploratory nature of the methodological decision adopted in the current study, the research design of the current study employs mixed methods. The data collection methods used in this study have potential strengths and weaknesses. As highlighted in the literature, mixed methods research is used to refer to any research study that integrates one or more qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection and analysis (Creswell 2003; Borkan, 2004). In any study, the research questions should determine what methods are adopted. Methods are "the techniques or procedures used to gather and collect data related to some research question or hypothesis". (Crotty, 1998: 3).To answer the two research questions of the current study, the researcher designed three research instruments: a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview and a semi-structured observation.

The participants of the current study were 165 Egyptian student teachers of English who were randomly selected from third and fourth year students at the Faculty of Education, Helwan University. Moreover, seven essay writing lecturers at the same university took part in the current study. I purposively selected fourteen student teachers of English to be interviewed

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and all the seven essay writing lecturers who were available at the time when the study was being conducted.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1 Socio-political Challenges

4.1.1 Opinion Suppression

A major socio-political challenge influencing students' writing performance in English is suppressing students' opinion in writing. Thirteen student teachers and seven responses to the open-ended questions have clarified that they cannot express their opinions freely within the Egyptian university educational system. This in turn, restricted their ability to express their opinions in English essay writing. For example, Asmaa highlighted how she is unable to express her view as follows:

> *"The teacher was very much dictatorial in saying that my opinion as a student writing an essay is not important for her. The most important thing is to develop your ideas into a whole* essay. *That's why I'm unable to express my opinion freely and clearly. I can express my view in a novel, a play or in a poem in the exam, but not in essay writing."*

Likewise, Mahmoud showed which topics of writing are allowed in the essay writing course and which ones are prohibited as follows:

> **"***Expressing my view in essay writing is very big challenge for me. She [the teacher] told us that there are three fields of knowledge that you should avoid writing about in the exam: religion, sex and politics. She suppressed our opinions and we have to obey, or otherwise, she would give me a very bad mark that will fail me in this course."*

Apart from that, Ali pinpointed how he is politically unable to express his opinion as follows:

> **"***We are in Egypt. So, we are used to write what is consistent with the policy of the teacher, the university* and *the whole country. I can state my opinion in general matters such as why the underground tube is out of order. Politically speaking, we are used to be passive and not active participants."*

In the same context, a response to an open-ended question showed how the cultural view of the teacher as the source of knowledge negatively affected students' ability to innovate and express their interests freely.

> *"Our minds have been automated to obey what the teacher says as if it were something sacred. We blindly follow what the teacher says because we know that he is the only experienced person in this course."*

Similarly, four teachers have advocated that students are culturally bound not to express their opinions. A sample example is given by Dr. Lamiaa who said:

> **"***They are not* confident *enough to express their opinions. I think that our society and secondary educational system are opinion suppressing. They are brought up to do this whether at home or at school. I try sometimes to*

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> *direct their attention to assume that there are other readers to convince them. But they can never forget that they are students writing for a teacher."*

Socio-politically, the Egyptian constitution granted every citizen the right to express his/her opinion freely and clearly. This is well expressed in article (47) of the Egyptian constitution as follows: "Freedom of opinion is guaranteed. Every individual has the right to express his opinion and to publicize it verbally or in writing or by photography or by other means within the limits of the law. Self-criticism and constructive criticism is the guarantee for the safety of the national structure." (Eid, et.al, 2007).

In reality, this freedom of opinion expression is suppressed. This affected the teaching and learning in higher education negatively. Personally, I was taught within an educational system that has forced me to blindly obey the university teachers even if I disagree with their views. They had certain views in their minds that nobody can dare to discuss because they might fail in the course. They see their views as unarguable. For example, after I was awarded the B.Sc. degree in education, I attended a fourteen-course programme in which one of the lecturers was very tough although I was not doing the course as a part of my compulsory education. I disagreed with this university lecturer about his definition of creativity, and I argued this with him. Consequently, he made me fail the course although it was totally unfair. I think this has to do with the power relation of Egyptian university professors as they are not accountable for the actions they take or for the way they behave. Another example of this voice expression is represented in a student of mine at university who told me that he had repeated the Drama exam for more than four times now despite passing all the other courses in his degree. The reason behind this is that he critically voiced his concern about an issue in the play they were studying. He discussed this issue orally with his lecturer in class, but the result was too harsh. If there had been any higher authority to investigate his case, he would have graduated by now.

