

A Study on Students' Problems in ESL Writing Classes in the Arts College/ Kuwait University

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(Received 13th October 2018; Accepted: 16th October 2018)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34256/ajir1811>

Abstract

This paper discusses the influence of the first language (Arabic) on the second language (English) in the writing pieces of ESL students in Arts College/ Kuwait University. Going over some writing papers taken from the students' work in class, the reader would notice a 'different English'. The overall layout of the paper, the ideas presentation, the personal expression, the syntax and word choice, the punctuation and other elements make this new language on students' papers. From papers written in class and at home, I conducted an analysis to see the difference between the two languages techniques, and to find solutions for that. I also interviewed students and they assured that Arabic has a massive influence on them. They disclosed that they read the topic in English, and think/analyze in Arabic. Some participants mentioned that their limited competence of vocabulary in English hindered them from expressing well on paper. Another group mentioned that the idea of 'being explanatory' prevailed their thinking while writing. They said that they wanted to explain their ideas well and repeatedly so that the reader/teacher would understand their points. They also had troubles in organizing the sentences according to the English paragraph style.

Key words:

Influence, Arabic, English, ESL writing classes, papers, first language, target language



Dr. Mona Salem Rashed is concerning SL acquisition in educational a writer and she has written magazines in Europe such as: European Journal three books among which a of English Language Teaching. She has given comprehensive ESL writing various ESL presentations in local and regional textbook, while the others conferences, symposiums, and seminars related are historical/science fiction to ESL issues and ESL students hopes and stories. Dr. Mona Salem expectations. In addition, she has created and Rashed has also published a presented a course about 'Critical Thinking'. She few research appears will move to the College of Business

Administration to be the head of the department there.

Introduction

Writing is a majestic skill that requires sensitivity, creativity, eloquence, broad information and wide/wild imagination. Although ESL writing follows a different and an academic method as well as falling within a distinctive area of composition, writing in class, needs a certain level of creativity, eloquence and a good command of language skills. Describing an event, a person or a place, giving reasons in a topic and other writing topics in ESL classes requires formulating ideas and good grammar skills together with writing elements. Thus, students are expected to originate ideas that are directly related to the topic, and must be composed in corresponding vocabulary and correct grammar. All the writing parts must be presented according to the English paragraph form and punctuation. The voice of the writer in ESL writing classes appears as necessary. Some topics oblige the writer to reveal identity in the sense of giving an opinion or defending a point. Describing a place or a person does not necessarily dictate showing the writer's personality. Such facts in the ESL writing realm should be guaranteed to implement through writing; still, there are massive numbers of ESL students around the world, and in Kuwait, who face difficulty applying these minimal features. Generally speaking, the influence of the first language on the target language in learning, thinking and writing dominates the students' mentality and learning ability, and compels them towards confusion and/or disorientation to apply the language skills correctly. It is a fact that we could find students who are brilliant in writing skills and in critical thinking ability in

their first language, yet they fail to apply that in the second language. Knowing how to write a "summary" or "analysis" in Mandarin or Spanish does not necessarily mean that students will be able to do these things in English [1]. Thus, there are several factors that influence the ESL learners in writing classes. In the Arts College in Kuwait University, as well, the same mentioned factors impede ESL students from applying the correct writing elements away from the first language's dominance. Another fact is that Arabic is a powerful, superior language that has a significant linguistic nature. It is so influential that the Arabic language speakers find it hard to detach themselves from some basic rules both grammatical and rhetorical. There are many differences between Arabic and English verbs with respect to voice, tense, transitivity and particles, [2].

Literature Review

Writing is among the most challenging tasks ESL students face in English. They often endure some difficulties acquiring this skill. According to the participants in this study analysis, various challenges block their attempts to achieve a full command of a correct, coherent written piece in English.

Here are a few major problems in composing a written piece that ESL students/participants in the Arts College suffered from:

- The difference in grammar between English and Arabic.
- The difference in Rhetoric between English and Arabic.
- The difference in Punctuation between English and Arabic.

- Thinking in the first language (Arabic) while writing in the second language (English).
- The limited competence in English vocabulary.

