

Saudi Students' Perception of Peers' Authority

Maggie Sami Saba

English Language Institute King Abdulaziz University
Jeddah, Suad Arabia

Abstract

This paper explores the obstacles that students from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia face when learning English in a writing course that demands critical thinking. Based on a study that took place over five months at the Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute in spring 2012, it examines how gender differences shape Saudi students' perception of their peers' authority, and how, in turn, those perceptions affect their development as writers and critical thinkers when learning in an intensive writing course at the high intermediate level. The researcher documented data through three sources: classroom observation, interviews with ESL students and teachers, and student writing samples. The findings examine in particular the data on two students, one female and one male, to provide detailed examples of the nature and impact of gendered responses to peer authority. This study found that the Saudi female students more readily accepted their peers as authorities than the male students did. While, for cultural reasons, working in groups of mixed-sex was more problematic for female students than for male students, the female students were able to progress and assert their voices as writers. On the other hand, the male students, while starting with a stronger voice when orally participating in class, were less able to demonstrate their critical thinking in writing.

Keywords: critical thinking, ESL, peer authority, Saudi students, writing

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Introduction

In 2005, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) introduced an ambitious program to improve the educational, scientific, and cultural experiences of its citizens. The program provides full scholarships to those interested in pursuing higher education in the US, among other countries. When joining American universities, Saudi students face two major problems: learning English and learning how to function in a new educational system that incorporates critical thinking. As linguist Canagarajah (2002) explains, critical thinking is an ongoing activity especially needed in writing courses at the university level, Instead of memorizing and uncritically submitting to higher authorities (as students in Saudi Arabia are expected to do), students in the US are expected to voice authorial presence and to demonstrate critical thinking by questioning and judging the ideas of their peers, teachers, and the authors of the written texts they study. American scholars like William Perry (1999) and Mary Belenky et al. (1986). have looked at American students' perceptions of authority and their intellectual development in college, but no study has similarly evaluated these aspects of Saudi college students' experiences when learning English writing.

The scholarships that Saudi students receive include funds for learning the English language so that they can earn high scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or Michigan Tests, the English language proficiency tests required by most Western universities. Saudi students commonly enroll in special English language programs to pass these exams. They spend as long as eighteen months (some of them even more) studying English in an effort to satisfy the English language admission requirements set by American universities. At Virginia Tech, where I conducted my research, many Saudi students take part in the Intensive English program offered by the Language and Culture Institute (VTLCI). Together, Saudi and Chinese students constitute the majority of students at the VTLCI.

Although the number of Saudi students attending American universities is on the rise, many of them continue to confront challenges in meeting American academic writing expectations and acquiring skills that would allow them to transition comfortably to college. Their difficulties in achieving fluency in English are complicated by their struggle to understand and accept the way English composition is taught in American universities. After the shift in the 1960s and 1970s, writing was no longer seen as just a means to record ideas, but also as a means to create and form ideas (Raimes, (1985). Saudi students come to the US unprepared for these shifts and turns. They come expecting the old, familiar paradigm, and believe that learning how to write—simply means learning how to produce an error-free product whose correctness will be defined and enforced by the teacher. They do not expect that they will either offer or receive criticism from their classmates.

The other hurdle that most of the Saudi students face when first joining an English program in the US is the mixed-sex environment. At home, they were used to a segregated educational environment in which female students are taught only by female teachers and male students are taught only by male teachers; here in the US, they find themselves taught by teachers of the opposite sex and learning with both male and female colleagues, with whom their instructors expect them to exchange feedback.

Body

This paper discusses how Kareem, a male Saudi student, and Fadia, a female Saudi student, perceive their peers' authority and the consequences for their development as writers and critical thinkers in an ESL intermediate writing course. (This paper follows the definition of

critical thinking as “[t]he intentional application of rational, higher order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, problem recognition and problem solving, inference, and evaluation” (Angelo, 1995, p. 6). Data is taken from the students’ first and second interviews, tutoring sessions, papers (timed writing, process writing, journals, reflection, assessment tests), and the researcher’s field notes to examine the following questions that this paper seeks to answer:

1. How do Saudi female and male students respond differently to their peers’ authority?
2. How do these differences affect the students’ development as writers and critical thinkers?
3. What are the reasons behind the Saudi students’ different perceptions of and responses to their peers’ authority?

