The EFL Essay Writing Difficulties of Egyptian Student Teachers of English: 
Implications for Essay Writing Curriculum and Instruction

Submitted by

Mr. ABDEL HAMID MOHAMED ABDEL HAMID AHMED

To

The University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

(February, 2011)

This thesis is available for library on the understanding that it is copyright material
and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper
acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been
identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for
the award of a degree by this or any other university.
ABSTRACT

The current study is conducted with the aim of investigating the essay writing difficulties of Egyptian student teachers of English. More specifically, it attempts to fulfil the following three aims: explore the focuses of teaching essay writing at one of the pioneering faculties of education in Egypt; investigate the different essay writing practices used by Egyptian essay writing teachers from teachers as well as their students’ perspectives; and identify the essay writing difficulties encountered by Egyptian student teachers of English at the concerned faculty of education from both students and their teachers’ perspectives. The current study adopts an interpretive methodology that uses a sequential mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis. Therefore, I administered a questionnaire to 165 student teachers of English and 7 essay writing teachers, conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 14 student teachers of English and 7 essay writing teachers, and observed nine essay writing sessions of different teachers. Data is analysed quantitatively using SPSS descriptive statistics and qualitatively using exploratory content analysis. Findings of the current study reveal that there are eleven focuses of teaching essay writing at the concerned faculty of education. These focuses have been classified into four main categories: Mechanics/Language, Content, Structure/Layout and Practising Writing. Findings also shed light on the essay writing teachers’ practices in relation to planning, teaching, feedback and assessment. Finally, findings show that student teachers of English encounter the following difficulties in their essay writing: planning difficulties, organisational difficulties including coherence, cohesion, and stylistic difficulties, lexical problems, and technical difficulties including grammar, punctuation, spelling and revision and editing. According to the above mentioned findings, a theoretical writing model has been devised and a pedagogical process genre approach to teaching EFL essay writing in Egypt has been proposed. Implications for essay writing curriculum planning and instruction are also included. Finally, suggestions for further research are provided.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to thank Allah (God) who helped me at all times complete this piece of work successfully. My special thanks should go to the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education and the Egyptian Cultural Centre and Education Bureau in London which sponsored me during my four year of full-time study for the PhD degree at Exeter University in the UK.

Second, I would like to thank my first supervisor, Dr. Salah Troudi for his academic, professional and psychological support throughout the journey of this thesis. His academic support is invaluable in terms of providing reflective, critical and constructive feedback on each and every chapter in my thesis. He also encouraged me to publish some research papers and to disseminate my research findings in two international conferences in Canada and USA. Professionally, he wrote references for different academic and teaching jobs to which I applied in the UK. Psychologically, he supported me to settle down since the first day I met him, throughout my MPhil modules until the last day before my thesis submission. I really appreciate his help.

In addition, my thanks are extended to my second supervisor, Dr. Jill Cadorath who saved no effort to help me finish this work in the best possible form. She guided me throughout this journey of discovery with precious and insightful views about each chapter, without which this thesis would not have been well-organised. She was always there for me when I needed help whether by attending my tutorials, responding to my e-mails and phone calls, or revising my chapters.

In addition, I would like to extend special thanks to all student teachers of English and the seven essay writing teachers at the concerned faculty of education who participated in the current study. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Lamiaa and my two children Alaa and Esraa who stood by me in the hard and good times. My wife used to urge me to improve the quality of my work before submitting it to my supervisors. She always provided me with supportive and encouraging environment where I could work diligently to finish my thesis on time.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my late Dad, Mum and my wife

who greatly shaped my life and always dreamt to see me a PhD holder.
# Table of Contents

## CHAPTER I
**RATIONALE AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

1.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 14
1.2 Problem of the Study ........................................................................................................ 15
1.3 Rationale of the Study ....................................................................................................... 16
1.4 Aims of the Study ............................................................................................................ 19
1.5 Significance of the Study .................................................................................................. 19
1.6 Questions of the Study ..................................................................................................... 21
1.7 Terminology of the Study ................................................................................................ 22
   1.7.1 EFL Essay Writing ..................................................................................................... 22
   1.7.2 Essay Writing Difficulties ......................................................................................... 23
1.8 Overview of the Study ..................................................................................................... 23

## CHAPTER II
**CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

2.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 25
2.2 The Nature and Philosophy of the Educational System in Egypt .................................. 25
2.3 Teacher Education in Egypt ........................................................................................... 29
   2.3.1 Problems and Issues Facing Egyptian Teacher Education .................................... 30
2.4 English Language Teaching in Egypt ............................................................................. 32
   2.4.1 English Language Teaching at the Pre-University Stages ...................................... 32
   2.4.2 EFL Teacher Education in Egypt ............................................................................ 36
2.5 Prospective EFL Teacher Education .............................................................................. 37
   2.5.1. ELT Pedagogic Component .................................................................................. 37
   2.5.2 ELT Cultural Component ....................................................................................... 38
   2.5.3 ELT Academic Component ................................................................................... 38
   2.5.3.1 Essay and Linguistic Drills .................................................................................. 38
2.6 Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 43