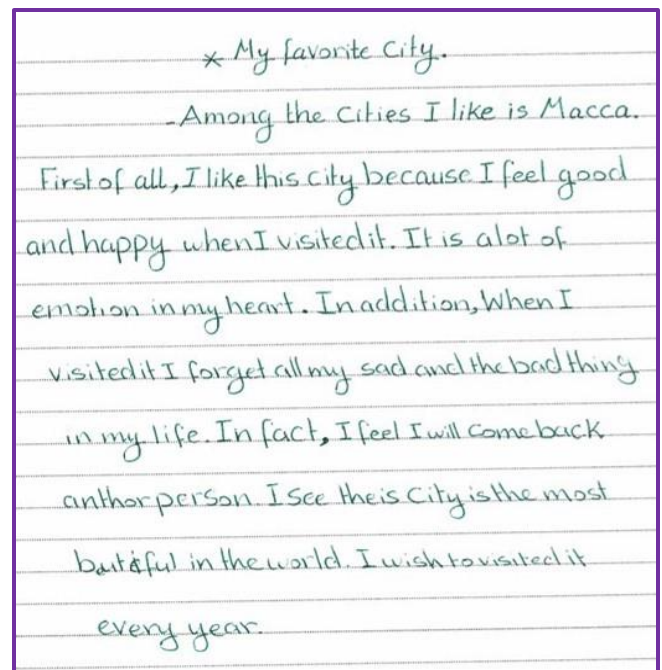
The difference in grammar between English and Arabic

Grammar is the most important pillar in a language to know and the most difficult part to learn. English has a 'different' grammar than many other languages, and it is definitely, dissimilar to Arabic. English grammar has been traditionally viewed as a "system of syntax that decides the order and pattern in which words are arranged in sentences", [3]. It is also claimed that mastering grammar is a complex process that requires making a series of decisions about when and why to use one form rather than the other, [4]. Generally speaking, ESL students, around the world, make the same mistakes falling all in a related category. The most noticeable mistake learners usually make is the prepositions choice, then comes the past simple tense (especially the irregular verb form). Then (lastly from top) is the definite article 'which', and that is according to a study conducted by the researchers Young and Cameron in (2005) [5].

In this study, students mentioned that they were uncertain when using the correct form of the verb in the present tense; they could not decide which to use the simple present or the progressive (continuous) form. They also did not remember to add an "s" for the third pronoun "he, she, it" because it simply does not exist in Arabic. Another point of confusion was they could not add verb "Be" to the verbs to the progressive form (past and present tenses)

because they saw that the "ing" form could fulfill the job in an action case. Prepositions, on the other hand, stood as a phase of confusion to them because the preposition "on", which meant something above or on top of another thing, did not mean that in all cases in Arabic. In English, it is used for days and dates, machines and devices, parts of the body, the state of something 'on sale, on fire' as well as the normal use of being on the surface. In Arabic, however, it is solely used to describe the case of surfaces, i.e, to be above-over something else. Therefore, when it was a situation to use "on" with a date for example, some students were perplexed, and eventually used another preposition. Actually, only few of them were able to use "on" for other functions than a surface. In their responses during the interviews, participants said that the sharp difference between the structures of the two languages perplexed them and caused them to make mistakes in applying the rules.

Here is a sample of a student's paper showing confusion in using the grammar tenses:



The difference in rhetoric between English and Arabic

Rhetoric refers to the study and uses of written, spoken, and visual language. It investigates how a language is used to organize and maintain social groups, construct meanings and identities, coordinate behavior, mediate power, produce change, and create knowledge (Rhetoric & Writing Studies). Since ESL classes are composed of non-native English speakers who come from different cultural backgrounds, teachers have to understand the diverse socio-cultural mentality and patterns administered by learners. Students are mentally loaded with their own educative style of writing; prose and believe it is 'The' correct one. They bring their own insight and assumptions to the writing course and think it is correct to apply them on learning and performing in the second language. Therefore, students must be enlightened and directed towards the right rhetoric skills in English. For ESL writing teachers, awareness of the students' cultures is essential. It is only after coming to know, understand, and appreciate something of other cultures can one realize the importance of providing culture clues to assist the language learner in a new environment [6]. Accordingly, the Arabic rhetoric is different. In contrast to Western modes of argument, which are based on a syllogistic model of proof and made linguistically cohesive via subordination and hypo taxis, Arabic argumentation is essentially paratactic, abductive and analogical. It persuades by making its argumentative claims linguistically present: by repeating them, paraphrasing them, and clothing them in recurring structural cadences [7].

