Linguistic Factors Affecting Wring Skills of College Learners in Oman

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1. Introduction

Writing is the most challenging of the four language skills and also the most neglected one (Arapoff, 1972). It is the skill required for most academic tasks such as taking and making notes, writing passages, essays and exams, doing projects, making presentations, and communicating through emails. It is also the most commonly assessed skill in exams at various levels and for various purposes.

Motivation is the most crucial determining factor that can affect an individual's language learning (Hohn, 1995). However, a learner's motivation level could be influenced by various linguistic, attitudinal, and environmental factors which comprise a major part of their life. A thorough knowledge of these aspects can help the teacher understand the learners better and to identify appropriate learning and teaching strategies to help them enhance their writing skills.

2. Need and Focus of the Study

The present study focuses on the linguistic factors which may be responsible for the lack of motivation towards writing skills of learners at undergraduate college level in the six colleges of Applied Sciences in Oman located in Ibri, Sur, Rustaq, Nizwa, Sohar and Salalah. These colleges enrol approximately 7000 students (Al Shmeli, 2009, p2). It reveals how various aspects related to the learners' L1 such as their pronunciation, spelling, script, inhibitions and challenges influence those of their L2.

3. The Study

The study was conducted using structured interviews and questionnaires as well as informal conversations with students, their parents and grandparents, English teachers of all the six colleges of Applied Sciences, school teachers, and teacher supervisors. Analysis of the errors in the target learners' written work also offered greater insight.

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4. Findings of the Study

The study shows that there are various linguistic factors that are directly responsible for the low motivation level of undergraduate EFL learners towards enhancing their English writing skills.

The first impediment to writing effective essays in English is that the target learners have to also master writing in the Modern Standard Arabic, which is their medium of instruction throughout their schooling. Altoma (1969) states that there are at least two different languages in every Arab country: 1) Classical Arabic also known as Literary or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is slightly modernized and is used in written communication, lectures, speeches and on radio and television, and 2) Colloquial Arabic, with its many regional dialects, which is the first language of all Arabs. MSA and Colloquial Arabic are different in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. It was found that the students commit quite a few errors in their writing in MSA since it is their L2. When they have no control over errors in their own language, they naturally find it hard to cope with the challenges of a foreign language with its own distinct script and writing conventions and other nuances.

English is a language written not only in the Roman script unlike Arabic, but also in the direction opposite of what the target learners are used to reading and writing. This makes it doubly challenging to learn. It means first the learners need to decode the script and then move in a direction contrary to what is normal to them.

Moreover, the learners find it difficult to follow the handwriting of the English teachers because different foreign and local teachers write differently, and some teachers may have a bad handwriting which can consume a lot of students' time and energy besides focusing on their own writing skills.

Students also find Arabic grammar rules complex. Therefore, learning a new set of grammar rules of a foreign language such as English is all the more difficult for them to follow and apply accurately.

The data analysis shows that spelling in English is challenging to the learners as English is a non-phonetic language. The Arabic spelling system does not orthographically represent the common vowels that are articulated. In other words, they do not write the short vowels while writing words.

For example, /kitæb/ is written as 'ktab' (كتاب), and /ʌhmed/ as 'Ahmd' (أحمد)

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Therefore, many students do not write the vowels while writing some Arabic names in English such as 'Humood' which is written as 'Hmood'.

The same strategy is extended to writing English words.

For example, 'remember' is written as 'rmmbr'.

Such errors occur because of negative transfer.

Learners have not acquired dictionary skills in learning Arabic because of the complications in its use. As a result, they tend to avoid consulting the dictionary in English classes and miss exposure to reading opportunities which are essential for improving writing skills.

It is also noticed that all government documents are naturally in MSA to ensure comprehension for all the citizens of Oman. Students who study in Arabic medium schools learn English just as a subject for less than five hours a week. Those who study in English medium colleges also do not get adequate exposure to the target language in day to day communication in colleges because they are required to fill in application forms in Arabic. In addition, internal communication such as notices, circulars, and text messages to students from the administration and other departments are all written in Arabic in English medium colleges.

Another significant reason identified is that many major subjects in the college are taught in Arabic to ensure optimal comprehension for the students. Thus, students are deprived of a major source of exposure to the target language (English). Inadvertently, these teachers are sending across message that English is not always essential in an English medium college, rather than simplifying their lectures in English to suit the language level of the learners.

Moreover, many English teachers seem to lack linguistic competence in English. This is not a negative comment about these teachers, but a sad revelation of the teaching and learning situation in Oman where teachers are forced into teaching English even though they are linguistically ill-equipped besides being unprepared to face the disinterested large classes.

4.1 Error analysis

The analysis of errors in the essays and other forms of writing point to two main reasons: the interference or influence of the mother tongue and the influence of the other skills on their writing. Here, errors are referred to also as problems since errors are basically caused due to the problems that the learners encounter while using the language.

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Errors in the handwriting of learners

The handwriting of some learners is difficult to decipher as they do not resemble the English alphabet and contain letters that do not have a regular size.