## CHAPTER III
**LITERATURE REVIEW**

3.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 44
3.2 Theory and Research in ESL/EFL Writing ..................................................................... 44
   3.2.1 Approaches to Teaching ESL/EFL Writing ............................................................. 48
   3.2.2 ESL/EFL Writers’ Uniqueness ................................................................................. 54
   3.2.3 Writing Defined ....................................................................................................... 55
   3.2.4 Purposes of Writing ................................................................................................ 56
   3.2.5. Importance of EFL/L2 Writing .............................................................................. 57
3.3 Factors Affecting EFL/ESL Writing Development .............................................58
  3.3.1 Learning-Related Factors ............................................................................58
  3.3.2 Instructional-Related Factors ......................................................................63
  3.3.3 Socio-Cultural-Related Factors ..................................................................77
3.4 EFL Writers’ Difficulties ....................................................................................81
  3.4.1 Prewriting Difficulties ................................................................................82
  3.4.2 Coherence Difficulties ................................................................................86
  3.4.3 Cohesion Difficulties ..................................................................................88
  3.4.4 Lexical Difficulties .....................................................................................94
  3.4.5 Technical Writing Difficulties .....................................................................98
3.5 Conclusion .........................................................................................................105

CHAPTER IV
METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN
4.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................106
4.2 The Philosophical Assumptions ..........................................................................106
  4.2.1 The Ontological Assumptions ...................................................................106
  4.2.2 Theoretical Framework ..............................................................................107
4.3 Research Methodology ......................................................................................110
  4.3.1 Research Methods .....................................................................................110
  4.3.2 Data Collection Methods ..........................................................................111
  4.3.3 Research Procedures ..................................................................................115
  4.3.4 Trustworthiness .........................................................................................117
4.4 Development of Research Instruments ..............................................................120
  4.4.1 Development of Questionnaire ..................................................................120
  4.4.2 Development of Interview .........................................................................125
  4.4.3 Development of Observation Sheet .............................................................127
4.5 Data Analysis ......................................................................................................130
  4.5.1 Analysis of Questionnaires .........................................................................133
  4.5.2 Analysis of Interviews .................................................................................133
  4.5.3 Analysis of Observation Records .................................................................135
4.6 Ethical Issues ......................................................................................................136
4.7 Limitations ........................................................................................................137
4.8 Conclusion ..........................................................................................................138
CHAPTER V
DATA ANALYSIS & RESEARCH FINDINGS
5.1 Introduction.................................................................................................................. 139
5.2 The Focuses of Teaching Essay Writing at the University Level in Egypt................. 139
  5.2.1 Mechanics/Language ......................................................................................... 141
  5.2.2 Content ................................................................................................................. 145
  5.2.3 Structure ............................................................................................................... 149
  5.2.4 Practising Writing .............................................................................................. 154
5.3 Teachers’ Practices................................................................................................. 160
  5.3.1 Planning Procedures ......................................................................................... 162
  5.3.2 Teaching .............................................................................................................. 166
  5.3.3 Feedback Practices ............................................................................................ 178
  5.3.4 Assessment Practices ....................................................................................... 182
5.4 Essay Writing Difficulties .................................................................................... 191
  5.4.1 Prewriting Difficulties ...................................................................................... 193
  5.4.2 Organisational Difficulties ............................................................................... 197
  5.4.3 Stylistic Difficulties .......................................................................................... 205
  5.4.4 Lexical Difficulties ............................................................................................ 208
  5.4.5 Technical Difficulties ....................................................................................... 211
  5.4.6 Other Difficulties ............................................................................................. 220
  5.4.7 Emerging Themes ............................................................................................. 222
5.5 Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 231

CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY
6.1 Introduction.................................................................................................................. 232
6.2 Learning Factors........................................................................................................ 233
  6.2.1 Psychological Challenges .................................................................................. 233
  6.2.2 Proficiency in English ....................................................................................... 236
  6.2.3 Students’ Prior Knowledge ............................................................................... 237
6.3 Instructional Factors .................................................................................................. 238
  6.3.1 Teachers’ Qualifications and Experience ......................................................... 238
  6.3.2 Teachers’ Negative Attitudes towards Teaching EFL Essay Writing ......... 239
  6.3.3 Teachers’ Professional Development ............................................................... 239
  6.3.4 Course Description and Assessment ................................................................. 241
6.4 Institutional Factors .................................................................................................. 243
  6.4.1 Teaching Workload ........................................................................................... 243
  6.4.2 Teaching Large Classes ..................................................................................... 244
  6.4.3 Course Duration ............................................................................................... 245