Second Language Writing and Culture: Issues and Challenges from the Saudi Learners' Perspective

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Abstract
The focus of this article addresses and explores English L2 writing difficulties and challenges among foundation year Saudi foreign language learners up to intermediate level students. Saudi, English foreign language (EFL) learners are commonly stereotyped as poor writers of English, the target second language (L2). How does the Saudi context uniquely un-level the playing field in contrast to non-Arab contexts in its response to personal written expression? The researcher attempts to understand and explain contextually significant challenges the Saudi learner contends with on a subtle, yet powerfully influential level. Implications are made in the conclusion of this article for focused approaches to the writing task and skill development with awareness to Saudi learner identity and history. This article is a theoretical literary review of writing and the Arab learner; and is divided into four parts. First, the context is the Saudi learner whose educational experience has taken place in Saudi Arabia; and second, the term 'Arab learner' refers to subject participants cited in research articles that may or may not specifically be from Saudi Arabia. Part one begins with an introduction to the aims and the rationale of the article. Part two describes Arab learner attitudes towards the complexity of foreign language writing. The third part defines the term 'culture' and its influence on the Arab learners' English writing development. Part four then examines the potentially contentious effects of religious conformity and cultural resistance to self-expression. The article closes with a conclusion and implications for the Arab learner'.

Keywords: The Saudi learner and writing; second language writing; Arab identity and writing; challenges for Saudi L2 writers

1. Introduction

Writing in a second language poses many problems for the majority of English as a foreign language, EFL, learners. Learners in the Saudi Arabian context will be discussed here. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Western perspectives perceive Arab EFL student writers as knowledge tellers, who report information (Cummings, 1991) rather than knowledge transformers, who synthesize information into personal and critically meaningful concepts. Arab learners perceive writing in the traditional style where it abides by rules, and a certain structure. They are unable to think of different rhetorical approach. Based on Ryan (2005), the formality of the educational system of Arabic speaking learners of English consists of traditional drills and structured written exercises. Students may have to abide to models of writing rather than write freely. Arab learners find composing in English difficult because the writing process may require them to think (Doushaq, 1980).

However, with proper contextual awareness and with appropriate writing instruction, all learners can become better writers (Hyland, 2003). Contextual issues of religious conformity, cultural resistance to self-expression, and pedagogical background affect the way Arabs perceive learning, in general, and learning to write in a second language, specifically. Therefore, negatively stereotyping Arab learners as not being good writers may need reappraisal.

1.1. Aims

The literature concerning the development of L2 English writing skills in the Saudi Arabian context is limited. Several studies have addressed writing difficulties in the development of L2 writing skills, but the challenges that Saudi learners encounter have not been discussed in depth. Difficulties for Saudi L2 language learners may arise from factors such as L1 transfer, the orthography of Arabic writing, religious conformity, cultural resistance to self-expression, fulfilment of teacher expectation based on stereotyping, and the rote learning background that is embedded in Saudi culture. The aim of this article is to give an overview of the difficulties and challenges faced by Saudi language learners when writing in English.

1.2. Rationale

The quantity of literature concerning the relationship between Arab learners' cultural context and writing skill development in English is limited. Thus, a discussion of the cultural issues and challenges of the Saudi learner will be the central focus of the paper to further the conversation of how to improve Saudi learner competence in L2 English writing.

2. The Arab Learner and Writing

The Arab World is perceived as a diaglossic speech community where language has two forms: colloquial and classical (Al-Khatib, 2000). Colloquial Arabic exists in varieties of vernacular in major Arabic speaking nation states. Classical Arabic, reflecting the language of the Quran, provides the common and standard written form (Smith, 2001). The Arabic language is closely associated with the religion, Islam (Al-Mutawa and Kailani, 1989). It is the means of communication for official government administration, religion, and education throughout the Arab world (Al-Mutawa and Kailani, 1989).

English, in contrast, has become the globalized means of communication in the field of education, as well as, in commerce. Although English is taught as a compulsory subject in all government schools as the first foreign language, in Saudi Arabia, the teaching of it is highly reliant on rote learning and the receiving of information (Smith, 2001). In the Arab context, it is

suggested that examinations mostly require the reproduction of rote-learned notes; and tasks requiring original thought or the expression of personal opinions may be considered unfair. Learners tend to be dependent on their teacher to provide modelled written passages. This prevents them from being experimental, brave and creative in their writing.

Rote memorization of basic texts continues to be a central feature of the educational system in Saudi Arabia even today, and can be traced back to the Kuttab school (Rugh, 2002). The Kuttab school focuses on Islamic religious teachings of the Quran and other religious texts through memorization. Three characteristics apparent in the Saudi education system are government regulated curriculum, the intensive study of religion, and rote memorization. This approach imposes extrinsic controls on learning processes (Smith, 2001). As a result, learner autonomy can be severely undermined, if not altogether abolished.

