

**An Investigation into the Structural Errors of
Arabic Learners' Written Persuasive Discourse in English**

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Abstract

The substantial profile of Arabic speaking countries in modern political, religious and economic spheres has led to ever increasing interaction between the Arab and Western worlds. Never before has it been more important to facilitate communication between Arabic and English speakers, and unsurprisingly the number of Arabic learners choosing to study English as a foreign language is increasing year on year. The increasing volume of literature suggests that perhaps the Arabic learner of English faces a more arduous task than other EFL learners, particularly when it comes to writing. One of the most widely cited reasons for these difficulties is the vast differences between the structural systems of Arabic and English writing. The current investigation was conducted with 12 Arabic speaking learners at upper-intermediate level at a UK Higher Education Institute. It aims to better understand the reasons behind Arabic students' structural errors in academic persuasive discourse and to ascertain the effectiveness of a five-hour intervention designed to facilitate progress in overcoming them. This was measured in two ways: qualitatively through the use of a reflective journal, and quantitatively through the analysis of written samples. The overall results were positive, with an improvement rate of 42% in the total number of structural errors committed. However, the low sample size and inherent issues within the Error Analysis criteria mean that the results were highly subjective and cannot be realistically applied outside of the current sample population. This project has taken an initial step towards understanding and resolving the problems faced by Arabic students in writing, however there is still a great deal of work to be done in this area.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Both the Arabic and English speaking worlds are characterised by great diversity in terms of language varieties, geographical locations and both historical and cultural background. The substantial profile of Arabic speaking countries in modern political, religious and economic spheres has led to ever increasing interaction between the Arab and Western worlds. Never before has it been more important to facilitate communication between Arabic and English speakers, and unsurprisingly the number of Arabic learners choosing to study English as a foreign language is increasing year on year.

Over the past ten years, UK Higher Education Institutions have seen an increase in their numbers of Arabic- speaking students. According to the Higher Education Statistic Agency (2012), there were 302,685 non-EU students studying at Higher Education (hereafter H.E.) Institutions in 2011/12, which represents a 6.1% increase on the previous two years. Not all of these students would necessarily be from Arabic speaking countries; however the Middle East is one of the largest providers of international students to the UK, alongside China.

In addition to H.E. Institutions, there are numerous other options for Arabic students to study in the U.K. The intense linguistic demands of studying at this level in a second language have meant that many Arabic students choose private providers of foundation courses, such as the one detailed in this study. Their role is to prepare students for study at undergraduate or master's level. When one considers the intense demands of studying at this level in a second language, it becomes clear the importance of ensuring that students have the necessary

linguistic skills to be able to face the challenge.

When studying any language, it is a foregone conclusion that learners will encounter a number of obstacles and commit numerous errors. A number of different authors in the field of linguistics (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972; Dulay and Burt, 1974; Richards 1971; and James, 1998) have written about the errors of second language learners and the importance that these errors have in understanding the process of language learning. Selinker, (1972) coined the term of “interlanguage” to describe this situation. Interlanguage is an idiosyncratic, dynamic linguistic system developed by second language learners, which contains linguistic features of both the first (L1) and target language (L2.) It is theorized that when learners transfer features of their L1 that are different to features of their L2, errors occur. Other linguists, such as Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) disputed the role of the L1 in language learning and argued that errors were caused by the misunderstanding or misapplication of rules.

The concept of Contrastive Analysis, whereby the linguistic systems of two languages are compared in order to find similarities and differences, and therefore likely problem areas, is something that began with Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. This was based on the concepts of Structural Linguistics and Behaviourism, which were in their heyday during the early 20th Century. Although it is now widely agreed that focusing solely on probable areas of negative transfer from the L1 is not an effective way of teaching, to discount the L1 entirely would be illogical. By combining the insights regarding interlanguage with the learner’s prior linguistic knowledge of the L1, it is possible to categorize and account for errors that occur.

The increasing volume of literature suggests that perhaps the Arabic learner of English faces a more arduous task than other EFL learners, particularly when it comes to writing. One of the

most widely cited reasons for these difficulties is the vast differences between the linguistic systems of Arabic and English. Among the first to document these differences were Yorkey (1974) and Thompson-Panos & Thomas- Ruzic (1983). These early taxonomies of errors detailed problem areas in pronunciation, most notably the /p/ and /b/ phonemes,; vocabulary and spelling, due to the Semitic root system that Arabic writing is based on; and writing, which they remarked as being characterized the infrequent use of sub-ordination and overuse of co-ordination. These seminal articles generated a plethora of research, Diab (1996) Mahmoud (2000) Absimara (2003) and Al Khasawneh (2010) detailing similar frequent grammatical, lexical, semantic and syntactic errors brought about by the transfer of linguistic features of their L1 into the L2.

Although considerable research has been devoted to documenting, categorizing and understanding the linguistic errors that Arabic learners make, to the researchers' knowledge, (being a non-Arabic speaker) rather less attention has been paid to providing practical examples of how to help learners overcome them. It is therefore for this reason that the purpose of this investigation is to ascertain the effectiveness of a five-hour intervention designed to facilitate progress in overcoming structural errors in writing, more specifically focussing on academic persuasive discourse.

The specific research questions to be investigated throughout this study are:

RQ 1: What are the perceived structural problems faced by Upper-Intermediate level Arabic students when writing in English?

RQ 2: Can a Contrastive Analysis of the features of sentence structure in English and Arabic

provide possible linguistic reasons for these problems?

RQ3: What is currently being done at the current educational establishment to help students with these problems?

RQ 4: Can the implementation of a 5-hour writing skills class improve the sentence structure error rate of these students?