Students’ perception of authority is an important piece of their development as critical thinkers; however, the literature on ESL writing that focuses primarily on peers’ authority does not pay much attention to gender. The theoretical perspective of the study has integrated two major intellectual theories: 1) William Perry’s theory of intellectual and ethical development, and 2) Belenky et al.’s on women’s ways of knowing.

Review of Literature

Influenced by the idea of knowledge as socially constructed, Bruffee (1984) advocated for a pedagogy in which students “work collaboratively to establish and maintain knowledge among a community of knowledgeable peers” (p. 646). Bruffee (1984) believed that when students work together and respond to each other’s writing, they build critical thinking skills that are essential for analyzing their own work. Second language acquisition (SLA) scholars, as well as major scholars in the field of composition (e.g. Lundstrom and Baker; Mangelsdorf; Mittan), followed suit in adopting collaborative writing practices.

Collaborative writing requires practices such as group work and peer responses. These practices are designed to encourage students to actively learn to work with their peers instead of passively listening only to the voice of the teacher, thereby giving students more agency and autonomy (Vieregge, 2012), as well as practice in dealing with conflicting perspectives (Ede & Lunsford, 1990).

Studies in the English classroom as well as SLA point out some limitations the collaborative approach. Although group work and conversations with their peers help stimulate students to develop their ideas, group work, especially for those who are not used to it, has its drawbacks. Cone’s 1997 study of how student writers respond to their peers found several unwelcome issues, especially for the American students whose culture encourages intellectual individualism. Among the drawbacks that Cone (1997) mentions are non-process-oriented writing, lack of authority, and consistent fear of interfering with their peers’ highly personal expression of ideas. Many of Cone’s students were reluctant to give negative responses out of fear of making their peers angry:

I tend to give grammatical corrections because I feel if I give a lot of content corrections I am changing the person’s whole paper. I am also afraid the person will think I do not like their paper. I have never really had anybody mad at the way I responded to their paper, and I hope I never will (p. 69).

The Russian philosopher Lev Vygotsky (1978) stressed the important role social interaction plays in acquiring a language. Influenced by Vygotsky, the postmodern school of

thought changed the definition of the nature of knowledge—and how knowledge is created. Knowledge stopped being a mere collection of facts. Instead, knowledge became seen as socially constructed. This new understanding of knowledge, together with the shift from product to process, influenced the dynamics of the writing classroom. The source of knowledge was no longer limited to only books or teachers, but instead became socially constructed by the conversations that take place in classrooms, between students and teachers, and among students themselves.

While this shift is discussed above in terms of the ways that this idea was applied to writing pedagogy, it also had broader pedagogical implications. Because power relations are central to every social experience, especially education (Shor, 1996), the new perception of knowledge led to the development of critical pedagogy in the late 1980s and 1990s. The main goal of critical pedagogy was to explore the power relationship between teachers and students and how that power influences classroom dynamics (Delpit, 1992).

Although critical pedagogy was established only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the psychologist John Dewey is considered the father of the progressive education movement for his earliest questioning of the teaching methods that consider the teacher as the sole authority in the classroom while the students take only a passive role. About a century before the creation of critical pedagogy, Dewey (1916) criticized not encouraging students to take an active role in their learning. His main message was that education is not a passive activity during which the teacher speaks and the students listen, but rather an active and constructive procedure. Dewey believed “that education must engage with and enlarge experience; that thinking and reflection are central to the act of teaching; and that students must freely interact with their environments in the practices of constructing knowledge” (Darder et al., 2003, p. 3). And that environment includes their peers as well as their teachers.

The two major studies that looked at male Saudi students' perceptions of their peers' feedback in the KSA are by Al-Hazmi & Scholfield (2007), and Hamouda, (2011), all of whom are teachers and researchers. Their studies revealed that Saudi students do not take seriously the feedback they get from their peers. Al-Hazmi and Scholfield (2007) undertook an action-research style study to investigate the effect of enforced revision and peer feedback on 51 male Saudi students studying English in the third year at King Khalid University in the KSA.

The researchers found that although students expressed favorable comments about peer revision, which was new to them, feedback had little effect on what the students actually revised. The researchers concluded that the students “were not ready to abandon the traditional surface error focus” (p. 237). Still, the experience of Al-Hazmi and Scholfield (2007) with only male Saudi EFL college students in the KSA differs from that of both male and female Saudi students who are in the US as ESL students planning to attend US universities, which encouraged my study.

