An Exploratory Study of the Interplay between EFL Writing Teacher Cognition and Pedagogical Practices in the Palestinian University Context

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Abstract

This multiple case study explores some intricate connections between the cognition and the pedagogical practices of eight English as a foreign language (EFL) writing instructors over one academic year in two Palestinian universities. The study also examines how their cognition and pedagogical practices interplayed with the ecological contexts in the setting in which they taught. Integral to the study was the use of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, stimulated-recall interviews, and course document review. Constructivist grounded theory informed the data analysis. Results revealed that the instructors' cognition about second language (L2) writing, about teaching and learning L2 writing, and about their professional roles influences their teaching approach, curriculum design, and classroom assessment methods. The findings also stressed the role of the ecological contexts as a mediating force influencing the interaction between cognition and practices. The classroom context was identified as the most significant barrier to teaching writing; however, gaining access to L2 writing scholarship was viewed as the most significant facilitator for implementing effective practices in the L2 writing classroom. The findings showed that the instructors' cognition about themselves as professionals could mitigate the impact of the ecological constraints hindering L2 writing instruction. This finding of the role of cognition may explain why teachers working in the same context under the same conditions teach differently. The implications of these findings include the importance of encouraging EFL writing instructors to reflect upon their cognition, pedagogical practices, and working contexts and the need for introducing recommended models of L2 writing instruction in tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Grounded theory, contextual factors, L2 writing, teacher cognition

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Introduction

Second language (L2) writing research has shown that teachers' cognition has a significant impact on the way they teach in the classroom (Burns, 1992; Lee, 2018; Shi & Cumming, 1995). Borg (2006) defines teacher cognition as "teachers' beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions, perspectives about teaching, teachers, learning, students, subject matter, curricula, materials, instructional activities, and self, colleagues, assessments, and context" (p. 283). Studies of teacher cognition have helped capture the complexities of who teachers are, what they know and believe, how they learn to teach, and how they teach in diverse contexts (Johnson, 2006). However, the existing research on L2 writing teachers' cognition has been limited. One limitation is the context of research. Much of the research has been carried out in developed countries with native English teachers teaching small groups of motivated adult students (Borg, 2006). Studies investigating the cognition and pedagogical practices of teachers working in foreign language university settings have also been limited (Borg, 2009). Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008) call for more research to investigate the pedagogical practices of teaching L2 writing and the development of teachers' knowledge in underrepresented and unrepresented contexts.

No research has been published internationally on L2 writing teacher cognition and classroom practices in Palestinian universities. In the research context, non-native English-speaking teachers teach large classes in an exam-oriented educational system. This study employed interview data supplemented by classroom observation and course documents analysis to investigate the relationship between the cognition and the pedagogical practices of eight EFL writing instructors in two large Palestinian universities. It also sought to explore how their cognition and practices interplay with their working context. This study was designed to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the instructors' cognition about teaching and learning EFL writing? 2) What are the instructors' actual pedagogical practices of teaching writing? 3) To what extent does the instructors' cognition correspond to their L2 writing pedagogical practices? And 4) What ecological factors shape and inform these instructors' cognition and practices? The structure of the article is as follows. Firstly, pertinent literature on teacher cognition and L2 writing instruction is reviewed. Secondly, the methodology of the study is outlined; namely, a qualitative, collective case study drawing on constructivist grounded theory for data analysis. Thirdly, the findings are presented with a comparison and contrast of the participants' cognition, pedagogical practices, and perceptions of their working contexts. Finally, the results are examined, and theoretical and professional contributions are discussed.

Literature Review

Keeping in line with the aims of the present study, this section mentions studies on themes related to teacher cognition and L2 writing instruction. These studies suggest that L2 writing teacher cognition impact pedagogical practices. Also, the review shows the relative lack of focus on research in the area of L2 writing teachers' cognition in developing countries context and highlights the methodological limitation in data collection methods. Researchers have examined writing teachers' self-reported beliefs and practices about teaching and learning writing in Hong Kong (Lee, 1998), writing teachers' conceptualizations, planning and delivery of writing courses in Canada (Cumming, 2003), teachers' use of written language in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in Australia (Burns, 1992), and L2 writing teachers' beliefs about and practices

of error feedback in the United States (Junqueira & Payant, 2015). Other studies investigated L2 writing teacher cognition about assessment in Iran (Nemati, Alavi, Mohebbi, & Panahi Masjedlou, 2017).