It is hoped that the current study will provide a better understanding to both the researcher and the learners involved about the kinds of errors that they are making, and possible ways to overcome them. The results will not only add to the body of literature that exists regarding Arabic students and writing, but will also for part of continued professional development for both the researcher and her colleagues.

The remainder of the project will proceed as follows. Chapter two is an exploration of the existing base of literature related to this topic, beginning the concepts of Error and Contrastive Analysis that provide theoretical underpinning to the current investigation. Studies of a related nature with Arabic learners will also be reviewed and evaluated in order to justify the scope of the current study. Chapter three details the steps and procedures taken throughout the study and will provide justification for the mixed-methods approach to data collection which has been adopted for the project. Chapter four will present, analyse and discuss the results of the study, drawing comparisons to the expectations of the researcher and the existing base of literature. Chapter five outlines the principle limitations of the project to reflect upon ways that it could be have been, and may be improved in the future. Finally, chapter six will draw together the main

findings and conclusions based on the results in attempt to answer the research questions outlined in this chapter, and make suggestions for further study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter is an exploration of the existing base of literature related to the topic of Arabic learners' errors. In order to understand the errors of the learners in this study, it is necessary first to understand the concepts that provide theoretical underpinning to the current investigation, those of Error and Contrastive Analysis. Moving from theory into practice, previous studies of a related nature will also be reviewed and evaluated in order to justify the scope of the current study.

2.1. Definition of Errors

A number of different authors in the field of linguistics (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972; Dulay and Burt, 1974; Richards 1971; and James, 1998) have written about the errors of second language learners and the importance that these errors have in understanding the process of language learning. Each individual author has their own terms or labels to define and categorize different types of what can be generalised as 'unsuccessful language attempts.' When studying and investigating the errors of our own second language learners, is it important to consider a number of different aspects: the importance of errors in the language learning and teaching process, the different types of error that learners can make, the difference between an error and a mistake, and, finally, ways of recognising and diagnosing our learners' errors.

When considering the importance of errors in language learning and teaching, the words of Pit Corder, considered by most to be the 'father' of Error Analysis (hereafter EA), seem to sum up the significance effectively. "Errors are significant in three respects: because they tell the teacher what

needs to be taught; they tell the researcher how learning proceeds and they are a means whereby learners test out their language hypotheses.” Corder (1967) cited in James (1998:12). Interestingly for teachers, errors can be seen as evidence of a kind of 'in-built syllabus' – what they have and haven't acquired from the input that they have been provided with. This knowledge helps teachers to target teaching accordingly in attempt to minimise or eradicate the errors being made.

Language errors come in many forms and accurate labelling and defining of these different forms is crucial when it comes to understanding the learning process. Errors should be categorized by type and also by the severity of the error i.e. whether it impedes the meaning of the intended message. Again, each writer has different ideas about the different categories of errors, but particularly thorough examples can be found in Richards (1971) and James (1998). Typically, errors are divided into categories such as substance errors – misspellings or mispronunciations; lexical errors – false friends or collocations; grammatical errors – morphology and conjugation; syntax errors – clause, sentence and inter-sentence; discourse – coherence and cohesion and, finally, pragmatic errors – formality and social distance.

These errors can then be further categorized by the level of error being committed. James (1998:6) again provides of a guide of the level of errors in terms of four interlinked categories: grammaticality, acceptability, correctness and strangeness and infelicity.

When a learner commits an error which cannot be correct under any circumstances
e.g. “I goed to the cinema” - this would be considered to be ungrammatical. However, the problem occurs when they make errors which could, under certain circumstances be correct but that do not convey the intended meaning in this case *“the milk turned rotten”* – in this case we may have a lexical or semantic error. When non-linguistic factors determine the use or non-use of a phrase,

then this is judging the acceptability of an error. Often some phrases can be grammatically or semantically possible in some cases, but not others. An example might be "*I came to England last year to study the English*" - the acceptability of this erroneous use of the definite article would depend entirely on the intended meaning and the understanding of the listener/reader. The concept of 'correctness' of an error would depend on it obeying prescriptive normative standards of language, which are often disobeyed by native speakers and learners of English alike e.g. "*who/whom.*" Very often utterances that would be deemed as acceptable and may not, in fact, be correct.

Another important distinction to make is that between a 'mistake' and an 'error'. Once again, there are a number of different definitions given by different linguists, most notably Chomsky, cited in Corder (1967), Edge (1989), Hammerly (1991) and James (1998). Chomsky makes a distinction between "what a speaker knows of his language (competence) and how he uses it for communicative purposes (performance)". It can be assumed that once a native speaker reaches cognitive maturity, they would have a perfect grasp of their language, yet on occasions they might produce what could be deemed as ungrammatical utterances. This utterance does not indicate that the speaker has problems in understanding his own language; it is simply an isolated incident of the failure to use their language system correctly. The same can be said about L2 learners' utterances. It is important to make a distinction between an error, which indicates a lack of understanding or command of a language system, and a mistake, which can usually be detected and corrected by the learner without the need for feedback from an interlocutor.

Edge (1989:11) classifies all incorrect language as mistakes but divides them into three categories. Slips – caused by processing problems or carelessness and could easily be corrected if given the chance; Errors- wrong forms that are comprehensible but could not be corrected by the student

even if pointed out – despite having being taught to the class previously; and finally, attempts – situations where students attempt something that is beyond their linguistic resources by activating their compensatory communication strategies. This is a more humanistic approach to error classification as it relies heavily on the knowledge of the teacher and the previous learning experiences of the teacher. It does help to highlight the difference between the input that the teachers give to students, and the amount of that that is converted to intake and acquired by the learner. This then allows the teacher to re-focus their efforts.

