Abstract: Throughout my teaching career I can claim that reading and writing are interchangeable skills. One cannot improve without the other. That is why I keep asking my students how we can improve our reading and writing skills? They give unclear answers simply because they do not read and write academically; they just read and write to pass exams and get a degree to get a job or wait for a promotion. At this point, students should be motivated well enough so that they like reading and writing as a means of improving their academic performance. To solve these problems or challenges, I have made claims that there are common grounds between reading and writing. Both require certain skills such as note-taking, good language as an aid to understand any topic and to write well. Both reading and writing need topics to read and write about. Similarly, reading and writing require a student, who should have a good command of rich vocabulary to understand topics, and to choose words that suit any topic they may tackle in English. However, there are basic differences between reading and writing. Firstly, in the process of reading, students focus their attention on the topic and the main idea. However, in the process of writing, students need to read as much as possible to find a topic to write about. Furthermore, during reading, students should take notes of the main ideas. However, on tests, students do not need to use documentation, as, in the process of writing a research paper, documentation is a must to avoid plagiarism. Thus, this paper tackles teaching reading and writing for EFL students at the college level in the Arab world and provide remedies based on observation, experience, and corrections of thousands of students’ exercises, assignments, and exams. The researcher has delved into many research areas to come up with remedies and recommendations for the challenges discussed in the article.

Keywords: reading, writing, challenges, remedies, culture

1. Reading and Writing

I have been teaching reading and writing for two decades. I have taught EFL college students these two skills and others such as listening and speaking. The challenges are great and indispensable when carrying out curriculum policy—stressing learning outcomes and demanding certain references and teaching plans. In reality students—in the Arab world such as Jordan, The Sultanate of Oman, and Saudi Arabia—join college straight from public high schools. There, teachers do not demand students to study hard in order to meet a new phase of students’ academic life—higher learning stage, which
requires new skills and strategies of mastering reading and writing, two essential subjects— integral parts of any college syllabus. Some students have a humble knowledge of English language, grammar and essential vocabulary for communication—face to face interaction and answering written exams. These situations create big challenges for teachers or college instructors. Should they start from scratch when meeting with students at school or college, who have not yet gained a good command of English to meet the curriculum standards? At the school level, teachers may propose remedial classes for weak students in many subjects, but at the college level, it is unlikely that instructors do so and if they do, it can be on a small scale. The reasons for not giving remedial classes are: (1) college learning means a higher stage of learning; students should be competent for a new phase of education and supposedly they have good command of English, and (2) college standards cannot compromise its standards for the sake of students who have poor skills in learning. (3) If a college allows it, its quality of education will go down every time it accepts students with low marks of English (not less than 60 % aggregate, along with a placement test for all English skills) to join college. (4) Weak students need to work hard in their free time to cope with college learning, not vice versa. (5) According to a recent study, “a number of scholars believe that the Arab countries including Oman largely lack the culture of reading in English as well as Arabic” (Al Damen 2018: 4) [1]. The last reason is the most important one because if students find reading difficult this is because they come from a culture that does not encourage its people to read. So far I have stated the causes of poor reading which I found out along my long teaching career experience as well as correcting students’ assignments, exercises, and tests. I keep telling them when I teach you reading I teach you culture and language. Thank God at the end of the course or semester students realize this fact and they appreciate it. As well I tell them at the college level the instructor who teaches reading should have some education in the West so that he can translate the culture of the West to the students easily. At this stage, we should set remedies for these problems and then we can lead students to better results as required by both curriculum and teaching plan. Finally, teaching reading and writing with the remedies I set in this study will achieve the intended goals.