Based on the previous information, we come to understand that a good portion of the

students' mistakes in writing (apart from grammatical and spelling) comes from the Arabic rhetoric preoccupation in the students' minds, and from the ignorance or partial ignorance of the English rhetoric. Thus, working on the students' competence to acquire a correct rhetorical style in English should be a primer mission to teachers. This will naturally allow them to produce proper and better-written pieces, and is certainly more preferred than showing the students their errors with the red pen.

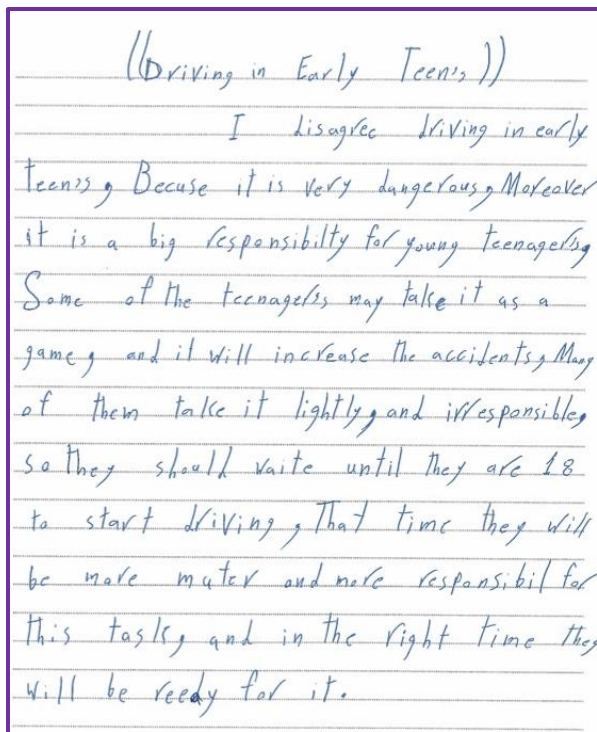
The difference in punctuation between English and Arabic

Punctuation in English helps the reader to understand a sentence through visual means other than just the letters of the alphabet [8]. It is also known that the origin of punctuation lies in classical rhetoric; in the art of oratory. It is utilized in two functions: verbal and written. The verbal is manifested through the tone and the pause of the speaker when he comes to a full stop, or when he changes his tone to the feeling/impression of surprise or happiness or disbelief and so on. As for the written part, the fourteen punctuation symbols show/lead the reader to all the emotions and/or pieces of information they need to know.

In Arabic however, the case is different. Punctuation use, conjunctions and length of sentences are unique to the language's own nature. On the one hand, conjunctions are and/or could be used as symbols of punctuation, which is quite different in English and considered odd. On the other hand, a sentence in Arabic can go as long as the idea comes before using a period/full stop to end the sentence. This explains why ESL students in the

Arts College in Kuwait University write long sentences without using a comma, a semicolon, or a full stop. In other places in Arabic, it is correct to end an idea/ a sentence with a comma not a period. There was no western-style punctuation in classical Arabic, which poses a major problem for text segmentation [9]. Teaching English as L2 for target learners whose L1 is Arabic can be efficiently exploited in authorship attribution studies, especially considering punctuation and conjunctions together [10].