The international curriculum for foundation year Saudi students demands that students be able to write about themselves, their family, and a variety of topics pertaining to travel, food, daily life, etc. Students come from either the private school sector or the public school sector. Those who graduate from private schools tend to be creative and independent while those from the public schools are more dependent on the teacher as the possessor of knowledge. The current curriculum continues to focus on textbooks, leaving teachers with insufficient time to implement creative writing activities. The researcher finds this method difficult to cope with in the university setting because it promotes knowledge banking, and frustrates knowledge creation.

Richardson's (2004) classroom observations indicate that Arab students prefer prescriptive learning environments where they are told exactly what to do, thus active learning and the role of the teacher as facilitator (currently implemented in the United Arab Emirates) often causes anxiety amongst them. Students' resistance to taking more responsibility for their learning stems from previous experience during their primary and secondary schooling where passive learning and memorization are the expected ways of learning. Richardson (2004) further contends that such approaches make it difficult for students to become accustomed to efficient modes of learning later, in university. This contention is applicable in our context where most students are dependent rather than autonomous learners.

2.1. Writing in a Second Language

Writing in a second language is complex (Bowen and Mark, 1994, Kroll, 1990, Smith, 2001; Hyland, 2003). Khuwaileh (1995b) found that Arab students primarily translate ideas from their native language into English. Drawn from this point was a sort of negative transfer which resulted in unsatisfactorily written samples. Hussein and Mohammad (2012) similarly contend that Arab learners tended to compose words and sentences in their L1 and then translate them into the L2.

Hussein and Mohammad (2012) argue that topic familiarity and cultural appropriateness are important factors affecting negative L1 transfer into L2 writing. But, despite this argument, when students wrote on topics that were both familiar and culturally appropriate to them, negative L1 transfer was not prevented. Students were asked to compare and contrast, in essay form, "Qatar in the present and in the past." Student writing samples included: "Qatar is very changing between now past," "a lot of women go to job," "we speak the similarity language," and "they are different and same in many things".

Cognition plays a role where writing is learnt through a process of instruction and comprehension of the written form of the language (Fageeh, 2003). According to Byrne (1988), difficulty in writing arises from psychological, linguistic and cognitive issues. He adds that

writing becomes even more complex with inadequate teacher feedback concerning process, cohesion and organization. In contrast to the native speaker, the L2 learner must consider meta-language and the pragmatic values of grammar, vocabulary, rhetorical patterns, and mechanics which can increase levels of writing apprehension and anxiety.

Arabic orthography is a cursive system, running from right to left where only consonants and long vowels are written (Smith, 2001). Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) note that Arab students encounter major difficulties from the irregular spelling system of English in compared to the regular phonetic script of Arabic. The irregularities are exhibited in the silent letters such as the final –e as in care, bite, the –h in question words like what, why and the –gh in various words such as night, taught. Problems may also arise in homophones where two words sound alike but are spelled differently. Thus, Arab learners need to be aware of the English orthography system when learning English in high school.

Elkhafaifi (2005) posits that anxiety plays a critical role in foreign language students' classroom performance. He suggested that reducing anxiety and providing a less stressful classroom environment might enable teachers and to help students improve their classroom performance. Furthermore, Cheng (2002) investigated the relationships among students' perceptions of their second language (L2) writing anxiety and various learner differences. The findings suggest that enhancing students' motives and perception of their own writing competence are equally relevant to the development of students' writing skills.

In the researcher's pilot study, about 10 foundation year Saudi students volunteers were interviewed about the common writing problems faced in the classroom. Half of the students studied in private institutes and the other half studied in public ones. They were asked 2 questions regarding their common problems in writing and about their needs in the classroom. Students experienced writing difficulties in using appropriate vocabulary, writing in correct spelling, following accurate grammatical rules and establishing cohesion in writing. Many students claim to have "the ideas" but have neither the L2 skills nor the pragmatic understanding to express them. Most students are self-conscious of making mistakes and this is a contributing factor to why few students are able to initiate a writing task without the assurances of explicit step-by-step instruction. This dependency is relative to their rote learning background, where 'knowledge banking' is teacher and subject-centered.

2.2. The Complexity of the Writing Skill

Many studies reveal the complexity of the writing skills of Arab learners. For those engaged in learning to write in a second language, the complexity of mastering writing skills is compounded by the difficulties apparent in learning a second language and the effect of first language literacy skills (Kroll, 1990). In their study on the Writing Ability of Arab Learners, Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) note common problems in the participants' L1 and L2 performance. Problems arose in the areas of subject and verb agreement, emphasis on certain tenses, irregular past tense forms, paragraph unity, and, coherence and cohesion. Fifty-five percent of students wrote compositions in their L1 with no appropriate logical linking of ideas, and lacked the skills to organise their ideas. Even L1 sentences posed to be major obstacles.

