

An investigation of Arabic speaking learners' difficulties in the academic writing course

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Abstract

Academic writing skills are of vital importance to the success and complete any academic major at the university level, yet the development of such skills is a challenge for many Arabic speaking students, particularly those who graduated from schools where English is not the language of instruction. It is essential to develop and evaluate strategies that can support academic writing skills for Arabic speaking students. This qualitative study evaluated a three credit hours academic English course for academic writing intervention strategy designed to support Arabic speaking students at Abu Dhabi University. Data from the course showed two major areas of difficulty for participants relating to academic writing: difficulties constructing different types of correct sentences in English, and problems elaborating and supporting new paragraphs ideas in English. The participants showed an improvement in terms of organization and lay out of essays. Courses like this intervention successfully meet the basic academic needs of Arabic speaking students, although ongoing support is also needed.

Keywords: *Course evaluation, English as a foreign Language teaching (EFL), Academic writing.*

Introduction

Academic writing is defined from many perspectives. It is defined as the skill Arabic speaking students who enroll in academic writing classes, particularly in University College (foundation program) English courses face a number of challenges in learning to write in academic English. Among other things, they have to demonstrate an acceptable mastery of grammar, spelling and other important linguistic features of the English language. Then they must comprehend the goals, learning objectives and requirements of an academic English writing course. In this study the course is aiming at providing instruction and practice in university level writing skills for freshmen. It enables them to write standard academic essays with clear thesis statements and subsequent supporting paragraphs. The course strengthens and highlights their skills in grammar and mechanics in Academic English writing. The students also learn to comprehend by summarizing and paraphrasing passages and are encouraged to become independent learners, capable of exploring reading and writing process.

The university college in Abu Dhabi University prepares freshmen for the specialization they have selected, English course is taught along with other essential courses include but limited to Arabic language, Islamic studies and math in some colleges. English 1 or Academic writing course is a pre-request for English two which aims at advancing the acquired skills in English 1 (Eng 100).

Here in furthermore, freshmen should communicate their academic ideas in written English in various rhetorical genres and writing styles that may be new or different from those they previously

learned in Arabic language. As law college students, they study in Arabic language where the means of instructions for the majors is Arabic language. writing classes are usually cognitively demanding and time-pressured, ESL students must learn to compose in academic English discourse quickly, often by trial and error (Buckingham, 1979; Krashen, 1984). The complexity of the academic writing task is increased for Arabic speaking students due to socioeconomic backgrounds, previous education, LI literacy, age, English language proficiency and several other factors.

Literature review

Linguists define Writing as a linguistic skill which has much in common with the skills of speaking and reading: it is considered as a means of communication that conveys a writer's intended meaning to a specific audience. Lindeman (2001) defined writing as a "process of communication that uses a conventional graphic system to convey a message to a reader" (p. 10). Berthoff (1980) described writing as "learning to do deliberately and methodically with words on the page what we do all the time with language" (p. 76). However, writing differs from speaking because of the absence of immediate interlocutor.

In this case needs analysis of the students target situation is needed to evaluate whether the assigned course takes them to desired level or not. This course designers have put in their mind the goal which is lead learners to master the basics of academic writing skills. Target Situation Analysis (TSA) approaches is utilized. This model was proposed by Richterich and Chancerel (1983) in this approach the all aspects that directly affect the learning process should be evaluated and considered; students and their background in terms of knowledge, culture and abilities, also learning environment should be evaluated as well as work place if the trainees are workers.

Needs analysis in general may be seen as combination of TSA (target situation analysis) and PSA (present situation analysis). As noted, within the scope of curriculum design, one cannot rely either on TSA or PSA as a reliable indicator of what is needed to create inviting learning environment to accomplish the desired goal. Teaching materials are 'tools that can be figuratively cut up into component pieces and then rearranged to suit the needs, abilities, and interests of the students in the course' (Graves K., 1996: 27).

It is important to shed some light on the difficulties in academic writing encountered by students.

1. **L1 interferences.** The theories of first language writing affect the learning of second language writing (McDonough, 1999). Several researchers attempted to identify the rhetorical features of certain languages, including, German (Clyne, 1987), Japanese (Kobayashi, 1984), Arabic (Al-jubori, 1984; Sa'Adeddin, 1989). One of the findings that these studies share is that students tend to transfer the rhetorical features of their first language writing into their second language writing.
2. **The writing process.** International students also struggle during the writing process in English-speaking universities (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Dudley-Evans, 2002). Cooper and Bikowski (2007) claim that international students are sometimes not aware of the writing demands of their own graduate majors and this makes them struggle while writing their academic papers.
3. **Difficulties resulted from the teaching approach:** many of Arabic speaking students lack the motivation to write long essays or even short paragraphs in English (Aljamhoor, 1996; Jouhari, 1996; Al-jarf, 2001). They attributed this problem to old teaching methods and to unqualified teachers who are teaching English at the general education. Using the grammar-translation method in teaching English, for example, has

limited the communication skills of the Arabic speaking students' ability to write competently or to communicate proper spoken forms.