Here is a sample of a student's paper showing the influence of the Arabic punctuation on the English punctuation



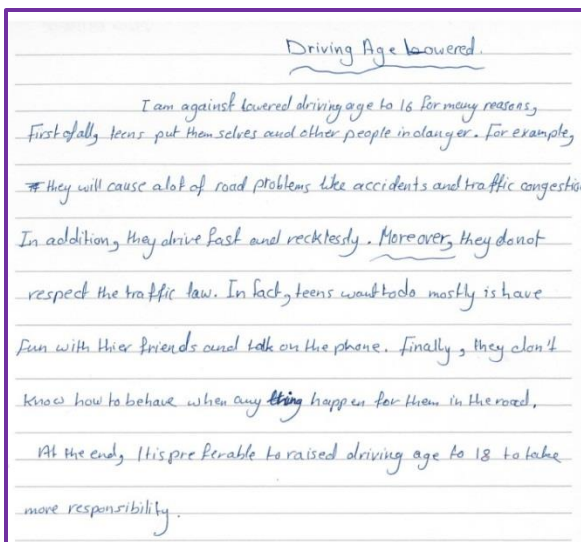
Thinking in the first language (Arabic) while writing in the second language (English)

Performing in another language can be challenging to most non-native speakers. It is a problem that most ESL students face in almost every aspect of the language. Relatively

speaking, when ESL students in the Arts College try to perfect their English in a non-English based environment, they encounter an apparent challenge. In class, they shift the language from mother tongue Arabic into the English language medium, which slows down the performance. They work on transferring/translating what they aim to say in Arabic into English. This stands as a considerable obstacle as the deficiency in English they suffer from halts their attempts. This creates a noticeable frustration and embarrassment they experience in discussion sessions in class. In the writing sessions likewise, students revealed that they strove to produce a well-structured paragraph, coherent and comprehensible. They said that they were disappointed when they found a low grade given to them, or sometime a failure grade. When were asked about their opinion, participants said that they added extra information and explained the points in many sentences and repeated the meaning for emphasis and clarification. Little they know that getting an idea in the first language and presenting it in the target language based on the first language's techniques demolishes a good portion of the meaning and the work consistency. They openly mentioned that during the writing assessment, the homework assignment and/or class work, they approached the topic exactly the way they would approach a topic in Arabic. They used their first language's sentence structure and technicality. In fact, the best techniques they used was elaborating an idea, repeating the meaning, emphasizing the same point and assuring the clearness of the message. It was out of style and approach in the English composition, and it was the reason to get a low grade. They assured that they used good language, diverse vocabulary, and brought

strong points however. In Arabic, they would get an excellent mark for the work in this pattern. As a result, they expected to get a high grade. It is known that the more content-rich and wording-diverse it is, the greater possibility there is for errors at the morpho syntactic level. Theoretically speaking, the more the students try to add information/points into their writing papers and pay minor attention to the grammar or language, the higher the possibility for falling into making mistakes in grammar and spelling. It is also a chance to generate an incoherent, inconsistent paragraph. Sometimes, students would fall into lack of logic flaw in their essays. They want to write a lot and give elaborate description/explanation, but they drift away in the non-harmonic pattern of writing what causes it to become incomprehensible to the reader. According to Ellis (1985) [11], it is through analyzing learner errors that we elevate "the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process".

Here is a sample of a student's paper showing the confusion between the Arabic and English styles:



Limited competence in English vocabulary

A good amount of vocabulary a student acquires is the best strategy to perform well in writing a paragraph. Being able to write an appropriate and effective piece mainly depends on the competence of vocabulary a learner has. The interesting way to present it is another technique to a good essay. Thus, vocabulary is the foundation of a strong, elegant piece of writing and the successful way to pass the message a writer aims to reveal. This is also applicable on the ESL students as well. The performance in language development is subject to improvement in writing skills [12]. A text of an effective ESL writer must be cohesive, logical, clearly structured, interesting and properly organized with a wide range of vocabulary and mastery of conventions in mechanics [13, 14]. Consequently, many students said that lack of vocabulary hindered them from expressing well on the paper and, eventually, blocked their brains from presenting their ideas, as they wanted to do. Moreover, a major number of students revealed that the brain effort they made to attain the target word for the text had caused them to waste a considerable time in the test. Such time, as they said, was precious to finish the writing piece on time and submit the paper. Naturally, the more stress students go under, the lesser concentration they can master. They disclosed that they knew the idea they aimed to write about and knew the right word (in Arabic) to be in the situation, but could not get the corresponding word (in English). That caused waste of time and gave them a feeling of unintelligent. Another difficulty that confronted students during the writing tests was to apply the appropriate and correct word that comes

from formal English instead of the common slang words they hear in the media. The writing assessment, hence, is a serious challenge for the ESL students in the Arts College. In fact, they learned their mistakes/deficiencies from that source.