Another line of research explored writing teachers' perspectives about their own development as teachers of writing in Hong Kong (Lee, 2010, 2011) and students' perceptions of their teachers' pedagogical practices in the Netherlands (Van der Schaaf, Stokking, & Verloop, 2008). Furthermore, other studies investigated the impact of teacher education programmes on shaping teacher cognition and practices in the United States (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan 2013) and the influence of previous learning experiences upon pre-service teachers' knowledge about teaching L2 writing in Vietnam (Nguyen & Hudson, 2010)

These studies are limited in terms of the educational context and the methods they included. Most of these studies were conducted in an ESL setting where the teachers are native speakers of English, and the conventional methods of data collection are questionnaires and interviews. Very few studies included classroom observations (Burns, 1992) to gain a more in-depth insight into teachers' practices. Instead, authors conducted interviews (Cumming, 2003; Lee, 2008), administered surveys (Lee, 2011), or combined surveys and interviews to elicit teachers' thinking and practices (Lee, 1998). Borg (2006) points out that it is crucial to include observations in language teacher cognition studies to be able to refer to what happens in classrooms accurately. To bridge these gaps, this study aims to capture the richness and diversity of eight Palestinian EFL writing teachers' cognition and their interplay with their classroom practices and ecological contexts. The study, therefore, intends to make L2 writing teachers working in similar EFL contexts reflect upon their cognition and classroom approaches. It is also hoped that this research can inform teacher educators and policymakers when making decisions to improve the teaching of EFL writing at universities. Furthermore, the qualitative approach adopted for this study makes a methodological contribution to language education research in the context of Palestine. In Palestine, educational research is in its infancy, and uses mostly questionnaire-based studies, analyzed statistically.

Methods

Setting

This study examines the cognition and classroom practices of eight EFL writing instructors working at two English language teacher education programs in two large universities in Palestine. For confidentiality purposes, the first research site is referred to as University A and the second research site is referred to as University B. The typical Bachelor of English Language in the research sites involves 140 credits of coursework. EFL student teachers study 34 credits worth of cultural preparation courses delivered in Arabic, 34 credits worth of educational preparation courses also delivered in Arabic, and 72 credits worth of courses in English language skills, linguistics, translation, and English literature. Student teachers are expected to complete three courses on Academic Writing in English. Writing I, offered in the second semester of the first year, focuses on sentence and paragraph writing. Writing II, taught in the first semester of the second year, is concerned with writing different patterns of traditional essays. Writing III, offered in the first semester of the third year, focuses on writing a short research paper. Instructors have the

freedom to design their academic writing courses, as there are no prescribed course descriptions. EFL writing instructors prepare the syllabus, choose the textbook, and create the assessment.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was necessary to identify instructors to participate in the present study. Creswell (2009) emphasizes that the sampling should be underpinned by explicit criteria. The sampling in this study was based on three criteria: EFL Palestinian writing instructors who have been teaching for at least one year in the research sites; who are employed full time; and who obtained their postgraduate degrees from an English-speaking country. Participants with these characteristics had the potential to provide rich data. The researcher had worked in the first research site for six years and had a friend who had taught in the second research site for four years. Therefore, gaining access was not difficult. The researcher explained the aim and processes to be used in the study to the Heads of the English Departments in both universities. Permission to carry out the research onsite was granted. Each Head of Department provided a list of the writing instructors who met the selection criteria along with their contact details. Emails were sent to the identified instructors, which explained the focus, objectives, procedures, benefits, and significance of the research. The researcher sought their voluntary participation through email response, followed by a face-to-face meeting to discuss the study in more depth and to arrange times for interviews and classroom observation sessions. Eight instructors participated in the study. Table 1 summarizes the participants' qualifications and professional backgrounds and provides information about the lessons they were observed teaching during this study.