Essay writing is also affected by this opinion suppression. In the essay writing course, the effect of this was clearly shown in what one of the university teachers did. She asked her students to avoid writing any of their essays about any of the three forbidden issues: namely, religion, politics or sex. This in turn, affected students as they cannot personalize their writing about issues that are of interest and relevance to them. In reference to this issue, Manal said:

> *"I'm a teenager and I should have the freedom to write about my teenage problems even if they were related to sex and the choice of future husbands. But, unfortunately, my essay writing teacher denied me this right."*

I can argue here that there are some reasons rooted in the Egyptian dogma behind the teacher's decision to forbid students from writing about sex, religion and politics. This university teacher is the product of an educational system where voice should be suppressed; otherwise you will get into trouble. First, I think that the teacher does not want students to write about sex because it is a taboo issue about which nobody should talk until they are married. Sexual problems are rejected in the Egyptian context for ethical and cultural considerations. If you have a sexual problem, you can not even talk about it with your closest friends. Recently, a new film was produced entitled "AlNoom Fi Alasaal", starred by Adel Emam, a well-known Egyptian actor. It talked about the sexual problems between wives and

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husbands indirectly. It tried to shed light on some of the problems about which nobody could talk for fear of culture and ethics.

Moreover, the teacher did not want students to tackle any issue from a religious point of view for some reasons. First, she might not be religious herself. Second, she might not want to read students' essays in which they address an issue from religious views that distort what the real religion calls for. Moreover, she might not have deep knowledge about the two religions in Egypt; Islam and Christianity.

Additionally, preventing students from tackling issues from a political perspective could be attributed to two reasons. First, the teacher does not want to be involved in any political issues that might be against the regime and political laws in Egypt which will lead her to prosecution. Second, she does not want other students and teachers to say that she is discussing political issues in class which might expose her to the danger of losing her job at university.

4.1.2 Lack of Accountability

Accountability means "the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used and to what effect" (Trow 1996, p. 310). In relation to the advantages of accountability to teaching, it is believed that it promotes better teaching practices and enhances professional collaboration among teachers (Louis, et al., 2005).

I can argue here that Egyptian university teachers lack accountability. It is taken for granted that university teachers in Egypt enjoy an extreme power in their educational institution. They are the only course designers, teachers, evaluators, examiners and markers of the exams. Furthermore, second markers of exams mark them in a superficial and marginal way in the form of signing the outside sheet without even looking inside the exam paper. University teachers decide what to teach and how to teach irrespective of any considerations. This lack of accountability might result in teachers' wrong decisions about teaching. It is also unfair for students to be taught by teachers who are not accountable for the decisions and actions they make. This lack of accountability causes Egyptian university teachers and their students to fall behind the international standards of quality teaching and learning. This claim was supported by other research studies that called for the need for greater accountability and improvement in the quality of teaching in higher education (Ballantyne et al., 2000). To be centres of excellence for teaching as well as research, universities and their higher education institutions require reviewing the ways in which they are managed (Umashankar & Dutta, 2007).

4.2 Socio-Cultural Context

A number of socio-cultural challenges emerged from the data analysis. Both teachers and students have revealed that there are some socio-cultural issues that cause problems to students' learning of English writing at the university level. These issues include pre-university learning experiences, exam culture, lack of reading habit and L1 interference in L2 writing.

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4.2.1 Pre-University Learning Experiences

In reference to pre-university learning experiences, a number of issues emerged including the use of stereotyped topics of writing, the use of written clichés, rote learning and memorization, lack of critical and creative thinking, and competitive learning environment.