1. Since some researchers (for example, Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanic & Camps, 2001) considered the presence of the voice in students' English writing as a sign of how strong that writings is, it is important to define it and to talk about the reasons that make students do not attempt to show their voices in their writing as mentioned by some studies in the literature. Matsuda (2001) defines voice as "the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available, yet ever changing repertoires" (p. 40). Although some researchers might sometimes use other terms; for example, authorial presence (Hyland, 2001) and authorial identity (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Tang & John, 1999), these terms can be considered similar to voice because their aim is to "identify similar discursive features associated with individualism found in written texts" (Stapleton, 2002,178). Several studies made attempts to explore the reasons that make some L2 learners avoid presenting their voice while writing. Some studies attributed that to the hierarchical and/or cultural values in some countries (Hinkel, 1999; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Wu & Rubin, 2000). One of the signs that shows the use of voice in writing is the use of the 'I' (Hyland, 2001; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Shen, 1989; Tang & John, 1999; Wu & Rubin, 2000).

The method

This study is based on data analysis which derived from learners results on three tests; Diagnosis test, midterm test and final exam test. All tests are designed in different ways so each of them has its own objective. The diagnosis test was just but a writing test at the beginning of the course where

all the 15 participants from course taker have asked to write a classification essay about the types of cars. The researcher, for the sake of assurance that students have essential content knowledge to approach writing their essay, warming up and oral discussion has been made to get the learners acquainted with information required to compose the writing. The question in the diagnosis test is to write a 250-word essay to classify the cars. They were given 50 minutes to do so. The results and the analysis appear later the discussion section.

Midterm test was designed to test ability level to apply major writing mechanics such as capitalization, punctuation, and grammatical accuracy. It is connected to the first goal of the whole college goal to equip graduate of law with needed skills, so they can Communicate effectively, responsibly and competently through the various written and/or oral formats. Midterm test was done in class twenty in the sixth week. The exam was covering topics studied in units one, two and three from the assigned text book (from great paragraph to great essay). The midterm test consists of six sections written in four pages. It is divided in tow main parts; Grammar and writing. In grammar the aim was to test the sentence type and using the correct tense; writing designed a way that can test understanding of the paragraph elements, paragraph types and capitalization and /or punctuation. The section grammar and mechanism. There are 4 multiple choice questions in part (A) and participant had to identify the sentence type from four choices given whether the sentence structure is: simple, compound, complex or compound complex. question (B) asks the testees to rewrite four sentences correctly to check the subject verb agreement, and the appropriate tense. Question (c) to use from set of coordinators and connectors too join two related or independent sentences. Writing skill questions were also three types; (D) questions were to punctuate and capitalize sentences. Question (E) is to identify the topic sentence, the topic of the paragraph, controlling idea and the type of the paragraph. The students were asked to read the

paragraph to find out the mentioned items. And the last section of the test students had to write a parallel comparative paragraph. The marking rubric was focusing on the paragraph organization, paragraph type, spelling, punctuation and various sentences structures. The researcher utilized the SPSS software to analysis the result of midterm results. It is also compare to the final exam test at relevant points. The answer sheet were numbered from 1 to 14 and the final test answer sheets so that answer sheet of student A is 1 in both midterm and final, Student B answer sheet is 2 in both midterm final test answer sheet correspondently. The analysis of the Diagnosis test was used to compare the development of the skills acquired at the final exam. The diagnosis test as described in the section was a piece of writing about cars types. The marking rubric for the essay is same like the one used in the final test essay. The table below shows the constructions of the three tests and their sections;

Test	Sentence type	Connector	Punctuate a sentence	Para. Elements	Layout	Write an Essay
Diagnosis	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Yes
Midterm	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes
Final	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes

The essay marking rubric can be found at the appendix (A).

Discussion and analysis

Most of Arabic speaking students in tertiary contexts lack native-like linguistic competences; however, students at this stage are prepared of expected to be familiar with the content of the subjects they will study and the conventions of academic writing so as to be able to write good academic papers in their own disciplines. Many students encounter difficulties when they write in

their mother tongues and writing becomes even more arduous when they write in the second language (Gilmore, 2009). Such challenges could have a bearing on their academic success.