Similarly, Ahmed (2010) investigates cohesion and coherence problems in EFL essay writing in the Egyptian context. In his study, Ahmed (2010) reports that the students faced difficulties writing thesis statements, topic sentences, transitioning of ideas, and the sequencing of ideas. Doushaq (1986) conducted a study investigating the writing problems of Jordanian Arab university students, and noted that the main problems lay at the sentence and paragraph level, and

that there were also problems of content. The research confirmed weakness in L2 writing was due to an original weakness in the mastery of Arabic writing skills.

Khuweileh (1995) found that Arab students usually think to prepare their ideas in their native language and then translate them into English, which results in a negative transfer of unsatisfactorily written samples. More recently, Ridha (2012) used an error analysis study to investigate the effect of EFL learners' L1 on their written English. After describing and diagnosing the writing errors of Iraqi EFL college students, she found most of the errors could be attributed to L1 transfer, as can be seen in the following example: "I cut a promise to help other people." Many of the learners relied on their mother tongue to express ideas.

In a different context, Wang (1999) investigates the use of references in Chinese (L1) and their effect on cohesion in English (L2). He figures out that EFL learners commit errors because they think in their native language and that they translate their thoughts into L2 or foreign language. Thus, it may be critical to comprehend the learners' cultural background and how it affects their writing in the first and second language.

3. Culture and Writing

Hyland (2003) explains that cultural factors are reasons for writing differences, and that there are numerous ways to form meanings. With those who are inexperienced, and lack experience about other cultures, there is a danger of ethnocentrism about learning to write, or regarding other writers as deficient. He emphasizes that an appreciation for writing differences, can facilitate cross-cultural understandings that can help us perceive that writing difficulties are not problems inherent in students themselves. By openly addressing students' L1 writing experiences, rhetorical styles and contrasting them with the expectations of target writing communities, teachers can make both instruction and genres applicable to context. Indeed, such awareness would increase the comprehension of the Arab learner in the classroom.

Social sciences' definition of culture refers to three aspects: "(a) the entire or total way of life of people, including a shared social heritage, visions, of social reality, value orientations, beliefs, customs, norms, traditions, skills, and the like (b) artistic achievements; and (c) knowledge or thought and the sciences (Barakat, 1993, p. 41)." According to El-Araby (1983), cultures are often so dynamic and complex that they defy scientific description and categorization.

Hofstede (1980) perceives culture and its traditions as learned thinking habits: in the form of collective programming of the mind which sets an individual group in contrast to another (Hofstede, 1980), and it is this early programming that causes people to react differently in similar situations. Hofstede's model may be applicable to Saudi learners. His research proposed four cultural framework dimensions which he labelled as "power distance (from small to large), collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance (from weak to strong)" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 14). Larger power distance reflects an acceptance of unequal power distribution without question, regarding it as normal. Uncertainty avoidance relates to the means by which cultures select, adapt, and cope with uncertainties. Individualism-collectivism relates to a person's relationship with the larger social groups of which he or she is a part.

Due to the tribal nature of Arab society, individuals typically put aside personal aspirations for the good of the collective. Specific circumstances depend on every individual's family and rearing. Some families favour personal aspirations as a priority, but generally, Arab families are strongly group oriented. The collectivist group tendency suggests they feel more comfortable when they are in unified situations rather than individualistic ones. This found comfort zone, rather than a zone where they have to think independently stems from family dynamics and radiates into the

educational system, according to Sidani and Thornberry (2010) may not be flexible to change and development.

Second language instruction often addresses cultural issues (Harklau, 1999). For instance, ESL teachers employ L2 cultural activities to demonstrate different cultural contexts in order to help students develop a degree of pragmatic literacy that will guide language construction and decision making competence. Research on written discourse highlights variations of the prose structure manifested in rhetorical style, purpose, task, topic and audience (Purves, 1988). Frequently, the L1 modus operandi appears to be transferred into L2 writing. Thus, addressing cultural issues help to socialize L2 learners regarding embedded cultural norms in the academic texts of the target language. Though teaching culture may not be an explicit goal of ESL writing courses, cultural patterns and values nevertheless influences the character of the content through which second language writing skills are taught. ESL writing classrooms hence serve as arenas for cultural orientation, and ESL teachers often serve not only as writing instructors, but also as explainers and mediators of culture and cultural values.