4.2.1.1 Use of stereotyped writing topics

First, two teachers have emphasized the use of stereotyped topics of writing at the pre-university stages. For example, Dr. Mostafa comments on the traditional topics of writing taught at the pre-university level as follows:

> *"…..I don't mind spending a lot of time with them [students] to discuss and brainstorm ideas. In choosing the ideas, I try to ensure simple ideas that they can elaborate. In the pre-*university *stage, teachers used to give students worn out topics to write about such as Mother's Day, Spring, Summer Holiday…etc. It is deeply rooted in their [students'] minds that when they begin writing, they have to begin with a famous proverb, a quotation from Qur'an or a famous writer and to end your writing in the same way. These topics are very traditional and students copy each others' ideas. There is no place for engaging students in interesting and personal topics."*

Moreover, Dr. Alaa added that asking students to write about abstract topics at the university level is really challenging to students. He expressed his view as follows:

> *"One of the difficulties in teaching essay writing is to give students abstract topics to write about such as justice,* courage, *the importance of sacrifice, all of which are very general. On the other hand, when you discuss a topic about the importance of having a clean house, or what makes you happy or what makes you laugh or the relationships between boys and girls. These are topics which they are naturally concerned with and usually discuss among themselves. I try to avoid abstract topics."*

Egyptian preparatory and secondary school teachers of English use a number of stereotyped writing topics in their English lessons for some reasons. First, these topics are used by the English language teachers since they were students learning English at secondary schools. Second, English language teachers might lack the knowledge about the different composition writing topics. Most likely, they have not mastered the different skills of writing in English when they were student teachers of English at university. This is reflected in their resort to the ready-made stereotyped topics of writing.

Socio-culturally, when English teachers use stereotyped topics of writing, colleagues, parents and students view them as experienced teachers who know a lot about the most commonly used topics in English exams. Besides, these teachers are not aware of the different strategies that enable them to teach English composition in a good way to their students. This might be attributed to the poor quality of their teacher education programme at university. Moreover, the exam-oriented nature of the Egyptian pre-university educational system plays a vital role

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in teachers' use of stereotyped topics of writing. Egyptian teachers of English train their students to write about stereotyped topics that are often repeated in the writing section in the general English language exams at the preparatory and the secondary levels. Any other topics of writing are discouraged because they will not be included in the exam. This notion of exam-oriented nature was deeply rooted in the Egyptian educational system (Hartmann**,** 2008).

4.2.1.2 Written clichés

The educational training students receive in their schools has become an established practice within the Egyptian educational system. An accepted practice in this society is the use of written clichés in learning/teaching of writing. Four students have voiced their concern about this practice. A sample example is given by Eman who said:

> *"The secondary school teacher told us if one uses one or more of some fixed opening sentences to begin our paragraphs and some other concluding sentences to end our paragraphs, s/he will get at least 5 out 6 in the writing section. Examples of opening sentences are: "No one can deny that…….. or It can't be argued that……,or It goes without saying that…… Examples of a concluding sentence is: Thus, the government should exert more effort to help improve/decrease/increase/uproot ……"*

In the same context, three teachers have pinpointed that using written clichés is a feature of Egyptian students' English writing. These teachers have clarified that writing is seen as a subject to show one's proficiency rather than a process of idea generation and thought expression. This is a socio-cultural view expressed by Dr. Alaa for a number of reasons as follows:

> *"Secondary school teachers* gave *students clichés to memorize and imitate and put in any essay writing. This is very bad because it sees all students as the same. I'm mentioning this because this is one of the difficulties I face with my students when I teach essay writing. My students usually tell me that in the secondary school, we were told to begin with one of these sentences: "No one can deny that…..", "There is no doubt that ……", "It is acknowledged that ……", It goes without saying that ……", "It is taken for granted that….". I spend a lot of time trying to convince these students that these clichés should be avoided completely. And of course, they don't have the chance to be trained in the secondary school on how to write a good essay or even a paragraph and how to move from one idea to another. We face these problems here because they are at the back of these students' mind."*

In this context, Atari (1983) indicated that Arab university students tend to follow certain techniques in their written English that make their writing incoherent such as including a broad statement in the opening sections of their essays before introducing the topic sentence. This clarifies that written clichés is a characteristic of most Arab students in their writing which might be attributed to their inability to write correct topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph. This is due to their teachers' suggestions to use these clichés when they start writing a paragraph to guarantee a very good mark.