Hamouda (2011) looked at students' and teachers' preferences and attitudes towards correction of written errors. The result revealed that both teachers and students have positive attitudes towards written error correction in terms of its relevance and the types of errors that need corrections. Yet there are considerable discrepancies in the techniques of error correction. For instance, students favor the overall correction, whereas most teachers do not believe that they should spend most of the instructional time correcting all the errors students make. However, the results show that students prefer teacher correction to peer and self-correction.

A study that looked at issues related to the writing of both male and female Saudi EFL students was conducted by McMullen (2009), who aimed to examine the differences between the

language learning strategies of male and female students enrolled in university-level English composition classes in Saudi Arabia. When looking at the social, metacognitive, compensation, and cognitive strategies students used, the researcher concluded that “Although no statistically significant differences were found, female Saudi EFL students reported using language learning strategies more frequently than male students at all three universities polled in Saudi Arabia” (p. 422).

As an educational psychologist, William Perry established models of [epistemological] structural or developmental sequences that liberal arts education college students go through (Many et al. , 2002, p. 304). Perry suggests that college students move through a series of well-defined (fixed) positions depending on the ways they perceive truth, knowledge, and authority. He also explains why and how people transition from one position to another. He introduced a scheme of nine positions of student intellectual development, which can be summarized in four major sequential categories: basic dualism, multiplicity, relativism subordinate, and relativism.

Belenky and Tarule ((1986) examined the epistemological growth and perspectives of female college students. They found that the basic assumptions that female students make about “the nature of truth and reality and the origins of knowledge shape the way [they] see the world and [themselves] as participants in it” (p. 3). These assumptions also affect their definitions of themselves, the way they interact with others, their public and private personae, their sense of control over life events, their views of teaching and learning, and their conceptions of morality (p. 3). Belenky et al. came up with a new classification scheme of five epistemological perspectives that apply specifically to women: Silence, Received knowledge, Subjective knowledge, Procedural knowledge, Constructed knowledge.

Group Work and Writing

According to Perry (1999), not only teachers affect the ethical and intellectual development of college students, but so do peers through different forms of collaboration. At the turn of the twentieth century, traditional writing classrooms in the US were “teacher-centered rather than student centered, focused on the product rather than process,” and were “oppressive rather than liberating” (Brooke, 1987, p.150). As more teachers became interested in the student’s role in writing, the focus of English teachers shifted from product to process. That shift brought with it an emphasis on invention, revision, and formative feedback. Writing came to be seen as a means to create and form ideas (Raimes, 1985), not merely to report them; a means for learning, not just a means to demonstrate learning (Emig, 1977). That learning takes place as a result of providing students with the “context, preparation, feedback, and opportunity for revision” through which to engage them in the discovery of meaning (Raimes, 1985, p. 250). In contrast, students in the KSA are not taught that writing is a means of creating and forming ideas.

With the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy comes a shift in power. In a teacher-centered pedagogy, the teacher holds most of the power; in a student-centered pedagogy, the teacher takes the role of a “coordinator of a cultural circle,” who, through structured questions, empowers students to voice their opinions and to take charge of their learning when working individually and with their peers (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 41).

Collaborative pedagogy reflects a practical application of the shift in power. In this pedagogy, the teacher’s role is to introduce the task, making sure it is an open-ended one (i.e. with no set answer or preconceived result) and then to get out of the way to allow each group of

students to work cooperatively towards a product arrived at through negotiation and consensus (Santos, 1992; Trimbur, 1989).

Working with peers, whether in whole-class discussions or in small groups, enhances critical thinking, but it poses unfamiliar challenges to Saudi students. Unlike the individualistic culture of the US, the culture of the KSA is collective. In a collective culture, individuals are expected to look after the well-being of the whole group as opposed to their individual well-being. Yet group work in the KSA is not highly valued because the teacher is regarded as the one who has the knowledge, not the students. Many Saudi students who come to the US to study encounter group work for the first time, in equally novel mixed-sex classrooms. Unlike most ESL programs in the US, which follow the coeducation system, EFL programs as well as all the educational institutions in KSA are single-sex. Saudi students are learning new techniques and approaches for English writing at the same time they are wrestling to reconcile the values of their home culture with those of their new learning environment.