Saudi students face a new culture, as is apparent in their Oxford series textbooks that bear a predominately Western tone in terms of life style and tradition, interlaced with some modern global themes. As we are now living in a globalized and technologically connected world, students are accustomed to many themes. However, they do not show the curiosity to know more; they are accepting of the knowledge as it is. Some may be curious to ask but still resist asking. There is an element of hesitation in their reactions to certain themes such as religion, politics, and of course, taboo topics. This hesitation is further legitimized as instructors are themselves reminded to avoid these issues, as well. Some instructors are willing to carefully approach boundaries while others limit expression and discourse due to their own thinking and fears. Modern topics naturally inspire free-thinking and debate, yet when classroom discussions do not broach these topics, the opportunities to generate opinions and ideas are thwarted before students and teachers understand the reason for their frustration.

3.1. The Arab Way of Writing: Contrastive Rhetoric

Kaplan (1966) states that speakers of Arabic transfer rhetorical patterns from their mother tongue into their English writing. Ibrahim (1978) explains that language transfer patterns are not restricted to Arab learners, but apply to all EFL learners. Purves (1988) suggests that ESL students should first comprehend the rhetorical patterns of their native language to better understand the rhetorical patterns of the English language. He adds that differences among rhetorical patterns do not represent differences in cognitive ability, but rather in cognitive style.

In order to comprehend the term culture, one must comprehend the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis (CRH) which has inspired a great deal of research on writing across cultures and on the teaching of writing in English to speakers of other languages (Leki, 1991). As Connor (1996) explains:

> *"an area of research in second language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second language writers and by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them ...contrastive rhetoric maintains that language and writing are cultural phenomena. As a direct consequence, each language has rhetorical conventions to it."(p. 5)*

Contrastive rhetoric was intended to facilitate creative use in expressing one's ideas in text in the second language (Panetta, 2001). Additionally, Baker (2003) notes that a contrastive approach to

culture should aid and enhance the learners' understanding of the target L2 culture as well as its language. If language and culture are inseparable, learners in the act of acquiring a new language will also acquire a new culture. As learners' develop understanding of the foreign language they may come to understand other values and meanings familiar to the target culture that are alien to their own. Yet, their understanding of these values and meanings may still remain different from that of the native speaker. This leads Kramsch (1993) to suggest that foreign language learning takes place in a third place that the learner must make for himself or herself between their first culture (C1) and the foreign one (C2).

Within the Asian context learners are often exposed to a limited range of encounters with English language speaking culture through Western media and brief encounters with tourists, which can easily lead to unrepresentative stereotypical impressions. Teachers are asked to help learners become aware of these stereotypical images through classroom discussions and through the use of English language media (Wongbiasaj, 2003). Kramsch (1993) highlights the constant conflict between the personal meanings learners' try to communicate and with the larger social context in which those meanings are expressed. Arab learners may still find themselves in a dilemma of whether to embrace the new Western culture or to abide exclusively with their own culture.

The idea of cultural differences in rhetoric has been of interest to writing teachers since Kaplan's (1966) study of 600 L2 student essays (cited in Hyland, 2003, p. 46). Kaplan found that students from different backgrounds systematically identified and developed their ideas in ways different to English native speakers. Compared with the essentially linear pattern of English paragraphs, he suggested that Arabic speakers produced texts based on a series of parallel coordinate "oriental" clauses, used an indirect approach, and came to the point only at the end. Patai (1983) states that repetition, overemphasis, stylistic elaboration, and stylistic exaggeration characterize Arab rhetoric. The western mode of argumentation is based on syllogistic model of proof, while Arabic argumentation is characterised by repetition, which is deeply rooted in the language (Barakat, 1993). Kaplan (1987) cited the influence of L1 syntactic discourse elements and prior education over L2 writing.

3.2. *Knowledge telling/ knowledge transforming*
As mentioned previously, Arab writers are mostly perceived as following the knowledge telling model whereas western writers are perceived as knowledge transforming (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Cumming 1989). Based on Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) theory of writing expertise, Cumming (1989) refers to an anecdote about an Arab learner, Abdullah, who demonstrates a knowledge-telling approach to writing where he tells the knowledge he has about his subject, but he does not refine that knowledge to transform his thinking. People who write from a knowledge telling model in their mother tongue tend to approach writing this way in a second language, as well (Cumming, 1995), and this may be applicable to Asian learners in general. From my own experience, I have always written based on the knowledge telling model, because in my undergraduate years, we were not taught to write critically. It is a skill that needs to be learned.

Hatim (1997) notes that modern standard Arabic tends to prefer Thorough Argumentation: thesis-substantiation-conclusion, while English prefers the Balance: thesis-opposition-substantiation-conclusion. In other words, an Arab writer shows a preference for a persuasive style where arguments for a particular point-of-view are accumulated, until the writer feels he or she has proven his or her point; while the Western argument considers both sides of

point-of-views that may even be oppositional to the thesis, to eventually reach a conclusion. In short, Arab learners persuade by means of their descriptiveness and judgement. This could be explained by Arab students' rote learning background, as they may have not had an adequate experience in developing problem solving skills necessary to demonstrate critical analysis.