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4.2.1.3 Rote learning and memorization

Rote learning and memorization form the third socio-cultural challenge at the pre-university level that has to do with the wider educational approach. This claim was supported by five students and four teachers. In reference to the four teachers, all of them have indicated that rote learning and memorization are socio-cultural challenges that negatively influence students' quality of writing performance. A sample example of what students perceived as a challenge was expressed by Manal who said:

> *"The teacher gave us some model paragraphs and he asked us to keep them by heart. He divided these paragraphs into three categories: Topics that have positive effect on the individual and society, topics that have negative effect on the individual and society, and topics that talk about advantages and disadvantages of any issue …….."*

Rote learning is one of the features characterizing Egyptian pre-university educational system. Students are encouraged to memorize what they study. Culturally, Egyptian students who memorize what they study are regarded as cleverer than those who do not. This is reinforced by most exams in the different educational stages in most courses which ask students questions that mostly require them to recall what they have memorized during their study. This leaves no place for the development of critical or creative thinking skills. Schooling is thereby driven exclusively by the need to score high grades in national examinations, which determine access to university places. These exams do not only engender a culture of fear and frustration, but also reinforce rote learning and memorization and suppress critical thinking and creative expression (*Dhillon, Fahmy, and Salehi-Isfahani, 2008).*

Moreover, memorization is also encouraged by both parents and teachers to help students getting high scores in the different exams. Socio-culturally, parents encourage their children to memorize what they learn to get the best marks and to be teachers' pets at schools. Parents might be doing this because this is the way they used to learn. I remember my dad was asking me to memorize written paragraphs written in English to help me recall them quickly in a composition writing task in the exam. In relation to teachers, they might be in competition with time to finish the dictated syllabus at schools. Another reason might be that memorization is a learning strategy that proved successful with students who have tried using it. This might date back to a long period of time ago when children were enrolled in what was called at that time 'Kuttab', referring to a place where Muslim students used to memorize the Holy Qur'an under the instruction of a religious teacher called 'Sheikh'. Although this teaching technique is effective in learning the Qur'an, it must be only one of many teaching techniques encouraged until now.

Furthermore, many Egyptian preparatory and secondary school teachers lack the knowledge and the skills of using differentiated teaching strategies that help them develop students' critical and creative thinking skills. Additionally, the gap between what Egyptian teachers learn at university and what they practice inside the real classroom might help explain why memorization and rote learning are still encouraged. Experienced in-service teachers transfer their experience to the newly-graduated teachers by telling them what works in teaching and what does not work. From a personal experience as a teacher of English for one year and a supervisor of student teachers of English at different schools for many years, I was told that I should forget all about the teaching techniques that I learnt at university and stick to and

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follow what experienced teachers do in their classrooms by helping students memorize lists of isolated words and grammar rules without understanding them. In addition, teachers used to train students to memorize steps for answering exam questions correctly. This suggests that learning that is based on memorization and rote learning is soon to be forgotten. This justifies why teachers should pay attention to using a number of different teaching techniques that could help widen their students' minds to think critically and creatively. This, in turn, might cultivate a better learner who is adaptable to the rapidly-changing education worldwide.

Holliday (1996: 94) highlighted that Egyptian student teachers of English "were never in a position to negotiate what the lecturer put on the blackboard." This denotes that they are lacking the opportunity to discuss or negotiate meaning in what they learn. This could be attributed to the broader political concept of the so-called "democracy". In Egypt, democracy is no more than mottos that are not implemented. Nobody can dare to negotiate the decision made by the government on a certain issue related to the lives of the people in Egypt where the decisions are unquestionable. This broad concept relating to of the lack of democratic political system is reflected at a small classroom level in the Egyptian Educational system in Egypt where 'a democratic class' in which meaning is co-constructed and equal participation is one of everyone's rights, is not to be found anywhere in Egypt.