Reason: They are not used to writing from left to right and have not been given sufficient practice in writing the English alphabet when they were introduced to it. As a result, the strokes they use to form the letters move form right to left making some letters appear inaccurate.

They are also confused between the letters 'b' and 'p' and write a 'b' in place of a 'p'.

Reason: there is no /p/ in the Arabic language, which causes them to pronounce the /p/ as /b/ which may be directly transferred into their writing.

For example, 'paper' is misspelt as 'baber'.

Errors of capitalization

Capital letters are missing, or the wrong letters are capitalized including those in the middle of a word.

Reason: There is no concept of capitalization in Arabic

Errors in spelling

Many spelling errors occur due to various factors discussed below. Nation (1990, 2001) describes knowing a word or a lexical item receptively and productively as involving form, meaning and use. Knowing the form of a word receptively involves being able to recognize the sounds of the word, whereas productive knowledge involves being able to pronounce the word. In this section we can see how the inaccurate reception and production of a word may affect its spelling besides other possible reasons mentioned.

Errors resulting from direct transfer from other skills into the written form

Some learners are unable to separate words in the correct place. For example, they write *'indy and'* instead of 'India and' or *'Want come'* instead of 'want to come'.

This happens especially in word boundaries when a word ends in a sound that is repeated at the beginning of the following word. Here they transfer words directly from what they have heard into their writing.

Errors due to the differences in the English and Arabic alphabets and the sound systems:

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Many learners find it difficult to comprehend the non-phonetic nature of English since the only language that they read and write is Arabic which is phonetic. As a result, they tend to spell English words as they hear them.

For example, they spell 'family' as 'famile', 'with' as 'weth' and 'college' as 'collig' which are phonetically similar. They find it difficult to differentiate between the vowel sounds /i/ and /e/, /u/ and /ɒ/ and use them interchangeably.

For example, they spell 'sit' as 'set' and 'cooking' as 'coking'.

The possible reason for this error is that there are words in Arabic in which the vowel sounds mentioned above are used interchangeably. For example, 'Ibri' is pronounced as /ibri/, /ubri/ as well as /ʌbri/, and the sounds /u/ and /ɒ/ are represented by the same letter و in Arabic. As a result, the learners use the same rule while spelling words with the two sounds.

Similarly, some learners use the letter 'y' in words that have the sound /ei/.

For example, they spell 'today' as 'tody' or 'maybe' as 'mybe' or 'miby'.

The reason may be that in Arabic, the letter ي (read as /jə/ and the equivalent of the English letter 'y' which stands for the sound /j/) represents the sounds /j/ /i/, /i:/ as well as /ei/. As a result, the students apply the same rule while spelling English words that contain a 'y' misjudging that the Arabic ي and the English 'y' have the same vowel functions in written English.

They are confused between the consonant sounds /p/ and /b/, /dʒ/ and /g/, and /f/ and /v/ and use them interchangeably while speaking which affects their spelling as well.

For example, they spell 'pay' as 'bay', 'orange' as 'orang', and 'life' as 'live'.

In the case of /p/ and /b/, as mentioned earlier, since /p/ is not available in Arabic, their ears are not tuned to differentiate between the two bilabial plosives. Therefore, they use the letter 'b' in the place of the letter 'p', for example, 'bebsse' for 'Pepsi'.

However, they are aware of the fact that there is a difference between the two and that they need to pay extra attention to the voiceless plosive, some learners become over-conscious and write 'p' even in the place of 'b', for example, 'pak' instead of 'back'.

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They find it hard to distinguish between /ʤ/ and /g/ probably because they use the two sounds interchangeably in Arabic as there is just one letter ج (called /ʤi:m/ or /gi:m/).

They cannot differentiate between /f/ and /v/ perhaps because their ears are not able to distinguish between the two sounds. In Arabic, there is no /v/, but there is a /f/ which is very close to the sound /v/. Hence they pronounce /v/ as /f/ and it affects their spelling also.

Another error committed by the learners is in spelling words with silent letters, for example, 'teacher' is spelt as 'teache', 'message' as 'massag', 'mosque' as 'mawsk', 'talk' as 'tok', etc.

The possible reason is the unavailability of silent letters in Arabic. They do not see the reason why a letter is present in a word, but is not articulated. Therefore, they write what they hear from the teacher or from the audio in the class.

Omission of Some Vowels

It is noticed that some learners tend to omit the vowels in words that have the short vowel sounds /i/, /ə/ and /u/.

For example, they spell 'finish' as 'finsh', 'student' as 'studnt', and 'Quran' as 'Qran'. Modern Standard Arabic has a six-vowel system: /ə/, /a:/, /i/, /i:/, /u/ and /u:/ out of which only the long vowels are represented in writing. The short ones are indicated only in children's books, the Quran, and some special texts for foreigners who are not familiar with the alphabet (Panos and Ruzic, 1983). As a result students may apply the same system while spelling English words omitting some short vowels not realizing that they are considered spelling errors in English.