Ballard and Clanchy (1991) point out that these attitudes toward learning range on a continuum, from respect for knowledge conservation to considering its extension. This could also describe the process of a novice writer transitioning from basic writing ability to developing higher order thinking skills that are capable of being critical and argumentative. In the same way, Figure 1 displayed in page 29_which is based on critiques or stereotypes of Asian learners as knowledge telling (Hyland, 2003)_ shows the different phases that the Saudi learner processes beginning as knowledge tellers till employing a new rhetorical writing approach and reaching the needed critical thinking level.

However, the researcher contends that an environment inclusive of stimulating content and effective teaching methodology can indeed produce competent writers in both L1 and L2. Student interviews conducted in the researcher's pilot study regarding writing needs, revealed students had extra writing practise in private schools, but those who studied in government schools had not.

Based on the researcher's past experiences as a student, teacher and parent, private schools reliably build-in opportunities for students to participate in creative activities such as art class and extracurricular activities like cooking, photography, and drama. These considerations to exploration and discovery are in sharp contrast to the flat abiding to of curricular subjects and textbook memorization.

Many Asian cultures, however, prefer maintaining and reproducing existing knowledge by memorization and imitation. Both memorisation and imitation demonstrate respect for the knowledge, but may seem to the unaware teacher like the copying others' ideas. According to Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987), this is "knowledge telling" which, to them, represents immature writing. Then knowledge telling may connote copying, plagiarism and memorization. The learner's objective is to recall what he or she can. If cultural considerations are ignored, teachers may see this as plagiarism or repetition (Leki, & Carson, 1997). In a review of cultural conceptions of self, Markus and Kitayama (1991) contrast the Western view that emphasizes the separateness and uniqueness of persons, with many non-Western cultures, who insist more on a sense of community. A commonly held truism in writing pedagogy is that texts must display their author's voice, and concepts such as voice and textual ownership are familiar. However, such concepts may create problems for L2 writers from more collectivist, interdependently oriented cultures (Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999). For this reason, second language learners in the non-western cultures might find it difficult to express ideas freely in writing. They might find it difficult to challenge accepted knowledge in their effort to create new ideas.

Educational processes in Western contexts tend to reinforce analytical questioning, and maintain an evaluative stance toward knowledge by encouraging students to be critical and recombine existing sources of knowledge, to challenge traditional wisdom, and to form their own points-of-view. Students are often asked to analyze problems, to reflect on arguments, and to redraft their ideas, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). In the Western classroom, "good writing" generally reflects the writer's individual creativity and critical thinking, and teachers frequently perceive their role as helping to develop these skills in their students. Teachers often expect writers to reflect their voice through their judgements, display their knowledge, and give their opinions. Similarly, Carroll (2002) suggests that students have to learn to write differently, to

produce new, more complicated forms addressing challenging topics with greater depth, complexity, and rhetorical sophistication. In the Arab culture, the students think of writing as transmitting ideas only rather than rhetorical organization. It was founded that there is a clear absence of students' personal voice in writing as they lack critical thinking and just paraphrase what has already been written before.

Asian writers transmit the knowledge of important thinkers as homage of respect and thus show respect for learning by passing it on to their readers. The hallmark of Western excellence in writing demands that the writer's voice be heard in a multi-resourced debate and argument, and such copying of other's ideas are perceived as carelessness and as plagiarism (Hyland, 2003). Pennycook (1996) discusses cross-cultural differences of opinion on plagiarism based on different cultural and educational backgrounds. A variety of cultural perspectives towards knowledge, texts and the self are indeed major factors to be considered in learning and writing. Students may be operating from different positions than their teachers about texts, authorship, and reader expectations which mean that clarity of objectives must be emphasized.

Various cultural beliefs about the nature of knowledge, and, learning and writing are not the only differences between writing in a first and second language. Culture also affects the classroom experience through student expectations concerning instruction and with the meanings they attach to the writing activities they are asked to perform. One influential theory of learning emphasized the idea of "situated cognition" (Lave and Wenger, 1991), that the setting and the activity of learning are inseparable from learning itself. In this sense, L2 writing instruction should be seen as an expression of culture. Moreover, because educational contexts are quite diverse students' previous learning experiences must be given consideration in the interest of the learner who may not have had adequate preparation, scheme or scaffolding to take on certain writing tasks and assignments (Hyland, 2003).

4. The Influence of Culture on Writing in L2

Kramsch (1993) posits that culture and language are intertwined. The second learner is exposed to a new culture through its food, beliefs, ways of life, and societal norms. The learner unconsciously becomes a part of it, and enters a stage of acculturation. Kramsch refers to the inseparable nature of culture and language as, "a single universe or domain of experience" (Kramsch, 1991, p. 227). In her book, Context and Culture in Language Teaching, Kramsch (1993) adamantly states that cultural awareness while learning the target second language aids in the attainment of L2 proficiency. In her view, second and foreign language learners necessarily become learners of the second culture because language cannot be learned without understanding the cultural context in which it is used.