4.2.1.4 Lack of critical and creative thinking

Lack of critical and creative thinking are another socio-cultural challenges at the pre-university level. The Egyptian educational system is not targeted at promoting critical thinking skills and enhancing creativity. Rather, it kills creativity and undervalues criticality. This view was supported by some university teachers. For example, Dr. Lamiaa highlighted the absence of students' critical mind in writing as follows:

> *"Students are unable to focus on definite things while writing and reviewing their essays because they don't* have *the critical eye that makes them aware of their mistakes. Even when they correct things, they would correct things that are already correct and miss mistakes. Even when you give them editing checklist to correct mistakes on the macro level, vocabulary and structure, organization, they are reluctant to do it. I also think that this is the effect of the secondary school teachers that accustomed them to memorize and cancel their minds."*

In addition, Dr. Atiyat added that students do not give themselves the opportunity to think well or are not used to discussing ideas in the planning stage due to their bad habit formation of memorization in the secondary schools. In this regard, she said:

> *"They don't think well* before *writing any piece of writing. I also think that these writing problems are not only confined to the school and what teachers teach them, but it is more of a socio-cultural problem than anything else. As Egyptians, the society and the culture in which we live don't give chance to discuss ideas, express opinions and to argue for or against certain topics."*

Furthermore, Dr. Mostafa highlighted that the exam-oriented educational system in the pre-university stages negatively affected students' critical thinking skills. He expressed his perception as follows:

> *"…..In addition, they are* taught *for the exam. They are not taught to think. They tend to memorize pieces of English. They target certain issues and topics that they expect to come in the exam. Teachers also encourage this. So, they come to the English Departments at different universities without any appropriate background to catch up. They are not exposed as they should to the English language."*

These exams do not only engender a culture of fear and frustration, but also reinforce rote learning and memorization and suppress critical thinking and creative expression (*Dhillon, Fahmy, and Salehi-Isfahani, 2008).*

4.2.1.4 Competitive learning environment

Fourth, the Egyptian learning environment was viewed as competitive by both teachers and students. This competitive learning environment is regarded as one of the outcomes of the socio-cultural challenges affecting students' writing in English. Two students and ten responses to the open-ended question have shown that the learning environment is competitive. For example, Wafaa said:

> *"Our university teacher asked us to collaborate as a group to help each other understand what we were not able to understand alone, but it is only me who attended and the majority* of *the group gave us silly excuses because they don't want to help us. I think it is the Egyptian culture that is behind these non-sharing behaviours."*

In reference to the culture of not sharing acquired knowledge and skills, Amal said:

> *"I have a friend of mine whom I asked for her written lecture of the course that was given by our teacher and she made many excuses not to give it to me."*

In addition, a sample example of the responses to the open-ended question was very expressive of the same view as follows:

> "*My parents told me never to give my assignments or written lectures to anybody because they might benefit from my* work *and get higher marks than me."*

In the same context, three teachers have highlighted the competitiveness of students' learning at the university level. For example, Dr. Esraa sheds light on students' unwillingness to co-operate or work in groups as follows:

> *"Students feel jealous of each other and this hinders any attempt for peer review. They don't want to show* each *other their written essays. In addition, they are reluctant to work in groups when the chance permits. Moreover, if they do group work, they do it superficially. They don't want to share ideas or comments with each other. This is the influence of the family and school environment which taught them to hide knowledge and progress from their colleagues."*

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Moreover, Dr. Alaa added that students do not want to share or exchange ideas of their topics as follows:

> *"When I asked them to surf the internet about certain topics just to increase their prior knowledge about the topic, I found out that they hide the articles that they downloaded from the internet from each other* for *fear of their ideas being copied."*

There are some psychological, economical, and social reasons behind students' unwillingness to share learning. First, students believe that knowledge is the power by which they can excel over their classmates. Psychologically, students do not trust each other as their ideas might be easily stolen and they are worried about the mark that they will get as well. Economically, due to the limited resources, inability to access the internet, and old library resources, students compete intensely. Socially, they have not been brought up either at school or at home to share ideas, projects or experiences.

At the level of planning, Dr. Azza showed how Egyptian university students are greedy for higher marks at the expense of the learning culture.