Errors in Vocabulary

Some of the errors in vocabulary may be due to the application of mother tongue writing style. For example, in Arabic, when they refer to their teacher, they address him/her as 'my teacher'. As a result, they make sentences such as, 'Good bay my best teacher' and 'Yes my teacher'.

It has been observed that many learners are unable to differentiate between the words 'he' and 'she'. They tend to refer to female members as 'he'. The reason could be that in Arabic the word for 'she' is /hija/ and for 'he' is /hua/. As /hija/ sounds partly similar to the English 'he', they are confused and, therefore, use 'he' instead of 'she' in English.

Most learners use 'learn' or 'study' instead of 'teach' as we can see in the following sentences.

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My teacher learn me grammar.
He studying me English.

The reason is that in Arabic there is just one word for all the three terms. Therefore, they apply the same rule in their English sentences.

Errors in Syntax

As mentioned earlier, there are many structural and syntactical differences between English and Arabic, but the learners apply the Arabic rules in their English writing and speaking. Following are some errors they commit in their English writing. Most of them are due to negative transfer which Callies (2015, p 130) describes as a transfer of the learner's L1 patterns which are different from those of his/her L2 "causing errors in language production". According to Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008:182), these errors occur "when assumed similarities conflict with objective differences".

Most learners tend to omit the indefinite article, as in: 'It's happy family', or join the indefinite article 'a' with the noun that follows as if they were a single word, such as , 'alot' instead of 'a lot' or 'afriend' instead of 'a friend'.

This could be because Arabic has no indefinite article and the learners find it difficult to comprehend and apply the concept of articles in English. As Scott and Tucker (1974) identify, there is an indefinite morphological marker in Arabic which is usually neither spoken nor written which shows that indefiniteness is indicated by the absence of a definite article. Extension of this concept in their written English leads to omission of the indefinite article in English.

They sometimes use the definite article in the place of the indefinite article since it comes more naturally to them as Arabic uses a prefix 'Al' pronounced as /ʌl/ or /el/, which is the equivalent of a definite article in English, before all nouns including names of places.

Most learners make sentences that lack subject-verb agreement while writing in English. For example: He live in Izki.

The rule about adding an 's' to the verb for third person singular in the present tense is a concept that is quite difficult to follow for most of the learners even in higher classes in the college perhaps because such a concept is not available in Arabic.

It is common to see learners use present tense instead of past tense. The reason for errors in past tense could be that in Arabic the verbs are not inflected in past tense. Moreover, the

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auxiliary verb /kænə/ is added before the verb to indicate completed actions. Panos and Ruzic (1983) explain that while English can combine various tenses with simple, perfective and progressive aspects, Arabic, which is a highly aspectual language, makes two basic distinctions: the perfect and imperfect aspects. The perfect describes a completed action (frequently in the past), whereas the imperfect describes a situation not yet completed (often in the present or future). Since the meaning of the aspect is based on the completion or incompletion of the action rather than the time of completion or incompletion, both aspects can be used to describe an action in the past, present and future. As a result, learners use the same rule for making sentences in English which leads to errors.

The data shows that many learners omit the copula while forming sentences in English. For example: *His exams very easy.*

The reason for this type of error could be that the sentence mentioned above is grammatically correct in Arabic. Panos and Ruzic (1983) explain, '... there is no surface structure copula or verb present in Arabic sentences of this type.'

For example, in Arabic, the equivalent of '*Ahmed is in the house*' is /ʌhmed fi: ʌl beit/ which is '*Ahmed in the house*' if translated word to word. This is precisely what the learners do while forming sentences in English. They think in Arabic and translate their Arabic sentences into English to use them in their writing which leads to errors.

Most learners omit the apostrophe followed by an 's' when required to indicate possession.

For example: My father name Mohammed.

Sometimes they over-generalize the rule by adding the apostrophe followed by an 's' even when making plurals.

Reason: In Arabic there is no concept of apostrophe and a letter or suffix to indicate possession.

In some cases, a vowel sound is used to show possession in Arabic, but they do not require an apostrophe and a letter as in English.

It is observed that most learners tend to use the adjective after the noun as in, '*book English*' instead of '*English book*' or 'pen blue' instead of 'blue pen'.

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The reason is that in Arabic, the adjective follows the noun, and so the learners transfer this rule to English.

Many learners tend to make negative sentences without any form of 'do'.

For example: *The teacher not help. I not come to class yesterday.*

Arabic does not have an equivalent of the English operator 'do'. As a result, learners apply the Arabic rule while using English.

The above mentioned challenges are likely to discourage the slow learners from working on their writing skills since almost everything about the target language may appear difficult to them.

Conclusion

Knowledge of L1 is useful for the learners to understand L2 to an extent. However, L1 may also be a great hindrance to learning L2 as it forces the learner to think in the first language preventing him/her from thinking in the target language leading to many errors. In order to analyze the errors and understand the challenges that the learners encounter while learning or being forced to learn a foreign language, the teacher needs to be familiar with the learners' native/first language and its nuances. It can help the teacher understand the learners better and provide them with the linguistic as well as motivational support that they need.

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