The assigned book (from great paragraphs to great essays) Review.

Part of the study tools to evaluate the course was the book evaluation. The book is evaluated and its content was analyzed. The book author is Dr. Folse has been on the faculty at UCF since 2000. He is the author of 43 books. He has published articles on language teaching and his second language research in TESOL Quarterly, CATESOL Journal, TESL Reporter, Language Teacher (JALT), Perspectives (TESOL Arabia), Sunshine State TESOL Journal, TESOL Matters, Nexus, and Modern English Teacher. He is a frequent conference presenter in the U.S. and abroad.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The book moves smoothly from defining a paragraph in unit one, covering topic sentences in detailed activities, introducing supporting sentences and developing the topic sentences. Mentioning instructions to avoid irrelevant sentences the writers have shown informative language focus highlighting verbs and fragments, noun and noun forms. Then, they prepared the students to write concluding sentences with comprehensive descriptions. They concluded by giving exercises to build better sentences and vocabulary and activities for students.

In unit two the writers provided the students with elements of good writing elements; purpose, audience, clarity, unity and coherence. In stating the elements the writers did not ignore explaining the importance of consistent pronoun usage, repetition key words, logical order, transitional words and phrases and concluded with enriching vocabulary and timed writing for students.

In unit three the writers bring the students to the middle of the writing process so the students are actively involved in differentiating between types of paragraphs descriptive, comparative;

including basic skills like cause and effect and classification. in the assigned activity the writer refocus on the purpose of the paragraph.

Unit four moves from writing a paragraph into writing a descriptive essay by giving a lot of examples for the descriptive essay and at the same time reviewing on the paragraph basics for example body paragraph and conclusion paragraph it also introduced seven steps which embedded in writing process.

In unit five the writers elevate the learners to the level of practicing different methods to work out a text like “block method “and” point - by - point method” and to develop comparative skills by reading a text and reflect on the organization of a comparison essay. The writers equipped the learners by lessons on forming comparative adjectives, adverbs of degree and connectors and transitions.

Unit six covers ways of expressing past actions and how they help in building cause and effect essay. It also circles around what considered rituals of every unit; building better vocabulary, model text and timed writing activity.

The last unit is unit seven it enables learners to organize classification essay and it focuses on the passive voice and adjectives clauses following the same rituals.

The book also includes activities hand book which composes the seven steps of writing process, editing and writing, punctuation activities, types of sentences, grammar activity, connectors and citations and plagiarism. In addition to that it has appendices and index.

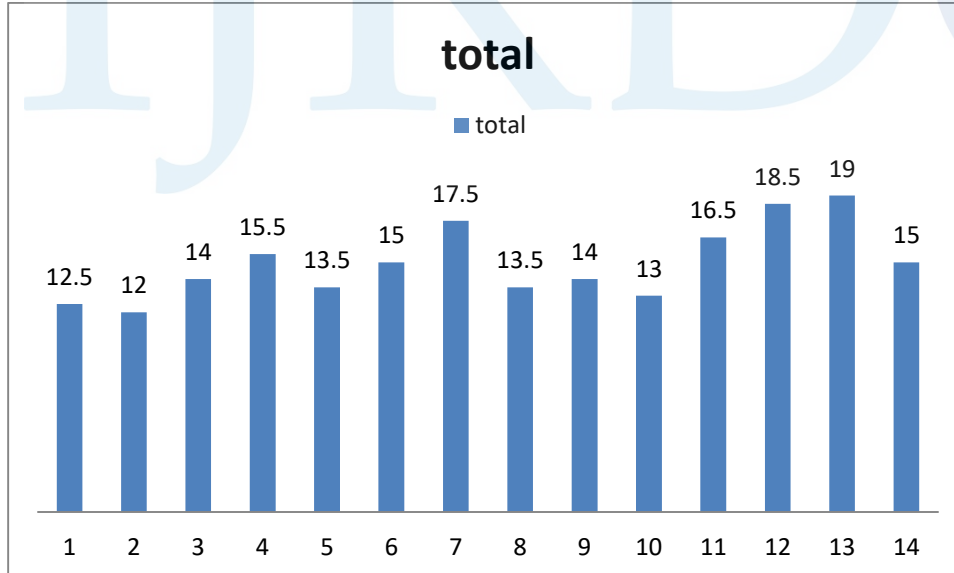
A. Objective Reasoning

1. Help students navigate the process of writing paragraphs and essays.

2. The texts are selected from academic field so we can say they based on factual information.
3. The information is valid and well-researched, and is it reliable and reasonable.
4. The ideas and arguments are well organized and it is a success to establish a certain steps to be followed in each unit.
5. The authors are professional teachers so they used the most applicable ways to help learners.