> *"Moreover, on the level of planning, students don't want to show their outlined ideas for an essay. I think that this is culturally related to the competitiveness of learning. Students are competing* because *they want to get higher years' works and at the same time, they don't want anybody else to get higher scores in the course than them. I have told them that this is not good for their learning, but it can't be solved as they have been brought up doing this since they were young."*

The Egyptian educational system whether at the pre-university level or at the university level encourages competitive learning environment (Abdellah & Taher, 2007). This relates to the culture of competitiveness in which students race to get higher scores than each other. Students are competitive because of some socio-cultural factors affecting them such as teachers' encouragement of competitive learning inside the classroom, parents' encouragement of this competitive learning at home and the society encouragement of learning competitively at large. The learning of essay writing in such a competitive learning environment justifies the lack of peer review because students are very much competitive and racing for a better mark in their written essays. They think that sharing their essays might lead to their ideas being stolen and losing their unique ideas.

As a product of this educational system that encourages competitive learning, I have acquired a number of harmful psychological traits that encourage selfishness, hatred of other competitors, love of self and monopoly of knowledge. As a mature teacher, I am now trying to get rid of these bad traits. Another product of this competitive learning is a university professor in Egypt by whom I was taught in the postgraduate diplomas. She was very much monopolizing knowledge by telling us not to share the monthly periodicals to which she subscribed with other teachers or lecturers. This draws our attention to the bad psychological effects of this kind of competitive learning that should be eliminated from our Egyptian educational system by looking ahead at how more developed countries nurture a supportive environment that encourages knowledge dissemination and stresses collaborative work that leads to ongoing productivity and progress.

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4.2.1.5 Exam culture

The educational system in Egypt is marked by being exam-oriented and highly competitive (Hartmann, 2008). Exams are the only way reported by university teachers to assess students summatively. All courses are mostly evaluated through written tests (20% years' work and 80% written test) except in the case of phonetics course in which 40% of the final mark is based on oral exam and 60 % is based on written exams. In terms of essay writing, the Egyptian pre-university educational system plays a vital role in teachers' use of stereotyped topics of writing. Egyptian teachers of English train their students to write about stereotyped topics that are often repeated or similar to other repeated topics in the writing section in the general English language exams at the preparatory and the secondary levels. Any other topics of writing are discouraged because they will not be included in the exam. This, in turn, causes a great difficulty for university students due to the slightly different nature of secondary school system and university system. As far as essay writing is concerned, Egyptian university teachers' style of essay writing exams are also stereotyped. This notion of 'stereotyped exams' kills students' critical and creative thinking skills. Exams should be differentiated to meet students' different proficiency levels.

4.2.2 Lack of reading habit

Lack of reading habit is another socio-cultural concern for both teachers and students. Three students and nine responses have highlighted this argument. A sample example is given by Banan who said:

> *"Also, I'm not* used *to reading much in general which results in poor prior knowledge about any essay writing topic."*

In the same context, two teachers have shed light on the lack of reading as the source for students' poor prior knowledge. In this respect, Dr. Mohammed said:

> *"I think students were educated whether at home or at school in a way that inhibits reading outside the curriculum. Students don't read for general knowledge or for pleasure. This is very sad, but this is a reality among Egyptian students."*

Within the Egyptian context, it has been revealed that Egyptian university students are not willing to read for some socio-cultural reasons (Ibrahim, 2009). First, parents do not encourage students to read even in their native language. Second, teachers summarize knowledge for students to memorize for exam purposes. Finally, there is no intrinsic or extrinsic motivation in the Egyptian culture to read. This shows how the Egyptian culture is not a promoting and enhancing the reading culture.

4.2.3 L1 Interference in L2 Writing

Arabic interference in L2 writing is the last socio-culture challenge affecting Egyptian students' essay writing development. Four teachers have referred to the interference of L1 (i.e. Arabic) in students' learning L2 writing in particular. For example, Dr. Mohammed said:

> *"So, I find interference of L1 into L2 and overgeneralizations are very clear as big problems in their writing. Let me give you an example for clarification. One of the students wrote once, "I cut my beard" to mean I*

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> *shaved. Another example is "To go to the water room"* meaning *to go to the bathroom. These are clear examples of literal translations from Arabic into English without giving the right synonyms of the expressions or the words. This also indicates that students do not have the specific terms or expression needed for this context."*