Table 1. *Participants' professional profiles*

Partici pants	Qualifica tions	Y ears of Teaching Experience	Work place	1 st class observation	Topic of 2 nd class observation
P1	MA in TEFL	7	Unive rsity A	Writing topic sentences	Writing supportin g sentences
P2	MA in Linguistics	16	Unive rsity B	Introduct ory paragraphs for essays	Error analysis

Participants	Qualifications	Years of Teaching Experience	Work place	1 st class observation	2 nd class observation
P3	MA in Discourse Analysis	5	University B	Writing topic sentences	Simple & compound sentences
P4	MA in Applied Linguistics	8	University A	Types of sentences	Exercises on sentence problems
P5	MA in English Literature	7	University A	Writing concluding sentences	Exercises on paragraph structure
P6	MA TESOL	4	University B	Argumentative text	Argumentative text continued
P7	PhD in Teacher Education	9	University A	Descriptive writing	Describing places
P8	MA in TEFL	10	University B	Comparison & contrast texts	Comparison & contrast texts

Study design and data collection

This study adopted a qualitative multi-case study approach to address the four research questions. Merriam (1998) notes, “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (p.19). Investigating multiple case studies enabled me to compare the cognition and pedagogical practices of the participants and to group them into clusters to facilitate my analysis and interpretation of the data.

Data collection occurred over one academic year. The researcher interviewed and observed five instructors during the first semester and three during the second semester. Data were collected through a one-hour semi-structured interview with each instructor, two non-participatory observations of the instructors' classes followed by two stimulated-recall interviews, and reviews of course documents. Interviews are the best means to access the minds of research subjects so that their knowledge, information, values, preferences, attitudes, and beliefs are accurately reflected (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Charmaz (2006) comments that “the in-depth nature of an intensive interview fosters eliciting each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience” (p.25). I audio-recorded and transcribed each interview.

The purpose of observation in the context of the present study was not to evaluate the teaching. Instead, observing the instructors in action allowed an assessment of the extent to which the instructors’ cognition and reported practices corresponded to what transpired in the classroom. Researchers often use observations together with interviews to cross-check issues under study as well as to capture data that may be difficult to collect through interviews (Creswell, 2009). Cohen et al., (2007) noted that observational data are attractive as they allow the researcher to gather live data from live situations.

The main aim of stimulated recall interviews was to help the participants recall their thought strategies and reflect on what was happening during their teaching (Borg, 2006). Following each session observing classes, I spoke to the participants in person so that they could attempt to recall their thought processes during teaching and the cognition behind their practices. The notes I took during the observation were used as the stimulus for the stimulated recall interview.

Document analysis was another tool used to provide a rich source of information to complement the data collected through interviews, stimulated recalls, and observations. Yin (2011) states that documents can “yield invaluable data about things not directly observable” (p.147). In the present study, the researcher collected and analyzed a writing course description and a sample writing test from each participant for any evidence of instructor’s cognition and actual practices in the writing classroom. The researchers sought to triangulate findings from analyzed documents with those resulting from the interviews and the observations. In the present study, all data were stored and coded in NVivo 9.

Data analysis

Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory guided the data analysis process through initial, focused, and theoretical coding, constant comparison method, category extraction, memo writing, diagramming, and memo sorting. The analysis process helped generate a framework that

depicts and explains the interplay between L2 writing instructors' cognition, pedagogical practices, and ecological contexts in the research sites. Data analysis took place both during and after data collection, and information from all data sources was compared. The first stage involved the independent, in-depth analysis of each case. After I analyzed each case, I grouped individual cases into two clusters based on the focus of their L2 writing instruction. Cluster A, which consisted of five participants (P1 to P5), focused on teaching grammatical forms and writing mechanics. Cluster B, which included three participants (P6, P7, P8), focused on teaching writing as a communicative act. I cross-analyzed and interpreted the clustered cases in the third stage. I synthesized the main categories evolving from the cross-cluster analysis in an emerging model which depicts L2 writing instruction in two Palestinian universities.