James (1998:76) also includes the concept of corrigibility in his definition of errors and mistakes. If a student is able to recognise and correct the 'wrong language' then it would be deemed as a mistake, if they cannot then it would be classed as an error. This is a simple yet effective definition, which is not without its limitations. For example, students may know instinctively that something is “wrong” but not have the necessary linguistic competence to be able to correct it unaided.

This review has been just an insight into the complexities that teachers and researchers face when attempting to define and categorize the errors that our students make. However, this is only the beginning. Krashen (1982:145) clearly states that the “accurate description of errors is a separate activity of the task of inferring the sources of those errors.” The causes of learners’ errors, the reasons why they do the things that they do or say the things that they say are in some ways even more significant than the errors themselves. This is where the process of Error Analysis compared to the L1 comes in.

2.2. Error analysis and Role of the First language.

James (1998:2) Describes EA as the “process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language”. EA has been an important tool for linguists, researchers and teachers alike in understanding the process that our students go through when acquiring a language in order to be able to help them. Corder (1967) is regarded as the pioneer of EA. Before his seminal (1967) article, errors were, as he described, “of no particular importance. Annoying, distracting but inevitable parts of the process of learning a language about which the teacher should make as little fuss as possible.” Corder was one of the first to suggest that learner's errors were the result of the interference of the first language (L1) in the learning of the second (L2).

The understanding role of the L1 in language learning, like so many other areas of EFL, has undergone a number of changes over the last 60 years. This process was described rather aptly by Gass and Selinker (1983:3) as having been “somewhat like a pendulum, swinging from all to nothing, and now finally settling somewhere in the middle.”

The shifts in schools of thought regarding language and the language learning process have led to a number of different viewpoints regarding the effect that a student's L1 can have on their ability to learn any given language. Beginning with Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (hereafter CAH), based on the concepts of Structural Linguistics and Behaviourism. It hypothesized that language learning is no different than any other type of learning, simply a matter of habit formation. Errors occur when habits from the L1 are transferred to the L2. A view substantiated by Faerch and Kasper (1987) who detailed transfer as a psycholinguistic process whereby L2 learners activate their previous linguistic knowledge in developing and using their interlanguage (Selinker, 1972.) Particularly for learners of a lower level, the mismatch between their communicative goal and target language knowledge will lead to learners using the linguistic resources that they

currently have, and transferring what they know from their L1 to their L2. In cases where the linguistic features are the same in both languages – this can be seen as positive transfer, where it is different there is negative transfer, which would also result in an error. Understanding and predicting the mistakes that learners make, was, according to CAH, simply a matter of comparing the linguistic features of the respective languages and looking for examples where there were contrasts. By focussing primarily on these areas during the language learning processes, learners would be able to eradicate their errors.

During the 1970s, theories regarding language and learning were moving away from the previously held beliefs of behaviourism, towards a more cognitivist approach. It was at that time that Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) pioneered the Creative Construction Hypothesis (hereafter CCH.) The CCH de-emphasized the role of the L1 in language learning. Language acquisition was considered to be a creative process whereby the students used their own linguistic resources and cues from external input to create hypotheses about the target language. These hypotheses are then either proven or disproven in use. A viewpoint supported by Krashen's Monitor Model (1979, 1981, 1982) Richards (1971:174) provided further backing when he claimed that a number of errors observed in the acquisition of English as second language could not be attributed to transfer from the L1 and were in fact due to a misunderstanding or misuse of the language rules.

He detailed four main non-linguistic causes of errors:

1. Over-generalization: Learners apply the rules that they already know to a new situation in order to reduce the burden e.g. omission of the third person“-s”
2. Ignorance of rule descriptions: very similar to previous – application of rules to situations that they do not apply. E.g, restrictions in relative clauses *“The man who I saw him”*

3. Incomplete application of rules – learners do not apply rules to the correct extent which then results in deviant structure. E.g. question and answer forms “*Do you read much?*” “*Yes, I read much.*”
4. False concepts hypothesized – these errors stem from the way that languages are presented in teaching – textbooks etc. Teaching often focusses on “difficult parts” of the language rather than the language as a whole. This leaves the learner with a patchy, unrealistic view of the language and they begin to make false hypotheses about functions of certain aspects e.g. over use of is/was for present/past tense

Although it is now understood that simply comparing languages cannot accurately predict learner errors, to discount the L1 entirely would be illogical. By combining the insights regarding interlanguage with the learner’s prior linguistic knowledge of the L1, we can categorize and account for errors that occur. This was referred to by Gass and Selinker (1979) as “Language Transfer;” they also argued that some aspects of certain languages, due to their salient nature, may be likely to transfer than others, a concept referred to by Eckman (1977:321) as ‘markedness’. This principled eclectic approach can offer teachers techniques which can be used to analyse their students’ errors and with a degree of certainty determine whether they are caused by L1 interference, inherent problems within the L2 language system, or even problems with the teaching. This final shift in perspective has taken place in the past 20 years, with a range of studies reviving the interest in the role of the L1 in language learning. Notable examples of such studies into Arabic learners will now briefly be reviewed.

2.3. Studies of Arabic Learners (General)

Yorkey (1974) and Thompson-Panos & Thomas- Ruzic (1983) were three of the first to document the extensive differences between the English and Arabic writing systems. Their seminal articles provided an insight for EFL language teachers into the difficulties faced by Arabic learners of English. They detailed problem areas in pronunciation; most notably the /p/ and /b/ phonemes, vocabulary and spelling; due to the Semitic root system that Arabic writing is based on and writing, which they remarked as being characterized the infrequent use of sub-ordination and overuse of co-ordination, also referred to by Yorkey (opp cit) as the “wa-wa” method of writing – the use of short, simple clauses, conjoined with the Arabic junctive ‘wa’. The two studies were examples of contrastive analysis in its purest form. The problem areas that were suggested were based solely on the comparison of the two language systems of Arabic and English with little empirical evidence. In addition to documenting the types of errors that Arabic students often make, these two texts also considered a more practical and pedagogical side to EA, and suggested a number of classroom techniques and activities which could serve as practice to try and eradicate the aforementioned language use problems. It is not clear, however, how effective these materials are when used with Arabic students.