2. Challenges and Remedies for Teaching Reading and Writing at College Level

Our second step as instructors now is to meet the actual challenges when we encounter weak students with humble knowledge of English language-structures and vocabulary. Is this an impossible task to handle or should there be some remedies or solutions for weak students to carry on teaching such classes? Or should we tell them to drop reading and writing courses before giving them chances to improve their level of learning over a month or so? These questions are not at all easy to answer. The decision is not always in our hands. We have first to report such cases to the head of the department, who in turn has to consult the vice-dean or the dean. Here, one should be careful not to make hasty decisions. Instead, what I personally do is that I start from the scratch for about a week or two; I try to give students a placement test in reading when I meet my reading class and I follow the same procedure when meeting writing class. After correcting the tests I give the results to the students with my comments on each paper (reading and writing). Finally, I discuss the major and common mistakes they have done on the tests of reading or writing. Now students know their real level in reading and writing. After a month or so I conduct an official test as prescribed in the teaching plan. Now I can tell who is going to make it and who is going to fail, based on their results. Luckily, students with low marks start dropping the courses I teach, reading or writing. Some students, however, insist on continuing the course despite their low marks. Consequently, and up to my best knowledge such procedures I have applied with weak students are the best remedies of tackling students’ problems arising from reading and writing. Along the course, I keep reminding them of my classical questions: what is reading? Why do we need it? What are the major strategies and skills we employ throughout the course? How do we improve our reading skills in academic reading materials? Similarly, I ask my students while I teach
them writing: What is writing? What do we do while writing? How do we improve our writing skills in academic writing? These questions need answers by professional instructors who can aid students to write well and read well. Personally, I help my students answer them during the course by being patient to explain each skill and make them read analytically and write critically to meet the requirement of a research paper or college projects. Interestingly enough, these questions mentioned above have taken a great bulk of research among the academics who teach an academic reading to first-year students. For example, Julian Hermida argues: “Success at the university level mainly depends on existing pre-entry college attributes, including the mastery of some fundamental academic skills,” and he specifies some basic skills such as “reading, writing, critical thinking, oral presentation, and media literacy.” He also argues that despite the importance of these skills for academic success, professors seldom teach them. They generally take them for granted; as they tend to presuppose that all students already acquired these skills either as part of their secondary education or elsewhere in college. The reality is that most first-year students lack academic reading skills, especially because University-level reading greatly differs from High School reading. Thus, most students employ non-university strategies to read academic texts, which results in students taking a surface approach to reading [2].

This is the reality of teaching reading for college students coming from high schools. These faulty assumptions, cited above, of teachers or instructors at college or university level hurt students than cure their weaknesses in a metaphorical sense. That is why I start from the scratch when I teach reading or writing to college students. Such a remedy will narrow the gap between students’ level of learning and the curriculum or the teaching plan with fixed learning outcomes, one of which is to read and comprehend the text. Students at this stage should as well have some basic idea of what reading process is all about. Janette (2007) defines reading process as “a complex interaction between the text, the reader and the purposes for reading, which are shaped by the reader’s prior knowledge and experiences, the reader’s knowledge about reading and writing language and the reader’s language community which is culturally and socially situated” [3]. She divides the process into three stages: pre-reading, the interaction between readers and text and the social milieu of the reader. These are potential factors that lead to an active reading/learning process. During this process, Janette emphasizes the role of readers when they “use a variety of strategies, sometimes multiple strategies at once, to help them make meaning from a text” [3]. These strategies are key components of reading. She as well stresses a very beneficial methodology of developing comprehension “by way of example, views the guided reading video clips and observes how a variety of strategies are employed at various stages of the reading process by both the teacher and student”[3]. In addition, another striking fact is that “the skill for reading and writing does not begin with the letters of the alphabet. It begins with the desire to get information, send messages, record knowledge and develop ideas” (Dixon and Tuladhar:11) [4].