Findings and Discussion

Variations in pedagogical practices

The first research question was posed to gather information on the pedagogical practices of L2 writing instructors in the research sites. Analysis of data from Cluster A and Cluster B displayed evident variations in the instructors' teaching and assessment practices. As shown in Table 1, the ten classes that I observed for Cluster A focused on sentence-level writing, grammar, punctuation, and structural elements of paragraphs and essays. Below is a brief description of P1's class procedures:

P1 explained on the board how to write topic sentences for paragraphs.... P1 then asked his students to write topic sentences for the following topics: "Watching television; doing exercise; college; and my first class." The students were not easily able to generate specific ideas for these topics. (My field notes from P1's class)

P2 focused on correcting students' grammatical mistakes:

After lecturing students on how to write introductory paragraphs for essays, P2 wrote three topics to write an introduction for: "stress, writing, and tourism." After fifteen minutes, P2 asked two of the students to write their introductions on the board to get feedback from the teacher and classmates. The teacher commented mainly on the grammar mistakes in students' texts. (My field notes from P2's class)

Cluster A's assessment tools were consistent with their approach to teaching writing. For example, P3's and P4's tests were forms-oriented. One question asked students to correct the mistakes in discrete sentences, and another question asked students to combine simple sentences into compound and complex ones. Below are excerpts from their tests:

Correct the mistakes in the following sentences:

- He is so selfishness, and everybody dislikes him.
- Ali lives in Gaza since 1990. Before one year, he got his high school certificate. (P3's writing test).

Combine each of the following pairs of sentences to make compound or complex sentences:

- The cost of education has been rising. Many students are having financial problems.
- He did not study hard. He did not obey his father. (P4's writing test)

In Cluster A's classes, textbooks worked as a quasi-syllabus. During my observation of their classes, practicing writing meant completing form-based exercises from the textbook. Below is a brief description of P3's class.

P3 explained the purpose of FANBOYS coordinators to his students. Students were asked to complete exercises from the textbook. (My field notes from P3's class).

Cluster A's teaching approach is similar to the teaching approach described in research studies of EFL writing teachers at university settings in China (You, 2004) and the Arab world (Ezza, 2010). The focus of instruction is the written product, with students usually writing only one draft on a particular topic. In many Arab universities, writing instruction assumes a bottom-up approach, emphasizing the sentence and its constituents at the expense of the skills needed to write coherent paragraphs (Ezza, 2010).

In Cluster A's classes, textbooks acted as semi-syllabus because they provided content and teaching-learning activities, which shaped much of what happened in the classroom (Celce-Murcia, 2001). The features of most of Cluster A's textbooks are similar to the textbooks used in other Arab universities as examined by Ezza (2010). Ezza applied content analysis to existing writing courses in three Arab universities. The examination of these courses has revealed that English departments adopted approaches and materials characteristic of the 1940s and 1950s. Ezza believed that unless new developments into the linguistic and writing theories and approaches are incorporated into the writing syllabus, Arab EFL learners will continue to experience writing problems. This finding is consistent with the findings of Akbulut's (2007) study. Akbulut (2007) found out that the teaching practices of the thirteen Turkish novice EFL teachers who participated in his study were almost always textbook-based. The participants did not feel confident to move beyond the textbook and to try out innovative techniques and methods.

In contrast, one key characteristic of Cluster B's classes was the use and analysis of written models to illustrate the features of different genres. In later stages, students and teachers collaborated to create texts similar to the model, and then students were encouraged to follow the process and convention of writing to produce their texts. Also, within this pattern of instruction, the teachers provided their students with collective oral feedback inside the class and individual written feedback after collection of assignments. Below is a brief description of P6's class:

P6 began her class by writing the following statement on the board: "Should university students be allowed to use their laptops inside the class?" She asked her students to discuss their opinions on the topic in groups of four.... P6 then asked her students to read a sample argumentative text about banning cell phone use while driving. P6 listed the following questions on the board: "What is the purpose of this text? Who is the target audience? Has the writer been successful in persuading his audience?" (My field notes of P6)

When asked to recall the objective of her lesson, P6 stated:

I wanted my students to understand the purpose and structure of argumentative texts. (P 6, Interview2)

Similarly, P8's writing classes focused on practicing writing, giving feedback, brainstorming ideas collaboratively, and writing many drafts. Furthermore, P8 stressed the importance of peer feedback in supporting learners' writing skills.

She asked her students to work in pairs to come up with arguments for, and arguments against, whether to study abroad or to study in one's home country. Students were required to revise their paragraphs first and then to have it checked by a peer reviewer. (My field notes of P8)

Besides, many of Cluster B's test questions assessed students' ability to produce genre-based texts. For example, P6's questions asked students to write a cover letter to be attached to a language teacher job application.