The points raised in Yorkey (1974) and Thompson-Panos & Thomas- Ruzic (1983) were further substantiated by Scott and Tucker (1974) who evaluated the proficiency of 22 Arabic speaking students enrolled in a low intermediate intensive English course at the American University of Beirut. In this study, errors were analysed and divided into categories of performance mistakes, mother tongue interference and false interlanguage analogy. Arabic interference was most visible of in the students’ frequent omission of the copula, in preposition and article errors and in the repetition of subjects and objects. (p.94-7) The findings of this study do provide empirical data to

support the claims made by Yorkey (1974) and Thompson-Panos & Thomas- Ruzic (1983), although the reactively low sample size and the use of only one level of proficiency means that the results are not generalizable to all Arabic learners. It was, however, one of the earlier attempts to systematically record and characterize the errors being made Arabic EFL students and provided a model for further study.

This particular type of study has been replicated several times over the past 30 years with different sample sizes, proficiency levels, nationalities, and study environments in order to provide a definitive list of the types of errors that students frequently make. Further taxonomies of errors have been provided by Diab (1996), Mahmoud (2000), Absimara (2003) and Al Khasawneh (2010) detailing similar frequent grammatical, lexical, semantic and syntactic errors brought about by the transfer of linguistic features of the L1 into the L2. Further analyses of errors revealed that certain errors (articles, semantic, word order, overuse of co-ordination and omission of the copula) could be due to negative transfer from Arabic. Whereas others (prepositions, plurals and concord) were due to the complexities of the English systems. The main limitation of these studies is that there was no focus regarding the severity of the error. As previously mentioned, it is important to consider not only the type of error being made but also the result of the error being committed and whether it impedes the intended meaning. By categorizing the most prominent errors at different levels of linguistic ability, teachers are also able to prioritize their error correction and ensure that students are able to achieve what is expected of them at a particular stage in their learning.

Al Khasawneh's (2010) study was of particular interest as it focussed on students in the HE system and investigated the students' feelings regarding the errors that they make. It was found that the students attributed their problems to their weak foundations due to inadequacies in the methods

of teaching in their countries. Although claims made by these students are highly subjective and could not be taken as tangible evidence, they do raise the issue of other, non-linguistic, causes of errors. The possibility of errors being influenced by anything other than the L1 was an issue first raised by Richards (1971) in his study about non-linguistic causes of errors and further substantiated by Al Khasawneh study.

The reality that Arabic students are taught to approach written tasks in a different way or perhaps have a different approach to learning than would be expected in an English speaking western educational setting is certainly an area of interest to be studied further.

2.4. Studies of Arabic learners (Sentence Structure)

Other researchers have chosen to focus on particular aspects of written errors in order to study them in more detail. Studies by Johnstone (1987), Adam (1991) Mohamed & Omar (1999) , Al-Khresheh (2010, 2011) were particularly relevant to the present study as they focussed on semantic or structural errors.

Johnstone (1987) analysed the tendency of Parataxis in Arabic persuasive writing. Two extracts of literary Arabic writing were compared with their English translations. There were two main findings of this comparison. The first was that Arabic persuasive writing is highly repetitive. This was evident in the frequent use of lexical couplets e.g. “of his soul and of his mind,” and a tendency to repeat ideas through the use of paraphrasing. One reason given for this repetitive nature is what Koch (1983a) describes as “presentation.” This style of discourse makes use of repetition to keep the idea in the forefront of the readers mind, thereby persuading them of the subject being presented. The second finding was the paratactic nature of the two original texts. Arabic writing makes use of short, simple clauses which are combined with the use of co-ordinating conjunctions. The first text analysed consisted of four sentences, all of which began with the co-ordinating conjunctions “wa” (and) or “fa” (as). This is further reflected in the findings of Yorkey (1974), Adam (1991), and Al- Khresheh (2011).

Adam (1991) is a comparison between two texts (Arabic and English) which have the same communicative function. The text was analysed using Halliday's (2004) SPOCA analysis and descriptive functions. The principal findings were almost identical to that of Johnstone, with the texts utilising repetition and reiteration as a means of retaining information in the reader's mind. The use of junctives is further analysed to understand why Arabic prefers co-ordination over subordination. (p.67)

“Wa” in Arabic, which can be closely translated to “and” in English, has four separate functions.

1. As an intra-utterance additive equivalent to “and” in English.
2. As a sense/unit divider, similar to the comma in English.
3. As a continuative-additive equivalent to a semi-colon in English.
4. As a inter paragraph continuative.

It is clear that the role of junctives is distinctively different in Arabic when compared to that in English. We cannot compare the two by simply translating the junctive form “wa” itself. This stark difference between the two functions would serve to explain the findings of Al-Kresheh's (2011) investigation into the interlingual interference in the use of “and” as a co-ordinating structure. This study analysed samples of writing from 120 students at Jordanian High schools. A total of 426 errors (which represented mistakes made by 82.5% of the sample population) were found that could be attributed to interlingual interference.

The final aspect of sentence structure to be considered is the use of punctuation. Mohamed & Omar (1999) compared a number of Arabic and English texts with reference to organisation. In addition to the previously discussed concepts of repetition and co-ordination, the study found that Arabic sentences tend to be much longer and contain more clauses than those in English. The differences between English and Arabic sentential punctuation are briefly explained.