4.1. Cultural Resistance

Research studies suggested that there exist cross-cultural differences in students' writings. In the field of contrastive rhetoric, the investigations have shown that multicultural and multilingual students tend to write differently from the native writers. In analyzing compositions written by second language students of English, Kaplan concluded that the differences he found were not simply grammatical or surface matters, but underlying rhetorical differences, including "paragraph order and structure" (Kaplan, 1987, p. 277). Furthermore, he made a comparison between ESL cultural practices and typical Western ones and found interesting results related to rhetorical trends and deviations (Piper, 1985). As an illustration, student writers from Anglo-European languages seemed to prefer linear developments, however student writers from Asian

languages seemed to take a more indirect approach, coming to their points at the end of their papers.

Research is emerging regarding the many aspects of foreign language learning' effect on the interpretative principles and paradigms of the learner's natal culture where the second language learner's cognitive ability is fundamentally affected by his or her culturally defined worldviews, beliefs, and assumptions (Kramsch, 1991). Cultural factors shape students' background understandings or schema knowledge and it's likely to have a considerable impact on their writing performance (Hyland, 2003). Simultaneously, he notes that writing topics are potentially culture-sensitive and may be inappropriate for some groups.

There are prohibitions, shared in Saudi Arabia and in other Islamic nations, on the topics of religion and family that cannot be discussed in the classroom. El-Araby (1983) notes that non-Arab teachers should be aware of cultural prohibitions to avoid inconsiderate references to the Arab learners' values. These topic prohibitions and other issues originate from conservative Islamic teachings that prescribes education to proceed cautiously, "without promoting morals and customs which are contradictory to our religious beliefs" (Shehatah, 1998, p.24 cited in Khafaji, 2004, p. 42). The Saudi learners' adherence to religion and conservative values prevents them from accepting a new culture with open arms.

Zhang (2004) did a study on the influence of topic choice, individual (cultural) stance and text types in different cultures. He notes that if the topic seems to be out of the student's cultural context, then he or she will find it difficult to express him or herself. Culture provides a set of values writers use in choosing how they write about a given topic, and as a result of these choices, writers produce quite different text types about different topics. Topics influence the decisions the writer makes and contextualize how the writer chooses to write, shaping the writer's view and stance that are then projected into the writing.

Based on the researcher's experience in the writing classroom, some Saudi learners find it difficult even to speak about certain topics of Western culture, and some resist embracing the new culture (Western) because of their sense of loyalty towards their religion (Islam), because Westerners are negatively perceived as open minded and liberal. Therefore, when it comes to writing in English, the activity of writing becomes even more complex. Corbett (2001) illustrates examples of repressed, suppressed and overt rhetorical conflict students face when they attempt to write in rhetorical forms that contradict or marginalize the ideas apparent in their native rhetoric. For instance, Corbett (2001) describes suppressed rhetoric when a Japanese student thinks it is unfair to write about any negative issue concerning his or her country; and when a Muslim student only talks of religion.

Also, in the researcher's experience, topics related to music and relationships have been sensitive subjects for some of the Saudi learners. Religion, politics, status, death and sex can be taboo topics, while the fact that "privacy" is not a universal concept means that writing about personal or family issues may seem intrusive to some learners (El-Araby, 1983; Barakat, 1993; Hyland, 2003). Since cultures attribute their own meanings to events and relationships, not all writers will be pleased to take a particular topic and write critically about it. Selection of writing topics can be sensitively approached with awareness for L2 writers when teachers understand the context they're working in. Awareness for the learners' and the teacher's cultural differences can help teachers cultivate different expectation for learners' out-put, resulting in more cooperative teaching and learning. This awareness will also facilitate the teacher's finding new ways to encourage and help students overcome years of educational conditioning which has barred creativity

4.2. Religious Conformity

Saudi Arabia is widely known as an Islamic country. In the Arab world, Islam permeates all of life, guiding tradition and contemporary lifestyle issues (Barakat, 1993). It is significant that the student has the Islamic creed as part of their life, and that students are furnished with Muslim values, teachings and ideals." (Ministry of Education, 1970, cited in Khafaji, 2004, p. 10). Some Saudi learners note that since English is a Western language, it may connote Western ways of thinking and beliefs which contradict the teachings of Islam (Ozog, 1989). As mentioned previously, this implies limiting topics appropriate for Saudi students to write to. Arab learners prefer not to lose their identity nor to lose their distinctive religious outlook, or be influenced by Western ways of teaching (Husain and Ashraf, 1979).