Fadia

Belenky et al. (1986), when talking about the developmental stages of female college students, present four stages: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. In the first two stages, silence and received knowledge, the female students depend on external authority for truth and information even when they are themselves capable of reproducing them. In the VTCLI writing classroom, collaborative work requires students to treat their peers as well as their teacher as external authorities. Ironically, because they have been culturally trained to comply with their teacher's demands, the Saudi female students obediently undertook assignments like peer editing that ran counter to their own assumption that the teacher is the only valid authority in the classroom. Consequently, they were able to enjoy and benefit from their peers' contributions, which helped their development as writers, once they overcame the tension caused by having to work in groups with the opposite sex.

Knowing that it is not culturally acceptable for Muslim girls or boys to touch or be touched by a member of the opposite sex other than immediate family members, I realized that I had to take my time before asking the students to move around the room and work with different people. All the female students clustered on one side, leaving the opposite side of the room to the male students. On the first day of the study, Fadia sat next to Hana in the right front row. In the front row on the left side of the room, Kareem sat next to Hassan. For the rest of the term, the students kept the same seating arrangement.

For the first two weeks, whenever there was a small-group activity on the schedule, I directed the students to work with their neighbor in the same row. When the activities were for bigger groups, I would ask the students to form groups with students in the other aisles. I had to repeatedly remind them to work with a partner instead of working individually. At first, they would not budge. They listened respectfully to me, said, "OK," nodded their heads to signal that they heard me, and moved a few inches closer to each other. Then they went on finishing individually what they had started. After they finished, they compared their answers with their neighbors', instead of working together all along. Since these students were not yet accustomed to working with their peers, comparing their answers with each other nonetheless represented a small step towards more frequent and longer group-work sessions.

As the term progressed, to help them get used to working in mixed-sex groups, I would periodically ask students to move around and form groups containing both males and females.

Although I would ask them to keep these groups for the coming days, the next day they would go back to their original segregated places. To expose students to the ideas of classmates of the opposite sex without making them uncomfortable, I held whole-class discussions followed by small-group discussions in the second term. In the small-group discussions, students were allowed to choose the peers they preferred to work with. All the Saudi students almost always chose to work with peers of the same sex, except when I asked them to pick a peer of the opposite sex.

Fadia is a typical Saudi girl who was granted a scholarship through the KASP to pursue higher education in the US. Fadia, 18 years old, grew up in the KSA in a large family. Second-language literacy is often tied to literacy skills in an ESL student's native language. Fadia did not write much in her primary or secondary schools, even in Arabic, and the kinds of writing she did do mainly focused on writing down existing texts, not creating ideas or thinking critically through writing. Fadia learned Arabic writing in the KSA from elementary through high school. Her Arabic writing education, however, was limited to taking notes and writing letters and speeches. In secondary school, she continued practicing the same genres with little progression in vocabulary. She learned by imitating the writing samples provided by her teachers. During high school, she wrote short stories in her spare time, but did not receive creative writing instruction in school. Mostly, Saudi Arabian students do not learn how to develop original ideas through writing or discussion; the Arabic writing curriculum generally does not include writing argumentative or opinionated essays or participating in group work. Fadia was a very serious student. She took her work seriously and finished all her writing assignments on time.

Although Fadia was fluent in English, she did not participate in debates or whole-class discussions unless I specifically asked her to do so. Despite the fact that she found it more difficult to express herself when writing than when speaking, she was still able to communicate her opinions in writing. However, she did not participate in a whole-class discussion during the brainstorming phase of any of the essays that she wrote.

For the argumentative essay in that class, I had asked the students to write on the topic of women driving in Saudi Arabia. During a whole-class brainstorming session, the class divided into two groups: one for women driving and the other against it. Both groups used religious reasons to support their claims.