Arabic uses a series of dots to mark the ends of sentences.

single (.) Equivalent to a “full stop” in English

double (..) Equivalent to a “comma” in English

triple (...) No direct English equivalent

When we consider the English equivalent (or lack thereof) of the different Arabic punctuation marks , it is easy to see why Arabic students can often compose long stretches of text with little or no punctuation.

The choice of punctuation will also depend on what Mohamed & Omar (1999:301) refer to as “completeness.” They argue that English sentences are based on the concept of syntactic completeness. Several sentences may be used together to demonstrate all the ideas about a certain point until it is considered pragmatically complete. In English this might represent one sentence, one paragraph or perhaps even a whole text. In contrast, Arabic sentences comply with a more pragmatic concept of completeness. That is to say that if there is further information to be added about a certain point, the sentence cannot be considered as complete, so a double or triple punctuation mark will be used. A true 'full stop' will only be used when there are no further points to say about a certain point and the sentence is pragmatically complete. Again, this represents a contrast not only in the structures of Arabic and English, but also a cultural difference in terms of what constitutes a complete concept. This has notable implications in the teaching of writing to Arabic students.

2.5. Scope of the current study

This review is just a brief insight into the range of literature available on the problems faced by Arabic learners of English when writing. Although it is extensive, there are certain limitations and gaps which, it is hoped, the present study will aim to target.

The first limitation is the lack of research carried out in an immersion setting. The majority of the studies have been conducted at high schools, language schools or universities in the respective Arabic speaking countries. A number of studies Richards (1971), Johnstone (1987), Mohamed & Omar (1999) and Al Khasawneh (2010) have suggested that differences in the educational background and generally accepted concepts in terms of writing may be at least partially responsible for some of the errors that Arabic students make when writing in English. It is therefore probable that students who are studying in a different educational setting to their own may display different linguistic problems to those in Arabic speaking countries. The present study will focus on Arabic students living and studying at a UK Higher education institute.

The second limitation is the distinct lack of reference to pedagogical implications of the findings of these studies. To the knowledge and scope of the researcher (being a non-Arabic speaker) Yorkey (1974) is one of the only researcher who has suggested classroom materials to help the students eradicate, or at least improve the errors that they are making. He did not, however, go so far as to provide any evidence as to how effective these materials may be.

Therefore It is hoped that the current study can contribute to the existing base of literature in the following two ways:

- By providing information about the type of errors made by students who are studying in an immersion setting on an undergraduate foundation course at a UK university.
- By using a Contrastive Analysis of Arabic and English to designing and pilot a range of classroom materials aimed at eradicating or reducing the errors that the students are making.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling

The present study is an action research project carried out at a small private education institute which specialises in providing foundation level study to prepare students for university study at both pre-undergraduate and pre-master's level.

The sample originally consisted of 19 Arabic speaking students in their final term of a three-term program designed to prepare them for a university entrance language test at B2 level. All the students had previously had a minimum of 2 years' experience learning English both in their home countries and the UK. This meant that they had previously received some form of instruction on writing in English. The diverse range of backgrounds, however, meant that it was difficult to determine exactly what kind of instruction. At the time of the present study, in addition to their subject specific classes taught entirely in English, they received 6 hours of additional English tuition per week, which were aimed specifically towards the entrance exam. However, these English classes are mixed nationalities, which means any input regarding writing skills may not have been tailored to suit their specific needs.

The exam to be taken consists of five different sections, designed to test the four major skills areas of listening, reading, writing and speaking, as well as use of English (grammar and vocabulary.) The sections are equally weighted; meaning 20% of their final grade for English is based on their writing skills. Appendix A shows the criteria used for grading the writing section of the exam. There are three criteria which are of particular interest to this study as they make specific reference to areas of language that, according to previous studies by Scott and Tucker (1974), Yorkey (1974), and Thompson-Panos & Thomas, Arabic students have particular problems with.

“For the most part, the text is paragraphed appropriately throughout and assists the reader in following the writer’s line of thought.”

“Variety of linking words clearly marks the relationship between ideas in the text.”

“Punctuation and spelling are reasonably accurate. There may be minor slips or errors but these do not detract from the message or the overall effect of the piece of writing.”

B2 Writing Descriptors (Appendix A)

All students at the school had previously taken this English test at the end of their second term of study, with around 50% of them passing and moving into a more advanced level class. Any Arabic students who had not achieved a pass grade in the writing section were invited to join an extra 'writing skills class' – which formed the basis of the sample of the present study. The voluntary nature of the class caused some difficulties. As previously mentioned, this class consisted of 19 students, a number which fell to 12 during the course of the term due to non-attendance.

Although they share a common first language of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) the students come from a range of different Arabic speaking countries including: Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar and Kuwait. This created a possible variable within the research as each of these countries has its own regional dialect of Arabic which is spoken by its people. This situation is referred to by Mahmoud (2000) as *Diglossia*. The principles of Language Transfer outlined in Lado (1957) stated that errors occur when habits from the L1 are transferred to the L2. This raises the question as to which standard of Arabic would they be transferring from; what effect would that have on the errors that they are making. Previous studies on transfer by Thompson-Panos & Thomas Ruzie (1983); Scott and Tucker (1974) Mahmoud (2000) and Al- Khresheh (2010) have proven somewhat inconclusive as to which features of language are transferred when a learner speaks more than one variety of an L1. However, the general consensus is that as MSA is the only language that is used for writing, this is the language that students tend to transfer from when

writing in English. For this reason, only features of MSA will be considered when analysing the written errors of the students, however the nationality of the students will be recorded and considered if any notable patterns do occur.