Use the following information to write a cover letter for a language teacher vacancy in the Future Private School. Clare Genner aims at being a language instructor at this school in Gaza City. She has a BA in Language and Linguistics from Southampton University. She graduated with distinction and has two years of teaching experience at Melton College- Southampton (2009-2011). She took two courses in language programming and using virtual learning environments. (P6's Test)

Cluster B's pedagogical practices were eclectic; they incorporated many principles and features of the product, process, and genre approaches. Combining the process and genre approaches provides opportunities for learners to develop their creativity and helps them to fully understand the features of target genres (Kim & Kim, 2005). The priority of the process-genre approaches over the product approach was highlighted in Hashemnezhad and Hashemnezhad's (2012) study. Cluster B's practice of employing peer feedback in their classes is recommended in ESL writing classes for its valuable social, cognitive, affective, and meta-linguistic benefits (Lundstorm & Baker, 2009). Supporting the value of peer feedback, the results of Ting and Qian's (2010) study showed that students considered most of their peers' feedback when revising their drafts.

Cognition about L2 writing instruction shapes pedagogical practices

There were apparent variations in Cluster A and Cluster B participants' cognition about the nature of L2 writing, about teaching and learning L2 writing, and about their professional roles. Cluster A perceived writing as being primarily concerned with linguistic knowledge, focusing mainly on the correctness of lexical and grammatical structures. P1 and P3 thought of writing as a measure of a person's linguistic competence:

Writing is the process in which you use your talents to manipulate to correct yourself, okay. Writing is a real reflection of your linguistic competence. (P1, Interview 1)

Writing is a combination of words, clauses, and sentences, structured according to the linguistic rules in English. Writing can help us improve our language by applying grammatical rules. (P3, Interview 1)

Cluster A's conceptualization of writing as structures shaped their cognition about the importance of teaching grammatical and textual forms. P2 stressed the importance of teaching sentence types in English.

I think you have to focus on teaching them grammar.... I teach sentence types; then, I concentrate on the complex sentence. (P2, Interview 1)

P5 was also keen to stress the importance of a correct grammatical start, which would prepare students for writing tasks.

After I teach my students grammar and improve them, I will be able to make them understand what the paragraph is, what the topic sentence is. (P5, Interview 1)

Cluster A's conceptualization detaches writing from its contexts and seems to overlook the complexities of the process of writing and its nature as a social practice (Street, 2003). This finding of how Cluster A's conceptualization of writing shaped their cognition is in line with Cumming and Shi's (1995) findings. Their study showed each instructor's conceptions of writing to be highly consistent with their individual, expressed views about their teaching. Cluster A's cognition about L2 writing echoed the form-based beliefs about writing instruction articulated by the Iranian EFL instructors in Khanalizadeh and Allami's (2012) study.

On the contrary, Cluster B believed that teaching writing should focus first on the process and convention of writing. In later stages, mechanics of writing, such as grammatical forms, punctuation, and transitional signals can be taught to enable students to polish their texts. P6 expressed:

I want them first to brainstorm ideas.... I do not expect my students to write well without searching for information, brainstorming ideas, Then, I teach them the style of the different types of English text. (P6, Interview1)

Cluster B believed that L2 writing instructors' orientation influences students' learning. If instructors focus mainly on grammar and punctuation, the students' main concern would be on writing error-free sentences.

If teacher's main focus is on grammar, you will notice that students begin writing their first sentence with focus on grammar which may constrain developing a good text. (P7, Interview 1)

Similarly, P8 commented:

If the teacher has taught students to focus on the flow of ideas.... you will find these students brainstorm and write their drafts. (P8, Interview 1).

Furthermore, Cluster B believed in the importance of integrating reading with writing since reading is a vital source of providing linguistic input and ideas that students need when composing English text. These instructors also talked about reading and analyzing model texts which exemplify the types of texts which the students are supposed to produce:

I believe when they read, they can see how other people write and how they use a particular style of language. Writing and reading are related. I urge my students to read if they want to have strong ideas and arguments. (P 8, Interview 1)

Cluster B believed in the invaluable role of practice and feedback in improving students' L2 writing. Students who write a lot learn more about the difficulties and strategies of writing because they have had more experience completing different writing tasks.