The beliefs and values of the Arab, Islamic society do not readily agree to the transfer of Western teacher education concepts and models (Richardson, 2004). Clarke and Otaky (2006) contradict Richardson's view regarding the Arab society by noting the opposite. From my point of view, there are still those who want to retain tradition and are unwilling to accept change, but there are also those who are moving forward by embracing new cultures without any kind of resistance.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The Arab learner is currently faced with many challenges in the age of globalisation. As pinpointed in the previous section, some Arab learners are faced with religious conformity, strict tradition as well as cultural resistance to certain topics of the West when it comes to writing in English. However, Arab learners need to keep up with the age of globalisation. Al-Essa (2006) notes the relevance of the English language as playing an important role worldwide as an effective tool for modernization, and as the language of science and technology. This is because the global economy, international business/commerce, science, technology and computer literacy are dominated by the USA at present. In this respect, as suggested by Howard Community College (1999), students must learn global competencies, embrace change and recognize the interconnectedness of all people with different life styles, backgrounds, beliefs and cultures in order to be effective in their learning and in their lives. Hence, approaching these relationships with tolerance would enable EFL learners to be creative and effective in their learning.

In the age of globalisation, Arab learners who experience resistance towards some topics or different cultures must practice cultural tolerance. Stephens (2002, p. 4) notes that "cultural tolerance is the ability of an individual to respect the beliefs, customs, and practices of a group or a race of people other than one's own." Vogt (1997) defined tolerance as the ability of individuals to endure things they do not necessarily like, even along the lines of cultural differences or diversity. With these points in consideration, students may learn to consider embracing the new culture with an open mind rather than resistance. If students do not learn to practice cultural tolerance they will not be receptive to learn anything new from any culture. Thus, they will just appreciate their own culture which will slow or even impede their learning.

The role of learning materials in the Arab classroom plays a significant role in embracing other cultures. Khafaji (2004) notes that the high school textbooks in the Arab context are purely designed in an Arabic setting since there is a need for learners to talk about their own culture with visitors. However, this will not encourage Arab learners to be exposed to other cultures. Another deeper reason is that such materials are usually designed to help students become aware of their own cultural identity. This could be the reason some Arab learners find some of the trends in Western culture difficult to embrace, because they have grown complacent in familiar

surroundings. Thus, when learners are confronted with different lifestyles and religions, some might find it difficult to accept.

It is hoped that this study might have provided a general view of the Arab learner, the common difficulties in writing, and a better comprehension of the influence of culture on writing. It has been noted earlier that language and culture are intertwined (Kramsch, 1991). An understanding and an awareness of how Arab learners write provide a grasp of how Arab learners learn. However, as Hyland (2003) explains we ought to not stereotype writers depending on their culture since it really depends on the writer's individual context, learning and past experience. Because of the Arab's strong religious background, a collectivist culture, some Arab learners may resist writing about certain topics, and prefer to write about familiar and general topics such as nature and country.

Though Arab learners are faced with obstacles in writing, competency can be achieved given proper exposure to appropriate materials and instruction. Transitioning learners from their rote learning background and moving them away from a memorizing strategy towards a creative movement is a major undertaking. If they are guided with the right supervision and made aware of their weaknesses, learners can manage to overcome the complexities of writing. Another challenge embedded in the students' educational background is that they have only been trained to follow a strictly structured format in writing which is similar to an audio-lingual method as explained by (Khafaji, 2004). Also, Saudi students are limited in exposure to restricted resources such as books and are subsequently limited in their thoughts, and are not be globally oriented. Therefore, it is quite hard for some students with such background to be in the knowledge transforming mode (Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), but again if they are given the correct instruction and environment, they will undoubtedly perform better in writing (Hyland, 2003).

In summary, ESL learners need deeper understanding guidance and support from their teachers. The organisation of the ESL/EFL writings is influenced by the writer's cultural background. By being flexible to our judgements, being explicit about our expectations and giving reasons for our teaching methods are significant components to the learning process (Hyland, 2003). Importantly, writing in a second language is similar to exploring an unfamiliar territory. Teacher commitment is required in helping students overcome their resistance to writing through conflicting ideologies in a multicultural world is indeed crucial (Corbett, 2001). Teachers could find ways to make the learner comprehend writing in L2 and to take it in gradual steps. Also, teachers may be in a position to scaffold the learner till they become autonomous writers. Finally, with awareness for the Saudi learner, writing and culture has been brought to light and may prove beneficial to readers who are interested in learning about the obstacles that Saudi writers face.

Implications for the Saudi learner:
1. To be brave to search and experiment.
2. To develop self-autonomy in searching for ideas, and not be completely dependent on the teacher.
3. To achieve a transition from learner dependence to learner autonomy.
4. To know about new cultures and be inquisitive.
5. To overcome religious conformity by being flexible and having the ability to change and embrace new cultures without reservation.