3. Research Writing and Students’ Background: Challenges and Remedies

One researcher, addressing college students who have just finished high school about definition of “academic paper” and the “three concepts that you need to understand before you write your first academic paper: (1) Academic writing is writing done by scholars for other scholars, (2) Academic writing is devoted to topics and questions that are of interest to the academic community” and finally, (3) Academic writing should present the reader with an informed argument” (Courtesy the Odegaard Writing and Research Center:1) [5]. These tenets of academic writing are sound and practical for those who have good language and vocabulary to help them in the process of writing. In teaching writing, however, the task is not simple; it consumes time and effort to get students to write a research paper. In contrast to paragraph and essay writing, the research paper is the toughest for both the instructor to correct and comment on and for the student to write with proper documentation. When students write a paragraph, they focus on a number of things such as topic sentence, supporting details and a concluding
sentence. However, in essay writing students find it difficult to write since their knowledge of English is humble as well as their language structure and limited vocabulary will not help them do the intended job. Most difficult of all, according to my best knowledge and experience, is the academic writing for research purposes. Research is a demanding task only a few of our students can investigate and carry out. Students just take it easy. They copy from internet sources and paste them onto their assignments-clear-cut cases of plagiarism. Here, one should pose a big question that threatens the whole educational institutions- school, college, university, etc. Why do students need to practice such mischief or unethical practice? In my opinion, they have not been taught how to do research properly and patiently. The thing is not far-fetched. It is within our students’ abilities. We can make it simple if we tell them from the start that academic writing can be a simple task to do rather than an impossible one! All that students need to do when writing research is to follow particular tasks without which writing becomes a wasting-time process than fruitful. First, students have to find a topic of research. Second, they have to summarize the information by taking notes and finally paraphrase only some paragraph or two in their own language. Here reading and writing are complementary and should be used to improve students’ reading and writing skills. Here I can propose a recommendation that reading should be taken prior to writing. How can they search for a topic to write about if their reading skill is poor? I have observed this the first week I teach them reading and writing. Furthermore, they need time and practice to recognize and differentiate between titles, topics and main ideas. Nevertheless, they do not take notes whether in class or while reading and writing their textbooks. It is a big problem that faces us as instructors. Sometimes I discuss this with my colleagues and their response to this is that these students have not received any research writing and they want their instructors to do the job for them. However, I tell my students “I cannot do the job for you; in college as in your life the more you depend on your teachers the less successful you are.” The reality of the situation is that our students do not know the benefits of writing. It is “essential” and “it brings about a lot of advantages since it helps to (1) express one’s personality; (2) foster communication; (3) develop thinking skills; (4) make logical and persuasive arguments; (5) give a person a chance to later reflect on his/her ideas and re-evaluate them; (6) provide and receive feedback; and (7) prepare for school and employment” (Klimova 2013) [6]. These are certainly good reasons to make students realize the importance of writing because at university level academic research is “required in order to obtain novel information or to create new knowledge” (Kwok, The Chinese University of Hong Kong: 1) [7]. If our students can do that, that will be progressing in their academic life.

4. Benefits of Reading and Writing through Raising Crucial Questions Strategy

• Foster communication;
• develop thinking skills;
• make logical and persuasive arguments;
• give a person a chance to later react to his/her ideas and re-evaluate them;
• provide and receive feedback; and
• prepare for school and employment

I always tell my students whether I teach reading or writing that to write well means you read more. Right from the start, I discover that they do not know how to read well and how to write well. This is a challenge facing me and my colleagues. Typically, when I teach reading I start with the basic skills that the book of the curriculum requires us to follow to enhance the learning outcomes. I write on the board some lead questions. What is reading all about? What are the basic strategies for reading? What is the title, a Topic, the main Idea? And how do we improve our reading? On week one, I find my students do
not know how to answer most of these questions or technical terms pertaining to academic reading or academic writing. I go on and I ask them, why do we read? What do we read? “Reading helps to develop thinking skills, enriches knowledge, enhances language proficiency and broadens life experience. Emphasis has to be placed on motivating learners and providing them with proper guidance and opportunity to enhance their learning capacity through reading”. (Teacher Manual P1, P 2 and P 3, 2010:14) [8]. When students recognize, after some time, these benefits of reading, their academic life means much for each and every one of them.

By the same token, when I teach writing right on the first day of instruction, I raise some questions such as: what is writing? What do we do when we write? Which organization of writing should we follow—paragraph or essay? What skills are necessary for writing well? Why do we write? Should our writing look like school writing or college writing? I assure my students that academic writing is based on taking notes, paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting and documenting the sources (in-text citation and references). “Communication through the medium of writing is a necessary part of everyday life, and maybe for personal, academic, commercial and other purposes, and audiences” [8]. Furthermore, “It is essential that students are given opportunities to learn and practice the skills necessary to express their ideas clearly, accurately and in a form and format appropriate to the purpose and audience required” [8]. Additionally, “the Process of Writing provides the framework and support for the teaching of the process of writing. Writing involves the development of writing skills to help the students master the mechanics of writing and at the same time develop skills in writing with the meaning” [8].