Learners will not be able to make progress if they are not given opportunities to practice writing (P7, Interview 2).

The results of my study revealed a significant relationship between instructors' cognition about L2 writing teaching and their real practices in classrooms. Our classroom decisions are always informed by our theories and beliefs about what writing is and how people learn to write (Hyland, , p.1). This finding about the consistency between teachers' reported cognitions and actual classroom practices is similar to Burns' findings (1992) who found a very complex and interconnected network of underlying beliefs which seemed to influence the pedagogical practices and approaches adopted by the six ESL teachers.

Variations in participants' cognition about professional roles

Cluster A and Cluster B held different perceptions about their roles as writing teachers and about the sources of their pedagogical cognition. Cluster A observed the importance of their professional roles as lecturers, error-hunters, and error correctors. Cluster A's perception of their roles was in line with the perceptions of the Turkish teachers in Saban, Kocbeker and Saban's (2007) study where they saw their roles as knowledge provider. P1 stated:

I explain for everyone. Most time of the class I am the one who is talking and giving information. (P1, Interview 3)

My students need to know exactly the errors they make I need to tell them to avoid this and avoid that. (P5, Interview 2)

In contrast, Cluster B articulated a range of professional roles, such as coaches, modelers, collaborators, feedback givers, need analysts, and motivators. P8 prepared activities to enhance her students' learning and to build good rapport with them.

I can think of myself as a coach.... an assessor ... Collaborator....Yes, students have negative attitudes, but we can turn their negative attitudes into positive ones. (P8, Interview 3)

Cluster B's perceptions of their roles were similar to those reported in Cowie's (2011) study where EFL teachers working in a Tokyo university described their roles as carers and moral guides.

P3 and P5 mentioned that they copied their former writing instructors. P3 said "I stole" my teaching approach from my writing teachers. The practice of editing texts and picking up grammatical mistakes had been a common exercise in P5's writing class when he was a student.

I copy my previous writing teachers. They corrected our grammar and spelling mistakes. (P5, Interview 3)

Teachers' prior learning experience emerged in this study as a main contributor to their cognition and instructional practices. This finding is supported with Lortie's (2002) comment that the main sources of knowledge for teaching writing are teachers' experiences when they were students in writing classrooms or through apprenticeship of observation. Their prior learning experiences as language students are likely to inform their cognition and act as a filter to their subsequent practices as teachers (Ariogul, 2007). It was noted in the present study that the instructors' early learning experiences shape beliefs and attitudes toward writing and often determine the pedagogical choices made in their classes (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011; Street, 2003).

Ecological factors shape teachers' cognition and pedagogical practices

The findings from Cluster A and Cluster B data showed that several ecological factors influenced their cognition and pedagogical practices. The physical reality of the classroom with its limited resources, large numbers of students, and space and seating inflexibility acted as a hindrance for many desired classroom practices. P1 commented on how the shortage of technological resources forced him to limit himself to copying sentences on the blackboard, which he viewed as a waste of time.

There is lack of technological facilities. lack of computers, photocopying machines, and projectors. If I have a projector, I will not waste my class time copying texts. I will teach better. (P1, Interview 3).

P4 felt that considerable time was required for more learner-based approaches to teaching writing: Writing is a time-consuming activity, so you do not have time to read, criticize, analyze, and write. The class duration is one hour, and the number of students is very huge. Teaching writing is a process of pain. (P4, Interview 1)

The way seats were organized in the classroom made it difficult for P5 to organize his students to work in groups and to manage overcrowded classes:

The huge number of students in the class is a big challenge. You cannot control students' behaviors. (P5, Interview 1)

P3 mentioned that giving feedback to students is hindered by the big number of students.

Giving feedback and interacting with students could be done with only 15 to 20 students maximum. Do not give me 60 or 70 students in one class and ask me to give them feedback. (P3, Interview 1)

Likewise, P7 stated that his ideal way to teach writing is sometimes constrained by the physical factors.

