

Difficulties that Arab Students Face in Learning English and the Importance of the Writing Skill Acquisition

Key Words: Lexical field – academic proficiency – syntactic repertoire – context – lexical categories – textual component – interpersonal component – effective communication – social and cultural context.

In this article there is a mentioning of the growing need and interest for Arab students to study English with the emphasis on their limited and weakness in the interpersonal component that limits their writing skills.

Improving reading and conversational ability are a precondition and needed to prepare learners to express themselves in the writing mode.

A number of studies argue that many ESL students face difficulties in learning English at various levels and with different skills (e.g. McCardle and Hoff, [15] Hoffman, [10]). Most material looked at the commonwealth experience, without much attention to the Arab region (Seargeant, and Swann,[17]; Mayor, and Allington, [14]; Tagg and Hewings , [20]).

Recently and with the spread of global English as an essential tool for communication, trade and worldwide exchange, more interest has been centered on the concerns, problems and needs of Arab learners studying English. The British Council seminar (Beirut, Lebanon, 2012) emphasized the need to study the specific linguistic and cultural requirements of learners in different regions in order to devise an appropriate curriculum that would cater for the specific needs of the learners.

Based Frames Theoretical and research frames in studies on second language identify a specific number of years required to claim competence in academic aspects of the second language. Collier [3], Klesmer [12] and Cummins [5] propose the interval of “at least 5 years of continued practice” to achieve a good level of appropriate academic proficiency in the second language. Academic proficiency is understood to cover writing skills, reading comprehension, knowledge of a range of vocabulary items including specific lexis and technical terms, and a developed syntactic repertoire.

Corder [4] argues that the range of writing skills required need to reflect agreement of content with context and the subject matter discussed. Halliday [8] proposes functional categorization of text components into the lexical field, comprising

processes, participants and circumstance that relate to the subject matter. The interpersonal component comprising lexical and grammar items that refer to the author and audience relations, within the specified genre. The textual component includes syntactic, cohesive and language specific characteristics of the specific adopted spoken or written mode of communication. Weakness in the lexical field identifies limited vocabulary and may feature in over extensions of lexical categories, use of super ordinates, repetition, etc. Weakness in the interpersonal component identifies limited writing skills, basic process writing application and inability to produce effective communication. Weakness in the textual component relates to general inability to use correct grammar rules to produce a coherent text. Ellis [6] argues that proficiency in reading comprehension is a prerequisite to writing competency. Conversational ability, obtained through reading and speaking a second language, is needed to prepare learners to express themselves in the written mode. Gardner [7] proposed a socio-educational model that combines four aspects of EFL learning: the social and cultural context, the learner's motivation, the setting (formal or informal learning), and the learning outcomes. The social and cultural contexts relate to specific social and cultural patterns of communication, as well as how the foreign language is perceived in the context of the learner. This has bearing on the second motivation aspect, and the perceived value that learning the foreign language would bring to the learner. The setting is concerned with both opportunities of teaching and learning and opportunities for using the learned language in formal and informal situations. The learning outcomes relate to measureable ability resulting from EFL learning. Kern [11] explains that culture specific schemata influence mental representation of abstract concepts that are related to things, events and situations, and this leads to difficulties when learners write texts using the second language. Odlin [16] explains that the transfer model is causing difficulties in the second language and relates it to cognitive issues resulting in word-by-word translation from L1 to L2. Odlin proposed that learner should be trained to translate "the idea" as a whole. Shaugnessy [18] refers to the concept of "derailment" in the learner's performance, when the learner ignores the characteristics of any of the two languages and produce texts that draw on a mix of both. According to Swain and Lapkin [19], cognition is very important. Learners should understand the subject of discussion, produce an outline to help them focus, then brainstorm to add appropriate material for their discussion or writing task. Understanding of the task and its

requirement help the learner focus on relevant material and use appropriate sequencing to secure a logical and coherent presentation. Cummins [5] identifies two types of language competency. The first type is: the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) that includes the surface skills of listening and speaking that are relatively acquired quickly. The second type of language competency takes a longer time to develop because it relates to the learner's ability to cope with academic demands. This is termed as the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

In second or foreign language contexts, the learner, as argued by Cummins, draws on a set of skills and metalinguistic knowledge from his first language when working on the second. Cummins perceives that learners develop a Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) basis for their languages that they may draw on to help them understand features in either of the two languages. Cummins confirms that, the conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input comprehensible in the other language. Krashen [13] explains that there are two independent systems of second language performance, the acquired system and the learned system. The acquired system is responsible for producing sub conscious processes without paying attention to the form. Acquisition results from extensive exposure to meaningful interactions. The learned system is responsible for producing conscious processes that attends to the form. Learning results from the formal instruction of language rules. Krashen also proposes the existence of the monitor, which is the result of the learned grammar. The monitor applies the learned system to the language output and corrects the items that do not correspond to the learned rule. Some learners, according to Krashen, overuse the monitor; others are under users who do not use their learned systems effectively. Optimal users use the monitor appropriately. Another premise targeted by Krashen is the input hypothesis. The input hypothesis proposes that learners acquire the second language through comprehensible input that is, input appropriate for their current stage of linguistic competence. Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a successful syllabus. The learner improves and progresses when he or she receives second language input that is one step beyond his or her current stage of linguistic competence.

Communication problems facing Arab learners of English: A personal perspective

General Problems of Arab Learners of English

Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers, e.g. Abdul Haq [2], Harrison, Prator and Tucker [9], Abbad [1] and Wahba [21]. The students in Jordan, for example, learn English in their native country, where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers at school are native speakers of Arabic. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language. This is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists, and this rarely happens.

English is not used in daily situations. Arabic is the language used everywhere. The situation is different in the United Arab Emirates, for example, where people use English in their daily lives because of the multilingual nature of the residents. It is thus more difficult for Jordanian learners of English to communicate in the target language in real life situations.

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