4. Other Challenges Encountering Instructors of Reading and Writing and Remedies

Throughout the course of teaching reading and writing I face many challenges: students in reading classes, while reading their material, they think in words and phrases; they almost never read for ideas due to the fact that they have never been exposed to reading for topics and main ideas. The reason for this is a very puzzling situation that results from lacking basic reading strategies such as skimming and scanning. Additionally, even during lectures or classes students speak and write in phrases rather than sentences. Similarly, when I teach writing I encounter new challenges such as students cannot distinguish between topic sentences, and how to develop them into good paragraphs with enough support—definitions, examples, facts, and others. Likewise, students still have problems with essay writing; they cannot distinguish between topic sentences and thesis statements. They get mixed between paragraph writing and essay writing. For example, when asked to write an essay, they write a paragraph. They cannot write a good essay. Neither can they write complete, meaningful sentences. Instead, they write in note-like form or phrases; furthermore, their writing organization is hard to follow; for example, they do not leave spaces between words and sentences; they do not as well finish their essay with good conclusion, thinking that there is no need to reach a conclusion since they have written most of the ideas required. I have observed this phenomenon while students answer their written exams. Strikingly, they start writing without an outline for their thoughts. Furthermore, when they finish writing, they do not proofread what they have written. These technical writing problems have created great challenges for my whole career as an English instructor who has received courses in the USA of how to handle students' problems. I find out that most of our students lack the motivation to read and write, which is in itself a great challenge. As the English proverb has it,” you can lead the horse to the water but you cannot make it drink. Their motivation boils down to getting a degree but not to further their education; the majority of them think this way. However, a small number of students act otherwise; these read well with comprehension and write a well—good essay in good English but without complex sentence structure and high vocabulary. In fact, the good ones have understood the material and followed me as I teach them. Honestly, I do my level best to guide them in the right way.
“Extensive reading (ER) is extremely important for English as foreign language (EFL) learners as it helps them build vocabulary and develop their reading comprehension skills. However, engaging Arab EFL learners in the ER might be a very difficult task especially when they lack motivation and enthusiasm” Al Damen 2018). This is an obstacle to the best of teachers or instructors to handle. I always remind my students of the fact that motivation comes before education no matter how excellent instructors are; no one can pour knowledge into your mind if you are reluctant to learn.

5. Effective Strategies for Teaching Reading and Writing on the First Week of Instruction

One of the best strategies to evaluate students’ ability to answer questions I raised above in writing is to conduct a comprehension reading test requiring students to answer in writing so as to scan and determine their level of both reading and writing. This is to be done during the first week of instruction. By so doing reading instructors can with ease set a criterion of handling the course along with course objectives. Similarly, the writing instructor can set a writing test whose objectives should be (1) to evaluate students’ ability in writing and (2) set time needed to handle students’ weaknesses and strengths in writing. When these challenges are discovered at the beginning of the course, the writing instructor has beforehand, a good knowledge of students’ performance and then he can easily set the proper procedures of handling writing problems. The earlier the action has to be taken by the instructor to handle writing problems the better. As a result, throughout the course, students will progress in writing well and the instructor can adhere to his teaching plan and the learning objectives as set by the curriculum with ease or smoothly. According to Firman et al. (2019: 447) “The curriculum is undoubtedly an inseparable of education” [9]

The same applies to read. Now one may ask a question about the intended results of such remedies: are these practices and procedures possible? Yes. If instructors follow the steps above mentioned with patience and understanding and keep motivating students, they can read and write better as the proverb has it “Practice makes perfect”, doesn’t it? To put these strategies in practice, instructors have to follow certain academic books prescribed by the curriculum as references. Personally, I recommend the texts I teach below as texts which have proved fruitful over time and experience. I find these books as helpful as possible since they provide as many strategies and skills which are good enough for college level, provided they are taken seriously by both instructors and students. Consequently, college personnel responsible for curriculum development will see good results during and at the end of the courses concerning reading and writing.