During the break after this whole-class discussion about women driving in the KSA, the female students stayed in the classroom as usual. This time, instead of socializing, they continued the women's driving conversation among themselves. Basma angrily said, "The way the strict men in Saudi Arabia are refusing to let women drive is very similar to how those who are like them before, like fifty years ago, refused to let women even to get education." Hana was quick to say, "It is really sad that back home women have their own cars but cannot enjoy driving them. The drivers do, but they cannot." Again, Fadia was quiet but very attentive. Before the end of break, I asked her why she did not contribute to the discussion. She replied that she always likes first to listen to her peers' opinions and then to present her opinion in a different way. Although Fadia easily contributed to small-group discussions, especially when working with female students, she did not do so in whole-class discussions. That did not mean that she did not pay attention, reflect, or take an interest in the discussions, as her following essay proved. Acknowledging that there are diverse channels for critical thinking, Arleen Schenke, a scholar in critical pedagogy, comments on the complexity of silence in language acquisition and use. She believes that ESL students' silence does not always demonstrate passivity. Instead, in many instances it shows oppositional thinking. The silence that Schenke talks about is the silence

imposed by fear. Fadia remained silent, on the other hand, not out of fear, but out of respect for her cultural values. Her journals, in which she expressed her opinion, which differed from that of her friends during the whole-class discussion, reflected that.

In the second interview towards the end of the second term, Fadia described the benefits of working in groups (as long as she was not with Saudi males) and whole-class discussion:

It was truly helpful. And like my last essay that was about Facebook, I have the ideas. And when I asked my classmates, what should I do? They recognized my ideas because I am confused and I am just thinking about Facebook and what should I say. I have the idea but I don't know how to recognize this idea and how to write it down. And they helped me with that [*sic*].

Her recognition that her peers' ideas are valuable was later confirmed in her end-of-term reflection. In her response to the question about the most interesting writing practice, Fadia wrote,

The brainstorming and the drafting. It is very useful to brainstorm our ideas in the class where we can discuss our ideas with friends and class mates. So, we can get help from our friends to develop our points and ideas. Also, it is very helpful to make much draft so we can improve what we wrote in the first draft with better and more logical concepts [*sic*].

Although enthusiastic about the brainstorming activity, Fadia was less pleased with peer editing. In the same end-of-term reflection, she responded to the question about "a writing practice you think is unnecessary" by writing, "Sometimes peer editing with a class mate is unnecessary. Because some students just finish their draft and they are tired from doing their own draft. So, some might feel boring to edit another draft for another friend or classmates [*sic*]."

Topping (2008) says that "peer assessment can also increase reflection and generalization to new situations, promoting self-assessment and greater metacognitive self-awareness" (p. 23). Despite her own doubts about the activity, when editing her peers' work, Fadia did not just fill out the checklist, but generally gave extensive feedback similar to what I had given her on her writing. She wrote to her peers phrases such as "give more details and examples," and "you need to put the word 'some' instead of 'all.'" She also wrote encouraging notes like "good thesis, great topic sentence, great conclusion."

Like all her female colleagues, Fadia expressed how much she valued her peers' input. During peer editing, all four of them gave, received, and implemented their peers' written feedback. Because they did not take notes during whole-class discussions and group work, though, they did not fully benefit from their peers. There are several reasons for their actions. They are not used to group and whole-class activities, especially with the opposite sex, and they are not used to taking notes. In all their classes in the KSA, including their English writing classes, they simply wrote down what the teacher wrote on the board or what they had memorized. The other reason is their concern for perfection. If they take notes, they may not have the correct spelling, or fully capture what their peers say. Additionally, coming from an oral culture, they may assume that they will remember what their peers say. However, capturing discussions in writing would allow them to profit more fully from those new class activities.

Kareem

Nineteen-year-old Kareem was enrolled in private school in the KSA. After high school, he had taken about five months of conversation courses in a private English language institute in his home town, Jeddah, in the KSA. Although Kareem is a sophisticated, spirited, influential, rational, and cogent talker in class, his biggest problem is that he has “no access to his thoughts or personal style through the medium of writing” (Shaughnessy, 1977, p.15). Also, because he did not fully commit himself to reading and writing the assigned tasks (whether in or out of class), he could not get his writing “to the point that it approximates his skill as a talker” (p. 33).

Unlike the Saudi female school curriculum, which includes the teaching of Arabic writing through the freshman year of college, the Saudi male school curriculum stops offering Arabic writing courses in the secondary and high school. Kareem described how he learned Arabic writing by saying,

In KSA they did not teach us academic writing. All they taught us was how to write a letter. From the 1st year to the last year of elementary school....We took no composition in middle and high school. In Secondary school we took only dictation...we never learned how to build a paragraph. Only how to start a letter and how to conclude a letter.

Consequently, not only Kareem, but all the male students in the study, seemed to have learned from their previous schooling that writing is not important.