The large numbers of students, not having a photocopier that is always available to share students' writing to receive feedback from their classmates.... I am still bound by finishing a certain amount of the curriculum. (P7, Interview 1)

Having big number of students in the writing classroom hindered P8's ability to give her students the chance to write on topics of their choice because she would not be able to read and comment on hundreds of different topics. To overcome the negative impact of large classes, P8 employed a great deal of peer feedback in her writing classes.

Casanave's (2009) study referred to these barriers as diverse realities. Contextual factors – such as insufficient weekly class times, big classes, students with multiple levels of motivation and English competence, teachers' workload, and teachers' motivation – may act as barriers that prevent teachers from enacting their cognition. The realities of the institutional context were also perceived as a constraint. The lack of placement tests before admitting high school graduates into the EFL programme meant that students who did not seem to possess the necessary aptitude and attitude to succeed in learning English were able to join the programme. The main criterion for admission is students' average in the Third Secondary Certificate Exam.

Academic affairs accept according to the Third Secondary Certificate Exam. They do not care about students' English entry level. (P3, Interview 3)

P7 also expressed his concern about the English programme study plan. Freshman students must study their first writing course right from their first semester. P7 believed that students need a foundation course to improve their grammar and reading skills. Once students improve their grammar and reading, they can use the skills and the knowledge in their composition classes.

It does not make sense to teach the most difficult language skill before the easy ones. Do you think students will find [it] easy to write texts when they do not have good command of vocabulary or they make many grammatical mistakes? (P7, Interview 1)

P8 also thought that the lack of coordination among writing instructors constitute a barrier facing their endeavors to improve their students' writing skills.

The lack of coordination among writing teachers is partly responsible for students' writing problems. (P8, Interview 1)

It was therefore prevalent in this study that the institutional context acted as a barrier that constrained the practices of the writing teachers. The impact of the institutional context cannot be minimized. It is, therefore, important to examine this cognition within their particular "ecologies" (Zhao & Frank, 2003) and to recognize the relationship between teacher cognition and institutional culture.

Cluster A and Cluster B made many references to constraints that result from the broader educational context. P5 believed that the schools did not prepare students well to facilitate their EFL writing learning at university.

I need to know how schools destroyed students' minds and fossilized their brains. They teach them, you know, capsules: do this when you see this. (P5, Interview 1)

P8 thought that her students' learning experiences in high schools caused discrepancy between her expectations of the students and her students' expectations from the writing courses. Most of her students were used to teacher-fronted classes throughout their school years. P7 blamed the testing culture that controls the performance of language teachers and schools.

In schools, teachers focus on teaching students to memorize information to pass tests... teachers give students formulas to memorize. They are mostly concerned with their students' success rate. (P7, Interview 1)

P4 used the word "poison" to refer to the negative impact of school teachers upon the way students learn writing.

We try to, what to say, clear their minds from the poison they have put in their minds during their school life. (P4, Interview 1).

Thus, teachers' perceptions of their students' attitudes and linguistic level influenced their pedagogical practices. This finding is in line with the findings of Cumming's (2003) study where teachers reported that they conceptualized writing instruction according to their perceptions of students' characteristics. Cluster A descriptions of their students' characteristics mirror the description of Arab students' low aptitude, motivation, and low proficiency (Fareh, 2010).

Another issue that emerged from the broader educational context is the lack of opportunities for students to use English language outside the classroom. It was noted that even if some students wish to practice their English with their friends, others make fun of them. In the Arab world, language education focuses on memorization and rote learning (Fareh, 2010).

We have to be realistic; our students are oppressed, they do not have chances to talk, or to learn from native speakers or to travel. This makes learning English more difficult and students unmotivated. (P3, Interview 2)

The final important ecological factor identified in this study as a contributor to the development of Cluster B's pedagogical cognition and classroom practices was their exposition to the global community discourse and L2 writing research scholarships during postgraduate training. P6 and P8 talked about their own learning experience in the MA TESOL programme where they were introduced to the teaching of writing and how that course influenced their approach to teaching L2 writing. P8's postgraduate experience helped her to learn about different aspects of academic writing, such as genre approach, new literacies, purpose, audience, academic honesty, and intertextuality.