The book is logically organized; the main points are clearly presented. The texts are easy to read, the authors have their own style of introducing the writing course.

The tests results and discussion:

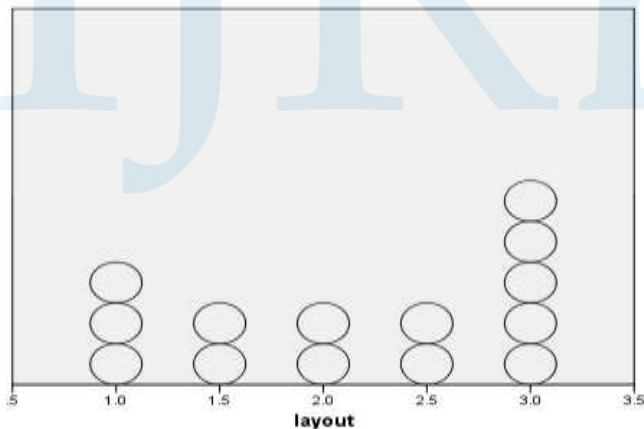


The table shows the students overall scores out of 20 in the midterm test. The highest mark is 19 and the minimum mark is 12.

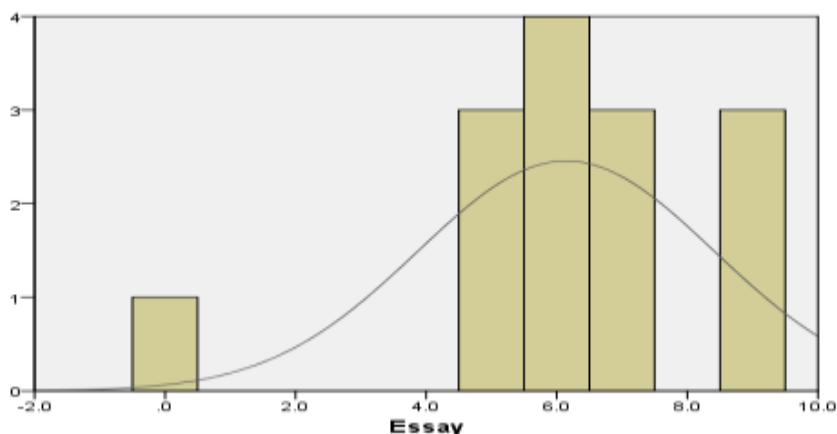
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Student No	14	1	14	7.50	4.183
Sentence type. Mutable choice	14	1.0	2.0	1.679	.3167
Using appropriate connector	14	3	4	3.64	.497
Punctuate the Sentence	14	3.0	4.0	3.536	.4584
identifying the fragment, sentence, comma splice	14	.5	2.0	1.357	.5345
Essay	14	.0	9.0	6.143	2.2738
layout	14	1.0	3.0	2.143	.8187

The table shows the descriptive analysis of the participants achievements in the final test of the course which held at the end of the semester to evaluate all the targeted outcomes. The number of the participants was 14 and the standard deviation of each section is mentioned at the end of the table at the last column.



The graph shows the learners marks at the lay out section at the final exam. It is clear that 5 students were able to master laying out their essay and only three out fourteen failed to lay out their essay properly.



It is obvious from this chart that almost 95% of the students succeeded to pass the exam ranging from 6-9 out of 10. It is observed that non- of the learners has got the full mark in the test. Or at the essay part particularly.

identifying the fragment, sentence, comma splice

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid .5	2	14.3	14.3	14.3
1.0	4	28.6	28.6	42.9
1.5	4	28.6	28.6	71.4
2.0	4	28.6	28.6	100.0
Total	14	100.0	100.0	

The validity of the this question is tested by SPSS t test and it shows it is valid. The final mark of this question was 2 and 85% of the students scored between 1 and 2 which means they showed some understanding of the task when tested isolate.

Conclusion

The course objective is clearly described and mentioned in the course syllabus. Based on the discussion it is obvious that learners' needs are partially met. The book assigned for this course is well guided and succeeded in help learners learn how to lay out the essay and let them understand the structure of the essay and the paragraph. Despite the course taught learners the different types of the sentences, they failed to use different types of the structures of the sentences when conduct essay writing at the test. The students need more practices in writing various types of sentences at essay level and punctuate their paragraph properly. The midterm and final results showed that learners of the course have had the ability to punctuate and identify the sentences types however they lack the ability to do these skills at the writing level.

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