In their educational book Interactions Reading I, Elaine Kirn and Pamela Hartmann (2016) offer college students, those who study English as a foreign language or ESL, a wonderful chance to learn English the best way they have ever thought of. First, the book teaches English through culture; the topics offered for learning cover a variety of subjects related to student’s interests, hobbies, and attitudes; the book presents mainly aspects of world cultures, American, European and synopsis of other cultures; the book helps student gain both language and vocabulary through reading about students’ accommodations on and off-campus, global diet, weather, health, entertainment, sports, architecture, and many others. These topics enrich student’s knowledge and experience by following the teaching plan suggested by the book, which focuses on reading strategies: skimming, scanning, paraphrasing, summarizing, and outlining [10]. However, the book does not offer exercises for analyzing topics to understand main ideas. This job depends on the long experience of the instructor to handle such jobs. As a matter of fact, the book focuses on recognizing topics and main ideas. It offers linguistic exercises and vocabulary building exercises as well as mechanics of writing such as punctuation marks: quotation marks, parenthesis, commas, dashes, periods, semicolon, question marks, exclamation marks, etc. [10] The truth is students find it very difficult to follow since their level of
6. The Continuum of the Teaching Process in spite of Obstacles

However, during the teaching process, these learning outcomes mentioned above are not easy to handle. We are met with challenges—students should be told about the importance of the book which prepares them for other courses and yet they do not show concern or interest for that. Now to meet the new challenges we have to keep motivating them right from week one to read the book so that we can follow the teaching plan. Another challenge arises; they have not read the teaching plan so they can set their study schedule right; at this point, as an instructor of the course, I have to tell them to get the book according to the teaching plan which we attach to the book. Now after making sure that they have the right book I can ask them to prepare the first article of it. It looks good so far, but to my astonishment, I find that they have not studied the first article in the reading yet. Another challenge comes in the way. What should I do in this situation, which occurs almost every day I meet with my students? Over my teaching years in the gulf I have noticed that students’ preparation for the next class is almost unattainable, no matter how hard you try; the results are in vain. This is one of the biggest challenges that one should find a remedy for. Patience is the only remedy or the name of the game; the second-best remedy is to ask them to do a little job like one exercise or one page of any material in the syllabus. By so doing teaching continues as intended by the curriculum. In this respect one of the potential studies in this area has offered solid recommendations as suggested by AlOmarani: “Firstly, EFL writing teachers should consider the proficiency levels of their students when choosing reading materials. For example, beginning students should not be given advanced reading passages that contain complicated rhetorical patterns and language structures.” He also believes that “exposing EFL students to texts that are developed especially to serve as models in L2 writing instruction can help the EFL writing teachers who cannot find appropriate models. His other recommendation, “one of the pedagogical implications that can integrate reading, writing, and technology is to use the internet in reading/writing classes. EFL students can be asked to surf the internet and read online texts to use them as resources for their writing assignments. Then he gives a reason for that” since EFL college students in the English departments of Saudi universities are required to write academic-oriented papers for academic courses during the last two-semester of the bachelor's program, it is important to integrate reading into writing instruction in the first two years of the program where the focus is on the language development. Then after that, he stresses the fact that “regarding the textbooks that should be used in EFL reading/writing classes,” he suggests that “EFL writing teachers should adopt EFL textbooks that are designed to integrate reading and writing. For example, EFL textbooks that provide step-by-step instruction for EFL learners with reading portions that illustrate specific rhetorical structures are highly recommended. In contrast, EFL writing teachers should avoid using traditional EFL textbooks that treat reading and writing as separate skills (AlOmrani 2014: 108) [11]. If these recommendations are taken seriously, our students will become good readers and good writers in the academic sense. Personally I have applied most of his recommendations and I wish curriculum planners in the Arab world and elsewhere, where English is taught to EFL or ESL students would implement them as soon as possible.

