Chapter one

The problem and its Significance

Introduction

Writing is a crucial language skill that enables people to express their feelings and thoughts. They use it to define themselves, clarify their knowledge and their ideas, to understand the problems that may face them as well as to find solutions for such problems. Being so, writing is a means for self-actualization. What people learn about themselves and develop within themselves through writing can help them to realize their individual potential and to achieve potential goals (Hughey, et al, 1983).

Learning to write in English as a second language allows learners to put their thoughts on paper, see their ideas in print, and share them with others. Writing also enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and large chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce grammar and vocabulary they are learning in class (Bello, 1997). It helps to consolidate learning to render it available for use in other areas such as listening, speaking and reading (Mohamed, 2000).

Writing has been seen as essential, useful, integral and questionable part of any language syllabus. Learning to write supports students in learning the rules of usage; they learn to spell and to use appropriate grammar and conventions. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) stated that writing in a foreign language helps learners to improve their grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences in target language. Also, when our students write, they have a chance to take risks and go beyond what they have just learnt to say. Moreover, when students write, they become very involved with the new language; the effort to express ideas and constant use of eye, hand, and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning.

In spite of the importance of writing, it is one of the most difficult language skills to master. Writing is generally regarded as a difficult skill and a complex task (Graham, Harris & Mason, 2005). This is often attributed to its inherently complex characteristics which
according to Wall (1981:53) "range from mechanical control to creativity, with good grammar, knowledge of subject matter, awareness of stylistic conventions and various mysterious factors in between."

Writing is a process through which writers explore thoughts and ideas, and make them visible and concrete. It is a difficult skill for native and nonnative speakers alike, for writers should balance multiple issues such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics. Writing is especially difficult for nonnative speakers because they are expected to create written products that demonstrate mastery of all the aforementioned issues in a new language (Abu-Rass, 2001).

Heaton (1994:7) assumes that the writing skills are complex and sometimes difficult to teach, requiring mastery not only of grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgmental elements. It requires the use of specific knowledge the writer has, the ability to discover and construct meanings, and the ability to put ideas down in writing using clear language (Olinghouse and Santangelo, 2010). Thus, writing is not an easy skill, or a natural process that just happens. Tierney (1989) stated that writing skill is considered a complex skill since it requires the students to apply the appropriate cognitive strategies, intellectual skills, verbal information and appropriate motivation.

Previous researchers proved that EFL students face some writing problems. Those problems might hinder their ability to express themselves freely, as they are not interested in the topic that the teacher asks them to write about (Aly, 2001). They cannot link sentences into a coherent paragraph, nor can they express their thought in a lucid and organized way.

El-Shafie (2006) stated that writing is the most difficult skill of all the language skills taught to EFL students and some sort of punishment for students. Students cannot develop their ideas when asked to write simple or compound sentences, and certain types of grammar mistakes dominate their writings (e.g. sentence structure, conjunctions, tenses, adverbs, adjectives, voice, prepositions, word-order, spelling, paragraph development, vocabulary choice, and
punctuation). In addition, their sentences are almost Arabic structures literally translated. Their writing is unsatisfactory and poor and they are unable to express themselves in writing appropriately and correctly.

Selim (2008) conducted a study to develop first year preparatory stage students' writing skills and their interest in English. He stated that students make many mistakes when they write and consider composition the most difficult task for them. So, he attempted to investigate the effectiveness of a program based on individualized activities in developing first prep pupils' writing skills and their interest in English.

Mohasseb (1992) conducted a study to determine student' writing problems, and to suggest guidelines for remedy. Findings of the study showed that students had problems at lower order skills (spelling, grammar, punctuation) and higher order skills (organization and unity).

El-ghotmy (2004) conducted a study to develop preparatory stage students' writing skills. She stated that students make errors in language and fall into writing problems. The majority of students are not able to write complete sentences or good paragraphs. That is why she attempted to investigate the holistic approach and its effect on improving second year preparatory students' writing skills.

In addition, research also identified that other reasons for the problems of lack of EFL writing skills are the insufficient teaching strategies followed by English language teachers in teaching composition (Aly,2001), and the absence of motivating pre-writing activities that can enable learners to collect enough ideas and information necessary for writing or the lack of due time and attention devoted to developing writing skills and its different sub-skills(Helal,2003).

Feedback or the way teachers respond to students' writing in English language can be an important reason for the problems of lack of EFL writing skills and negative attitudes towards writing in the English language. The correction of writing has been the most difficult, stressful and neglected aspect of writing instruction and the sole responsibility of the teacher. Although feedback is very
important as students learn from their errors (Abdel-Hack, 2002), research showed that the way in which teachers make comments on students’ drafts focusing on form rather than content is not effective in improving students’ writing and attitude.