Kareem had a good self-awareness and agency in his literacy development. During both terms, Kareem was respectful and enthusiastic; in fact, his voice dominated the classroom. However, while Fadia and the other female students were committed to doing the writing assignments, Kareem was not. He rarely came to class with the required draft, except the final draft of the last essay of the term, which he planned to include in his portfolio.

When referring to studies on sex differences in the use of language, Belenky et al. (1986) explain, “the world is commonly divided into two domains: speaking and listening...it is the men who do the talking and the women who do the listening” (p. 45). Kareem was mostly actively engaged during whole-class discussions, especially when the topics involved cultural experience. He seemed to be sincerely interested in learning from other students about proverbs, body language, and other customs. In response to the prompt, “the activity that you loved the most and would like to do more,” Kareem wrote, “speaking class argument because it is help students to form their ideas [*sic*].” About the most interesting writing practice, he wrote, “the brainstorming. It is very useful to brainstorm our ideas in the class where we can discuss our ideas with friends and classmate. So, we can get help from our friends to develop our points and ideas [*sic*].” However, like Fadia, he failed to take full advantage of his classmates' input because he did not take notes during small-group or whole-class activities.

Shehadeh (1999)'s study of gender differences among EFL students during group work found that male students “have greater and better opportunities to communicate, promote their productive skills, and progress than females” (p. 260). However, the same confidence in his own authority that made Kareem more willing than Fadia to speak in groups undermined his ability to use his peers as authorities to help him improve his writing. Kareem did value group discussion as a means to develop ideas, but he was reluctant to give or accept written feedback during peer editing. At the end of the first class, during which students were giving feedback to each other, Kareem asked me if he should consider his peers' feedback. When I asked him why not, he, like Fadia, said that he does not trust that his peers can contribute to his learning of writing.

Interestingly, outside the writing classroom, Kareem seemed to highly value his friends' opinions and advice about academic issues, including judging how seriously to take learning to write. For example, he said, "A friend of mine told me that all I need is the language of the field I will be studying. All I will need is the terminology of engineering, my future field. I am scientific. I don't need linguistics." When I asked how much time he spends on homework, he said,

It depends. When I have an essay to write, I take a very long time. I had hard time to transform the paragraph into a whole essay. In speaking I make mistakes, but my friends sometimes correct for me, sometimes they don't. Like when I used to say 'it is mean,' but one of my friend drew my attention that the right way of saying it is 'it means'.

Kareem does appear to value his peers' input on what he studies and their ability to help him correct his English. Ironically, however, part of the peer authority he thus accepted, in telling him that he will only need "the terminology of engineering," reinforced his belief that he does not need to adapt to the demands of English writing classes to succeed.

Gender issues may have compounded his unwillingness. While female students like Fadia were also unaccustomed to regard their peers as authoritative sources of feedback on their work, they are used to obeying a female teacher, and were thus willing to comply when asked to give and receive written peer feedback. Kareem's cultural background as a Saudi male does not incline him to accept the authority of a female teacher, nor to take seriously the critiques of his female classmates, who were more willing than male classmates to provide substantial written editing. Because he also refused to make a serious effort to critique other students' work, he missed the opportunity to practice critical thinking skills that could have honed his ability to develop his own writing. Accordingly, he did not make the progress in critical thinking and writing that Fadia did.

Conclusion

Group work was new to Kareem and Fadia. They both enjoyed and appreciated their peers' opinions, especially during whole-class discussions. While Kareem initiated and directed whole-class discussions, Fadia was more hesitant and reflective. During small-group work, both of them were more relaxed when working with peers of the same sex. While Fadia was supportive and gave elaborate written feedback, Kareem, because he was rarely prepared, gave and took mostly oral feedback.

Both Kareem and Fadia, came to the US with little to no previous experience with group work or whole-class discussions in Arabic or English writing classes. In the VTLCI, they both experienced for the first time exposing their ideas in class to their opposite-sex peers' input. Working with the opposite sex brings with it uncertainty, tension, and fear of being critical of each other and of being criticized. That fear results in the lack of the trust needed when working in groups. This is especially true for Fadia, who was used to being educated in segregated schools that were very well constructed and isolated from any male presence. In the VTLCI, she found herself face-to-face with male colleagues. She dealt with that new diversity through avoidance. Avoidance may be perceived as a lack of trust towards the opposite sex. In Kareem's case, it is an obvious possibility that, from a patriarchal society, he may distrust his female classmates.