7. Bridging the gap between High School and College Learning

What has been mentioned above is a case in point with Saudi students at the university level. Here one can raise an important question about the possibility of having a similar situation in Arab counters such as Jordan where I taught English skills in many colleges and schools. The possibility is there. Another study conducted by Jordanian researchers of Yarmouk University who have revealed that “At the university level, to be a successful student, one needs to be equipped with certain skills. Among these skills are reading, writing, critical thinking, and oral presentation. Although these skills
are very important for university students, university instructors rarely teach them.” They have also shown that:” Even for courses which are supposed to teach reading and writing such as English skills courses, they still follow traditional techniques in teaching them. The current approaches in teaching language emphasize the integration of reading and writing, yet instructors still teach them separately. It is also noticed that Jordanian students at the secondary stage have difficulties in writing skills.” (Alqouran and Smadi 2016: 179) [12]. Consequently, instructors should bridge the gap between high school and college learning, a role that must be taken immediately as a corrective measure to solve all of the problems above mentioned. It should be done via unlearning the bad habits, re-learning of the basics which students have either missed at school or they learned them the wrong way or even they have never learned them before. Ultimately, the level of EFL students will improve in every skill and subject if these bad habits or misconceptions are avoided.

From past experience, I have devised some fruitful remedies such as going from scratch. I ask my students to first read the passage in their book and then try to locate the topic sentence in each paragraph and how it is supported. Still, at this point, most of them cannot recognize it. It is another challenge that puts me in a very depressing state. Then I take the initiative of explaining it all to them. I start asking what a tile means, a topic, and the main idea. Then I explain the topic sentence, which states the topic but it needs some details to explain it such as definitions, examples, facts, etc. Finally, I tell them a statement of fact about the topic sentence. For example, I tell them, it is the main idea of the paragraph they are reading now and each paragraph should have a topic sentence. Unfortunately, they still do not get it simply because they were used to read for words at school, not for ideas. It is a big problem. Again and again one asks the classical question: What should be done to solve this problem? Now I have to be strict with them by asking them to forget all about school learning and start fresh at college; I tell them college English is different from school English in a number of ways: the complexity of sentence structure and the high level of vocabulary usage. Slowly but carefully and under my close supervision, my students start to get the difference between, title, topic and main idea after a month of intensive teaching and using the basic strategies of skimming and scanning for ideas. One may wonder: What is next?

This probably is the hardest part. Why? It is simply because there are skills for students to employ other than skimming and scanning, basic strategies for learning. Students after acquiring these strategies should progress towards more difficult methods of learning such as paraphrasing, summarizing, taking notes, analyzing, outlining, and others. These skills improve research writing. However, they are time-consuming since students do not have the potential of doing them. These skills demand much work and effort, and above all motivation which precedes education. When students are not well – motivated their performance in reading and writing, as well as other courses, result in may failures; students do not have clear goals for their future; education for them is a degree to get without putting enough effort. While I stress the importance of students’ goals for them and even demonstrate it; they have to achieve their goals with patience and hard work; unfortunately, they start considering dropping the course. Further, a good number of them do so after the results of the first midterm examination have come out. I tell those who get low marks to stay a little longer in my reading and writing classes, but they insist on dropping the course. Strikingly, those who get good marks, however, are eager to drop the course, afraid of failing the course. My argument which I try to persuade them with is, “you are doing quite well now, so why do not you wait till the second exam and learn more of how to skim, scan, paraphrase, analyze, take notes and do more exercises and you will be fine.” A few listen to my argument and others insist on dropping the course. Poor soul Walid! I am left with a small number of students who really believe in what I am doing. According to Ama, (2012:1-4) “Challenges
encountered by learners of English as a second language” are as follows: unqualified teachers, limited learning environments, students do not take their study seriously, over-use of native language in the classroom, students become too dependent on the teacher, strong students dominate the class.” For these challenges Ama suggests solutions for students: “to use correct materials recommended by a reliable teacher of English, must make a deliberate and conscious effort to learn with or without a class teacher, should get audio material so he/she hear the correct pronunciation of sounds and words.” [13] These problems encounter teachers whether they teach EFL or ESL students in class or college and a competent instructor will and can tackle these challenges when he/she assumes control over class with wisdom, patience, understanding of the situation he or she is put in, and above all, experience will tell him or her how to handle these problems. Otherwise, he/she will lose the respect of students.