It has been found that most students are usually apprehensive toward writing activities, and writing instruction remains an area of low interest for those students (Lidvall, 2008; Clark, 2004). Besides, the lack of suitable learning strategies in writing results in low motivation for students (Yang & Chung, 2005; Lo & Hyland, 2007). Jarvis (2000) asserts that many students do not enjoy writing because they feel that if they cannot do it correctly the first time then they will never get it.

According to Graham et al., 2007 and Knudson, 1995, writing attitudes affect writing achievement and writing competence. A student who has a positive writing attitude is more likely to plan writing actions, be more effortful, persevere despite challenges, set goals that will challenge him or herself, and believe in his or her own success (Bandura, 1995; Graham, 2006). Students with a more positive attitude will write more often than those with a more negative attitude. Further, those students with positive attitudes may decide to write even if they are not required to write. Students with negative attitudes, though, may choose to avoid writing tasks and put forth little effort when writing (Graham et al., 2007).

To solve most of the problems and the difficulties EFL students encounter in writing and that reflect their negative attitudes towards writing, the focus of research on writing has moved to the process approach. The process approach focuses on how writers actually do write. Writing process is seen as both a cognitive process (Flowers & Hayes, 1981; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) and a socio-cultural activity (Freedman & Medway, 1994). The cognitive model of writing is seen as a mental process involving directed decision making and problem solving (Chandrasegaran, 2004). Siti Hamin (2004) states that the skills in writing are not acquired but culturally transmitted. The students' writing skills do not come naturally but are cultivated through much practice and conscious effort. Moreover, the collaborative approach is also used to solve the students' problems as it stresses the purpose of writing and audience
for it. Student writers are encouraged to behave like writers in real life and ask themselves the crucial questions about purpose and audience (Ghaith, 2002).

Lipstein and Renninger (2007) suggested students who are interested in writing are more likely to develop a better understanding of it, set writing goals, make use of various strategies, and seek feedback on their writing. According to Wang (2005), learners should be involved in their own learning. In order to help students devote their efforts to language, they should have a desire to learn. Therefore, a better understanding of how to develop a suitable learning strategy or authoring tool to enhance students’ writing interest and motivation is worth examining.

Following that line of thought, there has been a sustained interest in using technology to support struggling writers. Technologies are recognized as having potential both to support writing and the teaching of writing (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2006; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006). The use of technology for writing includes computer-based projects, software programs and word-processing that direct writing instruction and assist students in developing their own writing, emails, and websites (Burner, n.d.). Research findings have supported the use of technology in teaching language. First, technology has positive influences on students’ motivation (Tsou, Wang, & Li, 2002). Second, technology programs have been encouraged as effective ways that could be used to replace or enhance direct human input (Ware & Warschauer, 2005 cited in Tsou, 2008). Acting in the electronic community helps learners create, analyze, and produce ideas easily and more efficiently. Using emails and sharing files give students the chance to collaborate with peers and teachers (Belisle, 1996).

In order to facilitate students learning a foreign language, Lee (2001) suggests that teachers integrate information technology (IT) into their EFL classes. EFL students rarely have the opportunity to speak with English native speakers. The computer-assisted language learning (CALL) can help them to improve their writing, watch videos, listen to audio, and be exposed to authentic and realistic communication. In this way, it provides students the opportunity to learn English in different contexts.
Spaulding and Lake (1991) found that freshmen remedial writers who used a set of networked computers to assist them in their writing lessons interacted freely and comfortably with their teachers and peers and thus opportunities to learn grew and increased.

Similarly, Pennington (1993), Sullivan and Pratt (1996), Braine (1997) and Liou (1997) found that the writing skills of the EFL pupils who used a word processing, a computer-mediated networked environment and web-based material improved significantly.

In addition, web-based writing instruction has proved to be an important factor in enhancing the writing quality of low-ability English as foreign language (EFL) pupils. Huang (1999) found that the EFL college students using the internet-related assignment had positive attitudes towards use of the internet in writing instruction. Al-Jarf (2004) also found that the use of web-based lessons as a supplement to traditional in-class writing instruction was significantly more effective than teaching which depended on textbook alone. It was found that the use of technology had a positive effect on their attitude towards the writing process. It enhanced their self-esteem, motivation and sense of achievement and improvement.

The use of the Internet and the World Wide Web has affected the educational process, the way teachers teach students, and the field of EFL (Chuo, 2007). The Internet serves both as a communication tool and as an information resource (Cunningham, 2000; Lee, 2000a). In fact, the most frequent classroom use of the Internet is searching for information resources (Grabe & Grabe, 2001). Among the benefits of Internet use in the second and foreign language classroom, the most important are: Increased motivation and participation by students (Warschauer, 1996); more opportunities to interact with the target language and content area because students spend more time on task (Kasper, 2000); greater integration of reading and writing skills and opportunities to practice them in meaningful contexts; the possibility to implement a pedagogy based on problem solving and critical thinking (Warschauer, 1999); more self-paced autonomous learning that is learner-controlled rather than teacher-controlled. (Mak, 1995).