



(Re)Writing Landscapes of Language and Literacy

ARAB STUDENTS (RE)WRITING EGYPTIAN CONTEXT(S) WITH TRANSLINGUAL
ENGLISH AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

Translingualism

- ▶ Translingualism is “how we do language and *why*.” -Lu and Horner 2013 (emphasis mine)
- ▶ “Writers can thus be seen not as writing in a language or context but always writing, or rewriting, language and *context* with each writing. [...] Culture, ethnicity, nationality, race, geography, and environments are likewise seen as emerging in performance, informing and informed by individual acts of speaking-listening, reading-writing.” -Lu and Horner, 2013 (emphasis mine)

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) and Local-Distant Constructs

- ▶ Gee (2000, p. 180) states that “writing only make[s] sense when studied in the context of the social and cultural (and we can add historical, political and economic) practices of which they are but a part.”
- ▶ Likewise, Street (2003, p. 80) states that “the result of local-global encounters around literacy is always a new hybrid rather than a single essentialized version of either.”
- ▶ And, “We need a framework and conceptual tools that can characterize the [hybrid] relation between local and ‘distant’” (2003, p. 80).

Participants

- ▶ *Alaa*. Public school graduate from Beni Suef, a rural governorate and city in Middle Egypt.
- ▶ *Farah*. Public school graduate from Zagazig in the governorate of Sharqia in the Nile Delta.
- ▶ *Karim*. Attended a private school but switched to a national curriculum following 10th grade. He is from Cairo city and governorate.
- ▶ *Sanaa*. Attended private American high school. Attended several different schools prior to joining the American school. She is from New Cairo city and Cairo governorate.
- ▶ *Nour*. Private, French-language school graduate from Cairo city and governorate.

Linguistic Landscape

Public secondary school

- ▶ English writing is non-ideological, used for general purposes. Typical topics would include giving directions to a tourist, discussing weekend activities. Typically in preparation for a national examination.
- ▶ Arabic writing is rigid: writing generally is meant to reinforce a reified Egyptian national ethos. Students should express the greatness of the country, its people, history, artifacts, its youth, its future. Koranic quotations and Islamic values can help increase the “value” of an essay, leading to better grades. Deviation from these expectations will lead to lower grades.

Linguistic Landscape

Private secondary school

- ▶ Typically have learned English from a young age and can often write in English more effectively than in Arabic. Topics have included literary analysis (of Western literature) and preparation for college entrance examinations and SAT. In this study, Sanaa and Karim report extensive English training and practice writing essays.
- ▶ Arabic similarly rigid to public school

Linguistic Landscape

American University in Cairo

- ▶ Private, English-language university located outside Cairo, Egypt
- ▶ Adapted to many changes in Egypt in the 20th and 21st centuries
- ▶ Oasis of relative free speech in the area, typically a university for Egypt's economic elites.
- ▶ Lower-division composition sequence focused on relevant regional topics, critical thinking, research; writing minor; writing across the curriculum.
- ▶ Students write in an academic genre associated with North America and seem to seek "correct" formal English, but there is a translinguistic register within the writing
- ▶ Students assigned to address topics of relevance to Egyptian and regional politics, religion, economics and culture/society.

English-Language Topics in High School: General Topics, Western Literary Analysis and College Entrance Essays

► **Sanaa** (private, English language American school):

"We would mention examples of Martin Luther King and the influential speeches [...] they [the teachers] would give us a few names so when we came to write our essays we would remember some of them [...] almost all of them came from the U.S."

► **Farah** (public school graduate)

"Sometimes it was like 'send a letter to some friends.'"

► **Aalaa** (public school graduate):

"[Tourism is] very important to the Egyptian economy, you should welcome tourists, you should respect them, you should be friendly with them."

► **Karim** (started in private school, finished in public school):

"You were supposed to write a composition about ten lines about how you spent your weekend or what did you feed your dog yesterday. [...] You were practicing dialogue, you were practicing situations like 'You are lost in the street, what do you say to this person and where you are going?'"

Arabic-Language Topics in High School: Reified Themes of National Development & Unity

Sanaa

“Our topic was the Egyptian revolution and that’s all we would talk about.”

“When Hosni Mubarak was still on top and we were trying to let him go [...] [our teacher] would say that we should not support the civil disobedience.”

“Any kind of behavior that stood against the government, we can’t talk about it in class.”