3.2 Data collection.

As with all types of empirical research, a key dichotomy for consideration is the use of different types of data, both quantitative and qualitative. Various linguists and researchers alike have given a range of definitions for these different types of data and the reasons for and against using them. Wallace (1998:38) summarises: “Quantitative is broadly used to describe what can be counted and measured, and therefore can be considered objective. Qualitative is used to describe data which are not amenable to being measured or counted in an objective way, and are therefore subjective.” This is a simple, yet effective definition which not only explains the attributes of the different types of data, but also begins to explore the advantages and disadvantages of each type. Quantitative data is useful for recording facts and figures; fixed data – in this study for example the number of a certain type of error committed or the increase/decrease in numbers of errors over time. For a sample of greater size, this type of data may have been sufficient. However, with such a small sample size, it was necessary to also analyse the data in a more qualitative way - showing the possible reasons behind these errors and giving an insight into the overall success of the intervention from the point of view of the practitioner. Richards (2003:9) suggests that the nature of qualitative analysis – a more person-centred approach - helps us to “understand the patterns and purposes in our behaviour and provide insights that will enrich our understanding.”

The present study will make use of a mixed methods approach to data collection. Johnson et. Al (2007) defines this as a type research which “combines elements of quantitative and qualitative approaches....for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.”

The complex, multi-staged nature of the current study calls for what Richards et al. (2012:308) refer to as an “embedded approach” whereby the quantitative and qualitative data collected in the earlier, exploratory stages of the study form the basis of an intervention design. It was hoped that the use of the mixed method approach to data collection and analysis would allow for triangulation to ensure reliability and validity of conclusions drawn from the study.

3.3. The study process

As with all action research, the present study was borne from an immediate need to solve a specific problem within the current learning and teaching environment. The needs were threefold: from the point of the view of the student sample, it was aimed to improve their writing skills in preparation for an exam. From the point of view of the researcher, it was an exploratory project to better understand how and why these specific errors are being made. Finally, from the point of view of the educational institution, it was an opportunity for the professional development and training of its teaching staff. The exploratory and multi-purpose nature of the investigation highlighted the need for a number of different stages within the project itself. These were as follows: a focus group conducted with the teaching staff, the collection of writing samples with a subsequent error analysis, the design and implementation of an intervention, the collection and analysis of a final writing sample and finally, reflection and analysis of the results. Further details regarding the different stages can be found below.

3.3.1 Focus group

Qualitative data was collected in the form of a focus group with the English teaching staff. The focus group was designed as an exploratory task to better understand the teachers' attitudes towards the errors made by Arabic students, the teaching methods currently used to deal with these problems, and the teachers' understanding of why these errors are made. The sample consisted of six ESL teachers, each with varying levels of teaching qualifications and experience. All teachers have some experience of teaching Arabic students in their current roles and some have more extensive experience of this type. One of the teachers, for whom English is a second language, speaks Arabic as an additional second language. Despite being chosen as a matter of convenience, this sample could be considered as fairly representative of the theoretical sample of all EFL teachers at Higher Education institutions.

One of the principal benefits of using focus groups as a data collection method is that it gives a greater focus on interaction and can produce more in depth data. However, one of the key ethical considerations cited by Morgan (1997:32) is that the data shared with the researcher is also shared with the other people in the group. The concern that Morgan highlights is that this could limit the topic of discussion and the interaction patterns. Although this is something to consider, the teaching staff at the centre are already well acquainted, and as the focus group was carried out as part of a CPD training day, it was hoped that they would be willing to participate and share as much information as possible.

The exploratory nature of the task called for a semi-structured approach to the focus group. It is for this reason that a collaborative discussion task was chosen based around the teachers working with samples of the selected students' writing. It was hoped that this approach and the use of a stimulus will produce a richer data than simply asking teachers to recount their thoughts or

experiences with Arabic learners.

Appendix B shows the tasks that the teachers were given during the focus group and any additional input materials. As can be seen, the session began with a brief introduction to the aims of the research and setting of “ground rules.” Morgan (1997) suggests that this is an important step in ensuring not only the smooth running of the session, but also in making the subsequent transcription and analysis of the session more straightforward. The next step was to ask teachers about their initial thoughts on working with Arabic students. This is what Janis (1982) refers to as an “opening statement.” By asking teachers to prepare individual statements, this helps to avoid 'groupthink', whereby respondents avoid expressing thoughts or ideas which do not match the overall thinking of the group. By asking them to give initial thoughts before seeing the samples of writing, it also helped the researcher to understand whether the perceptions of the teachers of Arabic students' writing were closely related to the reality or not.

The third stage of the focus group was for the teachers to work with samples of students' writing to analyse what they considered to be the greatest difficulties facing Arabic students when writing in English. At this time, the teachers were given no other guidance regarding how to analyse or categorise the errors, nor were they asked to grade or rank the samples in any way. The current base of literature on Error Analysis of Arabic students' writing (Yorkey 1974, Thompson-Panos & Thomas- Ruzic 1983, Diab 1996, Mahmoud 2000, Absimara 2003, and Al Khasawneh 2010) have detailed a number of different problem areas for Arabic learners, but none have gone so far as to say which errors would be considered to be the most serious. However, the principles of error analysis set out by James (1998) suggest that there are, in fact, different levels of error which can be judged by the 'acceptability' of an incorrect usage of language. By asking teachers to simply determine the greatest difficulties, the researcher was able to gain an insight into which errors

were considered to be the most grave, or perhaps carry the most importance.

The final stage aimed to investigate the teachers' knowledge and understanding of why these particular errors occurred, and what is currently being done to help the students. This was a key stage of the focus group and proved to be quite a talking point amongst the teachers. Although the use of CA as a tool for planning language courses has now been discredited, it cannot be denied that having at least a basic knowledge of the learners' L1 can be extremely useful in classroom practice. This focus group was what Morgan (1997) refers to as a "supplementary" focus group as the insights gained in this section were particularly useful when it came to planning the materials for the classroom intervention.