Implications for the Writing EFL teacher:
1. To encourage activities that promote learner autonomy.

2. To motivate the student to be creative and think outside the box.
3. To encourage students to accept and appreciate different cultures, not just their own culture.
4. To reduce language anxiety in the writing classroom by providing interesting motivating materials for the students, and to translate when necessary when explaining instructions in writing. An awareness of the anxiety in writing will also help the learner to overcome this difficulty and able to write with confidence (Chan and Wu, 2004).
5. To be caring, patient and supportive when students feel frustrated to write and unable to find interesting ideas.
6. To scaffold the learner in all stages of writing.
7. To be aware of the learners' various learning styles, proficiency levels and motivation so that to design writing activities that would be appropriate and applicable to visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners.
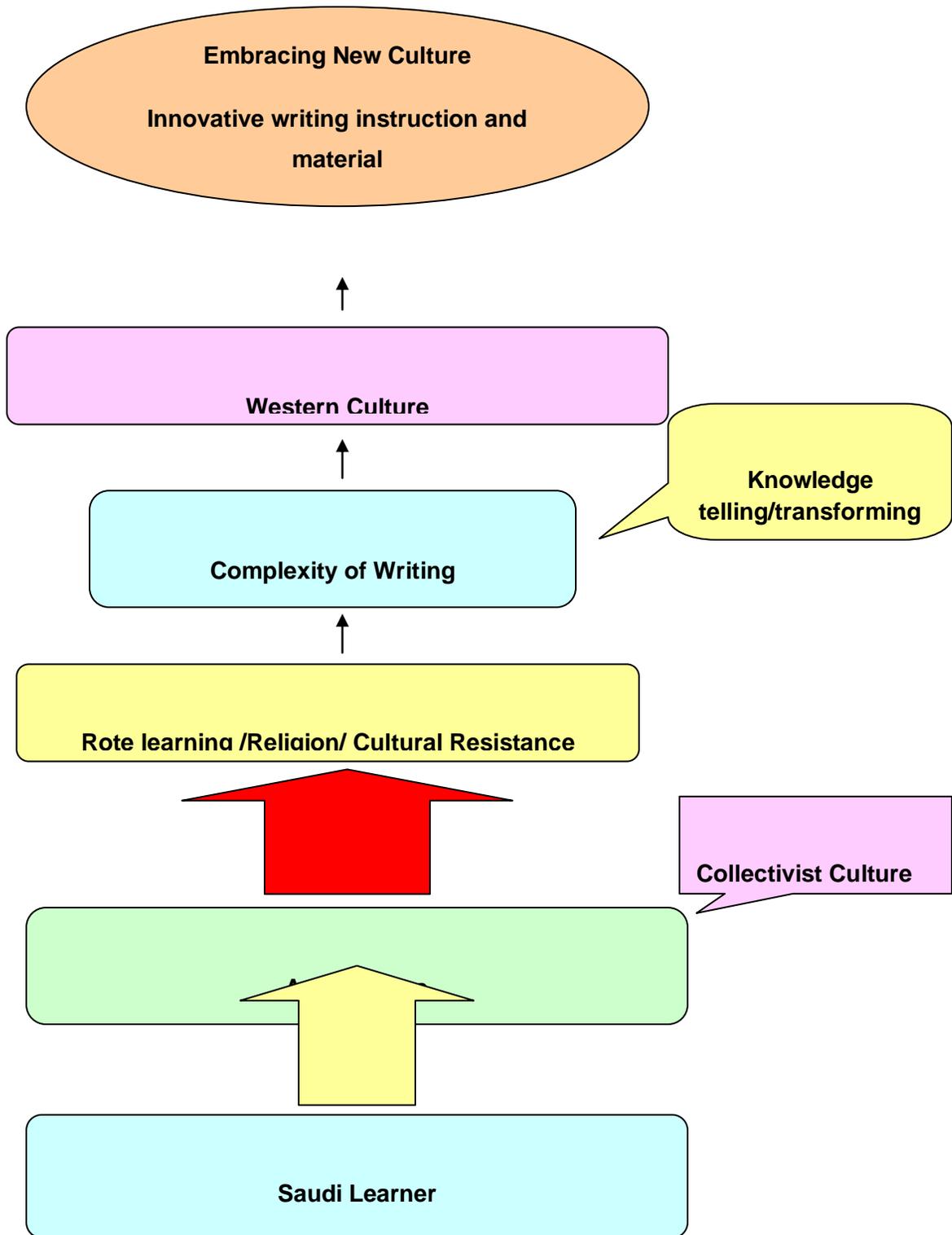
Figure 1. *The Saudi learner and the writing challenges.*

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