I got my master's degree from the U.S where great importance is placed on academic writing... Also, I studied a "Teaching of Writing" course. I learnt about the importance of giving feedback and how to give feedback, about new rhetoric, the process approach and the genre one.... (P8, Interview 2)

Teachers' cognition can undergo significant changes as a result of professional training (Borg, 2006; Mattheoudakis, 2007). In this study, Cluster B who took professional courses on the methodology of teaching EFL writing and who read research literature on teaching writing appeared to be more equipped with skills and knowledge that facilitated their teaching of writing. Cluster B reported that such courses assisted them in adapting and compromising the deterministic context and ultimately improving the teaching of writing in their respective universities. This study may have the potential to confirm Casanave's (2009) speculation that teachers who took professional courses on teaching writing were more likely to adopt a social orientation to teaching writing while teachers who did not are more likely to hold form-oriented beliefs. Teachers with little preparation in teaching L2 writing may minimize FL writing instruction or focus primarily on grammatical form (Casanave, 2009). This is the case with the majority of Cluster A. Lee (2010) commented that "writing teacher education can broaden teachers' perspectives on teaching writing and help them construct a new identity as writing teachers" (p.1).

Teachers' cognition mediate reactions to perceived ecological challenges

Although all ecological factors except the global discourse community are perceived by participants as barriers to L2 writing instruction, teachers reacted differently to these constraints. Differences in how teachers respond to ecological constraints may be due to the variation in teachers' cognition about their professional roles and their sense of teaching self-efficacy. Cluster C teachers employed a number of strategies in their teaching of writing to adjust their beliefs and instruction according to the perceived affordances and limitations of their teaching environment. For example, because of their inability to give feedback on every piece of writing for students, they employed peer review where students could read each other's writing and give feedback. They stressed their role in motivating their students. Their reactions to the ecological barriers are similar to those reported in Farrell's (2006) study. The teacher did not give up his beliefs which were not applicable in his teaching context and tried to search out a balance between his beliefs

The pictorial representation of the CEM is a comprehensive rainbow-like figure of seven bands. It is holistic because it extends beyond the classroom into the context where the teaching is occurring. At the core of the model are the teachers' instructional practices in the writing classroom. The other six bands can be thought of as filters to classroom practices which operate at different levels with a degree of overlap. The term filter is used to reflect the subtle impact of these factors upon practice. The first filter is teachers' cognition, and it operates at the intrapersonal micro level of individual teachers. The intrapersonal level refers to the micro personal factors that influence the teachers' practices. Examples of these personal factors are teachers' attitudes, pedagogical beliefs, conceptualizations, and their perceptions of their professional roles. The classroom social environment, the second filter, involves teacher-student interpersonal relationships and teachers' perceptions of their students' characteristics. This filter impacts on how teachers act on the classroom and orient their focus. The third filter to practice is the physical classroom environment. The teachers' perception of the physical classroom environment operates as a hindrance to the implementation of desired classroom practices. The classroom-related barriers were class size, space availability, environmental conditions, teaching materials, and classroom resources. The last three filters are the macro contextual factor: Institutional context, national educational context, and global community discourse. Global community discourse ecology enhances its members' knowledge and skills and promotes their teaching self-efficacy. The mediating positioning of the teacher cognition band between practices and the different contextual contexts may show that cognition determines the weight that teachers assign to various environmental constraints. This may explain why teachers working under the same conditions may exhibit different teaching practices.

To conclude, as the first in-depth study to directly explore L2 teachers' cognitions with respect to L2 writing teaching in the Palestinian university context, this study provides a thick description of the cognition and practices of eight experienced university EFL teachers when teaching L2 writing. The combined results from the interviews, classroom observations, and documents analysis provide empirical evidence that it is necessary to uncover teachers' cognition underlying their instructional practices in order to understand how teachers teach in the classroom and why they teach the way they do (Borg, 2009). Examining teachers' cognition and practices is the first step to gain insights into their teaching. If teachers do not have the opportunities to articulate their cognition in a manner open for a challenge, those cognitions will automatically be routinized into taken-for-granted instructional behaviors and personal theories for practice. Therefore, this study may act as a catalyst to enable other L2 writing teachers to reflect upon and examine their cognition about their teaching of writing in other academic contexts against those reported by the participants and the literature referenced in this study.

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