3.3.2 Writing sample 1 and Error Analysis

Quantitative data was collected in the form of an error analysis of the students' writing, both at the beginning and end of the intervention cycle. The writing samples provided by the students were analysed using an adaptation of the taxonomies used by Scott & Tucker (1974) and Abisamra (2003). This taxonomy has been selected as the level of detail is sufficient enough to show key areas of for development/improvement over a shorter time period. In addition, it has already been used with Arabic learners of English so should be suitable for the kind of errors that they are likely to make. The first sample was analysed for all error types – grammatical, lexical, orthography, structural and register. (See appendix H.) After analysis of the first simple, it was quickly discovered that the categories of error should be narrowed down, Upon personal reflection, and taking into consideration the possibility for improvement over the short time period of the teaching intervention, (5weeks) it was decided to focus primarily on the 'syntactic' errors - namely: conjunctions, run on sentences, punctuation, paragraph structure and essay structure. These were

all areas which had been highlighted as areas for concern in previous studies, and in the preceding focus group.

In order to ensure reliability of the error analysis, a sample of the scripts were second marked by another teacher and any discrepancies reviewed. Tools to calculate inter-rater reliability were considered based on Hallgren's (2012) overview and suggestions. Cohen's kappa coefficient was considered to be the most appropriate tool to calculate inter-rater reliability of ratings given by two independent raters. However, with such a small sample size, accurate statistical analysis was not possible. It was therefore decided that a simple agreement and disagreement rate would be calculated between the two markers. Hallgren's (2012) principle criticism of agreement and disagreement rates was that they do not account for ratings which may agree by chance, an argument which does not apply to the current situation.

Table 3.0 and Appendix L show the results of the second marking, with an overall inter-rater agreement rate of 80%. The agreement rate between the raters was not completely consistent throughout the process with sample 1 having a lower rate than sample 1 (73% and 87% respectively) Also, the different categories of error have somewhat inconsistent rates of agreement, with the categories of punctuation and run-on sentences having a low agreement rate of 67% and the categories of conjunctions, paragraphing and essay writing being 83%, 83% and 100% respectively. This highlights the subjectivity of certain categories of the EA tool, which could lead to inconsistencies in the results.

Table 3.0 Calculation of inter-rater reliability

Inter rater agreement						
Sample 1		Sample 2			Overall	
Total poss	15	Total Poss	15	Total Poss	30	
Agree	11 73%	Agree	13 87%	Agree	24 80%	
Disagree	4 27%	Disagree	2 13%	Disagree	6 20%	

Conjunctions		Punctuation		Run-on		Paragraphing		Essay	
Poss	6	Poss	6	Poss	6	Poss	6	Poss	6
Agree	5 83%	Agree	4 67%	Agree	4 67%	Agree	5 83%	Agree	6 100%
Disagree	1 17%	Disagree	2 33%	Disagree	2 33%	Disagree	1 17%	Disagree	0 0%

3.3.3 Classroom Intervention

The current intervention consisted of a 5-hour supplementary writing skills class. The reason for the unusually short duration was the time constraints of the college term, and the English exam dates at the end of the term. More hours per week for a longer time period, would of course have been preferable, however the nature of their course did not allow it. It is hoped, however, that if the writing class is deemed to be successful in the short period of time that it is run, then similar courses/classes will be implemented as part of the schedule at the beginning of the next academic year. At the very least, the materials used in this intervention, if proved to be successful, will be implemented at a much earlier stage of the students' courses.

The classroom materials used during the intervention are shown in appendix F. The design of these materials was based largely on the results of the two preceding stages of the research; the results of the focus group with the teachers and also the statistical analysis of the first writing sample. The materials were implemented during the writing-skills class and extra practice of the points covered in class was given as homework for the students to review in their own time. The classes were recorded, however it was decided by the researcher that the full transcription of the

lessons would be unnecessary, and instead a personal reflective-diary was kept to review the successes or shortcomings of each of the classes (appendix G). This reflection of the lessons formed part of the qualitative data that could be used to provide further evidence to support or refute the statistical results of the writing samples taken at the beginning and end of the intervention.

3.3.4 Final sample and Error Analysis

Upon completion of the five-hour intervention classes, the students were asked to compose a final writing sample based on the type of written task that they would need to do in their end of term exam. The errors were analysed using the revised error categories from the first sample taken at the beginning of the study. This allowed for the statistical comparison of the two results to show any changes over time. These were compared numerically primarily – to see if there had been an increase or decrease in the instances of a particular error. Specific errors were then analysed in more detail and compared with the qualitative data from the researcher's reflective journal to understand the possible reasons behind any improvements or, conversely to explain possible reasons behind any remaining errors. As with the first piece of writing, 25% were second-marked by another teacher to ensure reliability.

3.4 Validity and Reliability of the study

Rigour, which can be defined as the reliability and validity of any claims made by a particular study, plays an important role in any research design. Joppe (2000:1) cited in Golafshani, N (2003:598) gives the following definition of what a piece of research must be to be considered reliable and valid:

“The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable. Validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are.”

When considering the key concepts within this definition – the concepts of repetition of results, consistency over time, replicability of studies – one can observe the distinctly positivist nature of the wording and the need for accurate, replicable, empirical data to give definitive answers to the research questions. This somewhat rigid definition of what constitutes rigour within research design seems particularly applicable to the nature of quantitative research, which deals principally with facts and figures that can be sufficiently controlled through the restriction of variables. In qualitative research however, this definition is not so black and white. Qualitative research, by nature is more subjective, therefore considerably more difficult to be deemed as reliable. Action research in particular, with the heavily personal involvement of the researcher can be highly subjective. Although it could be argued that the concepts of reliability and validity are not strictly applicable to qualitative research, there still remains a need for some kind of qualifying check or measure to ensure that the results produced are as truthful and reliable as possible.