Additionally, Dr. Atiyat referred to students' run-on sentences as a result of their Arabic influence as follows:

> *"They [students]* always *write run on sentences without any pause or stops. I think this is due to the Arabic influence on their learning of the English language as we are accustomed to write very long sentences in Arabic, but I keep telling them to write simply and specifically."*

Second, three university teachers have reported that Arabic might be the source of the 'repetition' as a stylistic problem facing students. In this context, Dr. Mostafa indicated that students' repetition in writing is a stylistic feature that they transferred from the Arabic language. The following extract puts emphasis on this issue:

> *Also, they [students] make repetition in their writing which weakens their writing style. Actually, this may be due to the Arabic influence on their English writing.*

Findings of the current study have pinpointed that Arabic, as students L1, is the source of some difficulties that Egyptian student teachers of English encounter in English writing. First, university teachers highlighted that students' lexical difficulty might be attributed to the interference of the Arabic language into their written English. For example, Dr. Esraa said:

> *"When it comes to writing, they lack the needed vocabulary. So, most of the students start with writing in Arabic and then they translate it into English."*

Besides, run-on sentences were another feature of four students' poor writing style. Regarding this difficulty, a sample example was given by Wafaa who said:

> *"My writing is run-on because I translate from Arabic into English. That's why my writing style is not that good."*

In compliance with the findings of the current study, a handful of studies have revealed how Arabic negatively interferes in EFL/ESL writing. For example, Panos (1983) pinpointed that the contrasting features between Arabic and English have been identified as potential contributors to observed error production and weaknesses in some reading skills, but most particularly in writing skills. Besides, Doushaq (1986) who analyzed the content area writing of 96 Arab university students studying English for academic purposes, revealed problems in three major categories: sentence structure, paragraph structure, and content. It was reported that weakness in foreign language writing skills appeared related to weakness in mastery of Arabic writing skills. Similarly, Mourtaga (2004) highlighted that texts and other data of Palestinian students showed some frequent writing errors in verbs, punctuation, and articles. These errors were attributed to the interference of Arabic in the English writing of these students. Finally, other researchers have attributed the difficulty Arab students encounter in

cohesion to the cultural differences between Arabic and English speech communities. For example, Mohamed & Omer (2000) argue that the cultural differences between Arabic and English speech communities are directly responsible for the different use of cohesive devices in the two languages. They claim that Arabic cohesion is characterised as context-based, generalised, repetition-oriented, and additive. In contrast, English cohesion is described as text-based, specified, change-oriented, and non-additive. In my view, I think that socio-cultural factors affect the cohesion of Egyptian student teachers' writing. This is represented in students' many pre-university learning experiences such as literal translation and use of written clichés in their writing.

All the aforementioned studies highlighted how Arabic interference might cause some problems for Arabic speaking students in their English writing. Many of the phonological, morphological, and structural problems that encounter Arabic speaking students are clearly stated in the literature (Suleiman, 1987). Therefore, Santos & Suleiman (1993) have provided a number of recommendations for bilingual teachers while teaching English to Arabic speaking students. First, teachers should train their students to make linguistic adjustments when learning English. They should also be able to deal with the transfer problems from Arabic to English more effectively when they recognize the syntactic differences between the two languages. Moreover, teachers should draw students' attention the sociolinguistic differences between Arabic and English and how they are culturally-bound. Finally, the patterns of rhetoric in both languages should be made clear to avoid any misunderstanding and confusion. Thus, it is the university teachers' responsibility to make sure that students are fully aware of these interferences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the difficulties encountered by Egyptian student teachers of English are not only caused by one category of the aforementioned contextual challenges, but they are caused by the interaction among all of these major and minor factors related to different contexts. Furthermore, there might be other factors that could have caused these essay writing difficulties to students in different international contexts, but the current paper is only limited to the addressed factors which are believed to be common among Egyptian students whose Arabic is their native language. Finally, discussion of these contexts was crucial in providing the reader with an interpretive portrayal of the concealed factors that might lie behind the deficiency in the Egyptian educational system in general and in essay writing in particular.

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