Solutions and Suggestions

The writing process for ESL students is a challenging, overwhelming task. This was apparent in the responses of the Arts College participants; they assured that they faced various problems related to writing a paper in English, or smaller, a paragraph. Some students have even suggested having a list of instructions and/or standards to each writing course in the syllabus so that they can read, understand, follow and achieve the goal of the course. From the gathered information and data above, I reached some solutions and suggestions to work as a mediator between the writing courses and the ESL students who need to understand and react so that they pass the course.

1. The difference in grammar between English and Arabic

- a. Students need to immerse in exercises, practices and illustrative examples of grammatical structures, language application, etc., in order to be familiar with the special nature of English.
- b. Teachers can give students grammar rules and practice through interesting listening comprehension lessons, group conversation, reading passages, and so on, then ask students to deduct the grammar structures from each context.
- c. Teachers can engage students in class discussions where every student can

speak. The teacher, afterwards, together with the classmates can correct the grammatical and even pronunciation mistakes.

- d. Students need to take diverse homework assignments related to various grammar rules in order to 'digest' the structures and be able to generate written pieces as demanded with lesser mistakes as possible.

2. The difference in rhetoric between English and Arabic:

- a. Teachers can ask students to write a short essay or a paragraph in the beginning of the semester in order to see/discover their stylistic, linguistic, and rhetorical system in writing. It is a way to uncover their rhetorical identity as well as decide their ability to write well and deploy the grammatical rules.
- b. It is vital that teachers determine the grammatical patterns, which students are confused by and make the most mistakes, especially in tenses, prepositions, and punctuation. Grammar is the path to a correct, logical piece of writing in addition to mastering the language and excels in it.
- c. Students must know the difference in linguistic systems. Articles and prepositions, for instance, are difficult to many ESL students to distinguish between and use. They mix in the use of prepositions, or sometimes put an article in the wrong place. This naturally happens due to the influence of the first language that has such a system they follow. Therefore, teachers' duty is to disperse any confusion in forms and systems between the first language and the target

language. Here in this study, I am applying the rule on clarifying the difference between Arabic and English.

- d. Intense class activities in writing can help students become familiar with the style and the linguistic forms of the second language so that they can generate better writing pieces. Such activities can allow teachers to both; trace the students' weaknesses in the writing skill in general, and promote students' expectations in/ from the writing course. In fact, class activities help students to achieve their goals if some aim to be writers.

3 The difference in punctuation between English and Arabic:

- a. Punctuation in English has a distinctive order that singularizes it from other languages. Exercises related to punctuation rules are important to construct a well-organized, grammatically correct and easy to read paragraph.
- b. Learning punctuation symbols, on the other hand, allows students to strengthen their knowledge in punctuation and makes them able to use the symbols correctly. They can even revise their peers' papers in class and guide them to the correct form.
- c. Practicing conversation within grammar sessions helps the students to implement the punctuation rules orally and in a communicative way. The pause in speech, for example, means a period. Whereas, mentioning similar things in consequence in a conversation/talking means commas, while identifying/explaining a word means a semicolon and so on. The performed dialogue/discourse should be

accompanied with the suitable voice tone and/or pitch so that the listener can differentiate between the diverse punctuation symbols and comprehend them. This is a good way to prevent the brain from forgetting the fed information about each symbol.

- d. Editing written works by the teacher helps students detect the wrong punctuation uses and correct them. It is another strategy to teach students punctuation functions.

4 Thinking in the first language (Arabic) while writing in the second language (English):

- a. Brain training: the teacher can ask their students to think about something; any object, and then ask them to get the name in Arabic but secretly, not aloud. Afterwards, the teacher might ask them to get the meaning in English. If they do not know the word, the teacher can tell them the answer, and better, write it on the board and ask the students to write it down.
- b. Random talking: the teacher can direct the students to engage into conversations in class and talk as much as their language capacity allows them- without focusing immensely on the grammar rules.
- c. Relation building: the teacher should speak English more in the class so that students can get used to hearing the language. The teacher can choose a word (or a group of words), explain it, ask the students to repeat it after him and add it to their vocabulary list. Then, the teacher can tell the students to use it in sentences.