Belenky et al. revisited their study *Women's Ways of Knowing* and picked up "the narrative of how people know and come to think of themselves as knowers" (Goldberger, 1996,

p. 2). They asserted that the relationships between the ways of knowing, gender, race, class, and culture are complex. Culturally, writing requires more than language acquisition. For this particular population, writing involves preserving their cultural identity within the new culture. Therefore, teachers need to help the Saudi students find their voices so that they do not end up lost between their previous restrictive literacy practices and the new and challenging ones.

When investigating the intellectual and ethical development of American college students, Perry (1999) also asserts that the intellectual development process is dynamic and complex. The complexity for the Saudi students is even higher when considering their cultural backgrounds and literacy constraints, especially when keeping in mind that those students will return to the KSA and should be able to reassimilate with their communities. Therefore, it is important to consider students' literacy, social, and cultural factors, "especially when implementing social activities" (Gunn, 2007, p. 76). By doing so, educators will be helping them preserve the nature of who they are—especially since most of them do not look for Western assimilation—while at the same time empowering them through their own independent voice "rather than being silenced, accommodated, or rejected by the dominant discourses" (Canagarajah, 2002, p.116).

In addition, teachers, following Canagarajah (2002)'s advice, "must encourage students to stop focusing on writing as a narrowly defined process of text construction. Writing is rhetorical negotiation for achieving social meaning and functions...we do not write only to construct a rule-governed text" (p. 602). Therefore, teachers need to change the question they are asking themselves. Instead of asking how they can improve students' English skills, teachers should start looking for ways to assist the Saudi students to exhibit the critical thinking skills they already have to achieve their goals. They can do that by acknowledging the students' cultural experience and reflecting on it, in order to make students comfortable with who they are and help them be more willing to learn and become competent. Bringing cultural awareness to the classroom includes considering not only religious and social issues but also ways about how ideas are expressed. When demonstrating assertiveness, for instance, male students should not be considered rude, and when female students do not participate orally in whole class discussion, they should not be assumed to have no voice. Those students are behaving the way their culture has prepared them to behave. ESL teachers should also recognize that there are differences in the Saudi students' literacy background: female students have a better writing background than the male students.

Learning to compose in a different language is hard. It is one thing to learn to speak, but to learn to compose presents much more daunting hurdles. To assist students in this endeavor, teachers need to change their focus from concentrating strictly on language issues to taking advantage of the whole life of intellectual and cultural knowledge that the students bring with them to the American classroom. Canagarajah (2011) argues that teachers "will do a disservice to our students if we do not help enhance the resources and strengths with which they come," and criticizes those who do otherwise:

Given the tradition in L2 pedagogy of using written work to develop grammatical competence, teachers overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than rhetoricians. This mode of teacher response has many negative consequences for the literacy development and critical thinking of students... it fails to engage students in negotiating content and discourse ...students begin to focus only on an error-free final product (p. 194-195).

Kareem is orally competent in English, but writing classes value the words on the page. Although scholars in composition and writing stress the value of class discussions, students are evaluated on what they write, not what they say. Canagarajah (2006) says, "[W]e should reconsider the place of orality in writing. Oral discourse and oral traditions of communication may find a place in writing as they provide useful resources for narrative and voice for students from multilingual background," because orality can "expand the communicative potential of writing (p. 603).

The ways in which Kareem and Fadia view their peers' authority affects how they approach writing and critical thinking. Both of them value and integrate their voices with what they learn from their peers. A practical way to combine what students already know and what they need to learn, while at the same time respecting their cultural values, is through the use of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). By using CALL, which "boasts collaborative and process-oriented composing possibilities," teachers will enhance students' collaboration while at the same time respecting the sex and cultural constraints on face-to-face meetings (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 223). Through CALL, teachers can meet the special needs of the Saudi students who feel uncomfortable working with the opposite sexes about what is mentioned in class.

About the Author:

After earning a PhD in English from Virginia Tech and an MA in Linguistics from the University of Louisville in Kentucky, the author has taught Linguistics, EFL, ESL, and Communication, and has presented at various American and Saudi institutions and conferences including Tesol Arabia. She has served twice as head of the ELI in Jeddah, and currently heads the PDU there.

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