8. Culture and Language and Unlearning Reading Habits

As I have shown above discussing teaching the reading book written by Kirn and Hartman (2016); they have written a very good book but it should be taught with the aid of an experienced instructor for many reasons: (1) teaching their book for EFL students is a big challenge; (2) the book is based on presenting cultural aspects of English life; (3) students are not aware of the strong relationship between language and its integral part culture. I always argue the English sentence is grammatical, meaningful, logical and cultural. That is why when EFL students use English for communicating purposes, they are not understood for mistakes in their pronunciation and awkward sentences and expressions in their speech- these are not used in English by native speakers. Students have to think in English to be understood by the native speakers; I wish Kirn and Hartman would have provided videos on each topic to supplement teaching points and the culture of English; Students only learn by doing under the close supervision of the instructor. At this stage of teaching reading, I argue over and over again that students learn to read better if they read more in any reading form: books, magazines, newspapers, essays, articles, short stories or novels; all these forms of reading may improve reading, writing, and comprehension. I advise my students to report to the library to either check out a book or read there for a couple of hours. By so doing they will build good command of English structures and vocabulary.

9. Unlearning strategies for writing

In her excellent essay “Unlearning: A Critical Element in the Learning Process” (2002-2003), Lee argues: “Prior knowledge is arguably the single most important factor in learning. Unless we as instructors engage prior knowledge- the good, the bad, and the ugly, we risk sabotaging the new learning we work so hard to put in place” [14]. It is a challenge to make students unlearn bad habits. For example, while I teach writing I encounter the same challenges. On the first day of meeting with students, I give them the teaching plan in which they can get the name of the right book, weeks of teaching, examination assignments and other tasks. Challenges pop up the next meeting; they have not yet gotten the book, their excuses are many: it is not available at the college book store, and the fact that they are newcomers and the rest is history. Then after listening to their illogical excuses, I write the name of the book again on the whiteboard: The Longman Academic Writing Series: Writing Academic English, Fourth Edition by Alice Oshima and Ann Hogue (2006). It is a very good book to teach College students. I start saying, “All right dear students, now you know what to do next class: read the first Chapter 4 titled “From Paragraph to Essay.” [15]. Since they do not have the book, I start explaining what writing means and what this course demands them to do, and the basic skills of writing, etc. The first week may be called “Unlearning Writing” to put them on track with the new knowledge they have to encounter and experience. When I try to brainstorm the topics with my students, in the book above mentioned I get frustrated. I find my students know close to nothing about writing, requirements of writing and its basic skills. For the time being, I encounter challenges as big as
those in real life. I remember a piece of advice given to me by an American friend, when I was in the USA, learning how to teach language skills. “Listen”, Walid, he suggested, “Life is a problem and yet there is another to solve.” I always remember this golden piece of advice. Then I accepted the challenge by starting teaching them writing from scratch. Luckily, Oshima and Hogue have started their book from scratch; they have devoted the first four chapters of the book to paragraph writing. They have laid down the basic requirements for writing such as the structure of paragraph writing (a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence). To perform these while writing a paragraph, students should maintain unity (one main idea) and coherence (hold together), and their supporting sentences should have details such as facts, quotations, and statistics. Finally, they will be ready to write well and then we can move to chapter four devoted to essay writing. By applying Lee’s “Ways of Promoting Unlearning Behaviorist Tradition, researchers and practitioners have suggested a variety of ways of promoting unlearning in the service of new and better learning. In educational psychology, Gagne and Briggs’ classic eight-point lesson plan, a fusion of the behaviorist and cognitive traditions, instructors engage students’ prior knowledge early or before introducing new material”(Lee 2002-2003:1-2). Her focus on prior knowledge is as crucial to students as new knowledge. Undoubtedly this is one of the basic tenets of education when you start with the old knowledge and link it with the recent subject so that the start is right and on track.

Conclusion:

While teaching reading and writing for EFL students at the college level, instructors encounter real challenges that need quick remedies. Many strategies can help fix these problems. Bridging the gap between high school and college learning is very effective; unlearning wrong concepts from prior knowledge will be equally crucial in the first week or two of teaching reading and writing. These skills are interrelated and should be taught as if they were one subject in the syllabus rather than two courses; this procedure is carried out for remedial and evaluation purposes. Whether you are teaching English as EFL or ESL there will be other challenges as those above mentioned, you need to solve or set remedies for as a teacher at school or college. The curriculum then should be reviewed to meet such challenges and insert remedies to be included as new demands; developments in the field of education evolve. This will solve many problems presented in this study.

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