- d. Immersing in English language environment: the teacher may create a setting for students outside the classroom where they are free to speak English and exchange information and conversations. They can also start groups in mobile phones to contact, connect, and exchange anything they like in English. They can also connect in the social media programs.
- e. Media usage: the teacher may recommend the students to benefit from the media to improve their language competence. They watch movies; listen to songs, watch programs and shows on TV, radio, the internet and so on.

5 Limited competence in English vocabulary:

- a. Students should read more from sources outside the syllabus. Easier topics to read and comprehend such as children stories are more useful to learn the language from and extract vocabulary words from as well as they are interesting to read.
- b. Students can be familiar with the given lists of vocabulary (in the writing books). If they memorize the words, they can use them in writing the essay assigned for them. Related words are better to use in context than other terminology.
- c. Teachers can help students to learn synonyms of words so that they can have multiple word-stocks for writing and expand their competence of vocabulary.

Conclusion

The need to develop the writing skills for ESL students in the College of Arts/Kuwait University is overwhelming. Students must

believe that their weakness in writing is not chronic, nor is it dissolvable. They need to be guided to the best solutions and suggestions to overcome their inability in producing correct writing pieces. They, as well, need to know strategies to obtain a more control on their language. Teachers should also enlighten the students that among the major problems/obstacles they should work on is to differentiate between the two languages (English and Arabic) when they think and perform in class. Defusing the complicated relationship between Arabic and English is in fact a crucial necessity towards allowing the students achieve a second language and be bilingual. In order to allow the students generate well in English spoken and written, teachers/educators might need to originate strategies to help separate between the two domains (the mother tongue and the target language). A major result from the current study shows that the key to acquire a good, proper language is to establish English as an independent language apart from Arabic and its rules (in the ESL learners' minds). Thus, the few barriers (that were mentioned earlier in this study) that block the ESL students' endeavors to acquire the language are cultural and rhetorical rather than weakness in the language skills and in linguistics.

Findings

1. The weakness in the student's language competence is not only grammatical and linguistic, but rather, cultural, socio-cultural, and rhetoric.
2. Variation in abilities and mentalities appear clearly and is evident in the learners' level. Some students have more motives and

- persistence to learn the language than others do. Other students, on the other hand, are timid, unsure of their skills and overwhelmed with amount of material they learn every day.
3. Weak students whose language competence is limited are aware of their vulnerability. They know that they are unable to apply the language skills correctly. In fact, most weak students are not in oblivion of their level.
 4. Weak students can improve their academic performance in English if they receive intense class activities and constant homework assignments.
 5. Teachers need to investigate more about their students' abilities and ask about their preferences in language (what language skill they prefer and which one they are good at). It is useful to know students' goals and expectations of studying English in order to help them boost their language skills.
 6. Building a writing class plan/timetable helps students to know the general curriculum of the course and get the best of it. It also allows a clear view, a command over, and the incentive to write good pieces. Eventually, writing must go according to clear steps and professional instructions given by the teacher.
 7. Teachers might choose writing topics according to subjects students prefer like football and cars for boys, fashion and travel for girls and so on. Starting a writing lesson with favorite topics break barriers between students and the unfriendly writing session.
 8. Students, sometimes, propose to plan a lesson or a course (in advanced levels). In addition, they might give suggestions during the course flow so that they can keep track of the material assigned in the course and perform well.
 9. Teachers may need to conduct various writing assessments to choose the best one in which students have performed the best. It is a way to assure students good grades from one side, and release the exam-fear-syndrome from them from another side.
 10. Some students love to write, but they are weak in grammar and in applying the paragraph format. It is better if teachers, sometimes, focus on students' writing content rather than language rules because students need to be given the chance to express themselves and reflect their identity on paper. Also, it should be acceptable to leave them show passion/creativity to the topic they write about because it would certainly help them feel more confident on paper and towards English classes in general.

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Conflict of interest: NIL

Funding: NIL

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