“We would write about the revolution, we wouldn’t really mention anything anti- or pro-Mubarak. We would just write about how the youth are now the ones running the country, the youth are amazing, and how if we stand together, Christians, Muslims, we are going to get through this.”

Arabic-Language Topics in High School: Reified Themes of National Development & Unity

Aalaa

“You can say that we have a problem or we have a challenge about our image in front of the world regarding the relation between Muslims and Christians, for example. And you can just say this and say, ‘Okay, this is a fake image, but we love each other and we don’t have anything in Egypt and we should show this to the world,’ but you can’t say, ‘Okay, we have this problem actually and we have to work on this,’ no, you can’t say this.”

“In high school we used to write about why we love Egypt and how can we protect Egypt, how to serve Egypt, how to show our love to Egypt, but everything is general, you never talk about specific stuff, you never search a specific thing.”

Arabic-Language Topics in High School: Reified Themes of National Development & Unity

Karim

“You knew you had to be pro-government, you had to praise the president, praise the ministers, and you had to be happy. There is no such thing as unemployment, there is no such thing as government deficit. We’re living in a paradise, that had to be the words said. And the government is doing everything that they should do, but my suggestions are just a bonus they could do.”

“If you go against the system [...] you would find marks on your paper. [...] You will find that you were bumped two points for missing a comma that wasn’t even supposed to be put in there. You’ll find unreasonable reasons why you are bumped down a grade.”

Writing at AUC

Aalaa

An essay about a Nile island community in conflict with government:

“Despite the quiet nature of the Island of Gold and its inhabitants, life is not heaven on the island and there are many problems there. The Island suffers from a continuous conflict with the Egyptian government. The Government wants to make use of the great nature of the Island that has the Nile, greeneries, clear sky, animals, and its quiet healthy environment in investments. The government exploits the poverty of most of the islanders and their need to money to seize on the island and to sell it to foreigner investors who want to turn it into a tourist villages and kick the islanders out of their homes.

Writing at AUC

Farah

An essay about a non-governmental organization with ties to her home community, with which she has become affiliated:

“First part, we will answer the question of why Sonaa' El-hayah [NGO] is targeting volunteers in its vision. Then, we will examine the meaning of leadership and how Sonaa El-hayah is emphasising this meaning in its volunteers by examining some aspects of the qualities of leadership. Then, we will further assess the projects of Sonaa El-hayah in order to cover the second dimension of Sonaa El-hayah's direct beneficiaries, such as illiterate, poor, mothers, children. Finally, we will examine the challenges that sonaa El-hayah are facing while preparing future leaders and suggest solutions.”

Writing at AUC

Karim

Addresses social tension between a popular Egyptian satirist and his comments about the Egyptian military:

“The military in Egypt is an institution held above all others by the Egyptian people, it is considered the only government institution that does not fall to corruption and the most efficient of them all and therefore deserves nothing but respect . Bassem yousef the political satirist caused public unease when he attempted to mock the military or rather it’s Chief Alsisi [now president-elect]. However the fact of the matter is what Bassem had done nothing wrong.”

Writing at AUC

Sanaa

“Over the centuries, many Arab women have endlessly fought for their very basic rights of freedom and independence from the patriarchal mentality that has forever governed their lives. One Lebanese female writer, Joumana Haddad, stands firmly against the boundaries, restrictions, and limitations of the Arab society she grew up in. In her book, *I killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*, Haddad strongly opposes both the stereotyping of the western world against Arabs, and the oppressive patriarchal Arab society she lives in.”

Writing at AUC

Nour

Addresses religio-cultural practice known as female genital mutilation:

“After many years of combatting FGM, the rate of FGM has declined but with the rule of Muslim brotherhood the practice increased again which indicates that firstly the practice of FGM is related to the wrong religious beliefs in Egypt and secondly to reduce the incidence of FGM we must enforce the laws and we must work to influence religious leaders so that they will get the message to the people.”

Final considerations

- ▶ “As opposed to thinking of the local as a self-contained community [...] we could think of the global and local, which some have called ‘glocalization’ (Kraidy 1999), not as a neutral space but as a rich space for the reinscription of discourses as they coexist, emerge, and are reproduced and coproduced” (Medina 2010, p. 41)
- ▶ “Transcultural literacy [is] a semiotic practice of textual meaning-making in in-between spaces; spaces that are difficult to read unless significance is given to the zones of cultural contacts in which people develop new ways to mean, often in response to asymmetrical relations of power.” (Kostogriz and Tsolidis 2008, pp. 134-5)

References

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