The present study, which made use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis, has aimed to ensure reliability and validity in the following ways:

1. The selection and trialling of an error classification system was based on a design by previous researchers Scott and Tucker (1974) and Absimara (2003). This allowed for the comparison of results between the current study and those conducted previously, ensuring the feasibility and

reliability of the results produced.

2. The error classification tool was also compared with the marking criteria of the exam that the students were taking (appendix A) to ensure that the areas of writing that were being tested were in fact relevant to what they need to do in order to pass their exam. This helped to ensure the construct validity of the items tested.

3. During the error analysis stages, 25% of the texts were second marked by an independent teacher who was not formally involved in the project. Any discrepancies regarding the marking were reviewed to ensure that the results were in fact reliable. As previously stated, there was an overall agreement rate of 80% between the markers, although with some inconsistencies across the different samples and error categories.

4. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data with regards to the analysis of errors. This was done in two ways. Firstly, specific examples of each error type were extracted from the text and analysed using CA of English and Arabic to find possible reasons for these errors. This error type was then compared over time to establish whether it had improved or not. In addition, detailed records were kept by the researcher detailing the progress of the intervention classes. Any significant changes in rate of errors were compared with the notes on that particular lesson to establish whether the input had had a positive or negative effect on the students.

3.6. Ethical considerations

As the focus groups and classes were audio recorded, the teachers and students were asked to sign an informed consent form (appendices D&E) which detailed the principal aims of the study, assurances of the anonymity of the data and their right to withdraw from the study at any point..

The design of the consent form is based on an example available in Richards et al (2012.) The anonymity of the staff and students has been maintained at all times through the use of pseudonyms or codes to protect the identity of the subjects.

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

The aim of the current study were to ascertain the effectiveness of a five-hour intervention on the principles of structure in persuasive academic discourse conducted with 12 Arabic learners of English at a UK Higher Education Institute. In this chapter, the results of the study are presented, analysed and discussed with comparisons drawn to the existing base of literature.

4.1 Stage One: Focus group.

The first stage of this exploratory research was to conduct a focus group with the teachers in the hope of gaining a better insight into their thoughts regarding the problems that Arabic students face when writing in English. It also aimed to establish what is currently being done by the teachers to help students tackle these problems, and what more could possibly done in the future. A summary of the main points can found below. The transcript, which has been analysed according to research question, can be found in appendix C.

4.1.1 RQ1: What are the perceived problems faced by Upper-Intermediate level Arabic students when writing in English?

4.1.1.1 Punctuation

The lack of punctuation used by Arabic students in writing was highlighted as an area for concern by a number of the teachers in the group. When discussing the possible reasons for this type of error, one of the teachers was able to provide first hand insight into the complexities of the problem.

T6 *I learnt Arabic in high school. They do have punctuation, but they don't tend to use it in English. I don't know why. And also, they mix capitals and small letters. I know that in Arabic they don't have capital letters; they only have just small letters. So maybe that's why. (Line 68)*

4.1.1.2 Long sentences and overuse of “and”

Two areas that were suggested to be linked to punctuation were the high frequency of long, run-on sentences with the overuse of “and” as a conjunction, themes that are apparent in the work of both Yorkey (1974) and Johnstone (1987). This, linked with the lack of punctuation, was the main focus of conversation for one of the groups of teachers. They began to speculate about some of the differences that exist between Arabic and English.

T2 *Or maybe they ignore it in their own language as well. Who knows. Maybe it's not so important as it is in English and therefore they think it's optional. That's punctuation, but this thing about long sentences, is that something that is a feature of Arabic?*

T6 *Is that not a result of the poor punctuation though? If they don't include punctuation, that's what causes the long sentences?*

T2 *You said about the repeated “and”*

T1 *Maybe they use that instead of punctuation?*

(lines 260-280)

The apparent contrast between what linguistic resources that are available to them and what they actually use is interesting. If Arabic does have punctuation such as commas and full stops, then it would stand to reason that they should be able to transfer them from the L1 to English. The work of Mohamed & Omar (1999) supports this claim. However it seems that from the teachers, point of view it does not seem to be the case in practice. This could be an area for further investigation during the intervention.

4.1.1.3 Influence of spoken on written forms.

Emphasis on spoken rather than written communication, particularly at the lower levels, was cited as the cause of a number of problems, including spelling and punctuation. Teachers hypothesized that this may be related to the educational background of the students and the way in which they had been taught English previously; with a focus on spoken rather than written English. This is an interesting hypothesis as the issue of inadequate preparation or teaching was one of the non-contrastive error analysis categories raised by Richards (1971). Previous studies into students in HE systems, such as that of Al Khasawneh'd (2010) have shown that the students attributed their problems to their weak foundations due to inadequacies in the methods of teaching in their countries.

T4 *Also, a suggestion that perhaps this is due to the emphasis on learning English as a spoken means of communication. Rather than learning how to write.*
(line 37)

4.1.1.4 Structure

Another area which could also possibly be attributed to students' previous educational input is the lack of structure in their writing– or at the least a structure which is not what would be expected in a more western education system. This concept of a difference in the approach to argumentative or persuasive writing was documented in Johnstone (1987) and Koch (1983a) who suggested that Arabic tends to be written in a paratactic, highly repetitive style, quite different to what would be expected of students writing in a U.K. HE system.

T2 *Another one was no structure to the text that they write, so for example they don't write in paragraphs so it will just be one, long text.*

(Line 25)

T5 *It's cultural; in they don't address the question as we do. Instead, they give a lot of background description before they actually get around to actually answering the question.*

(line 48)

4.1.2. RQ 3: What is currently being done to help students with these problems? What more could be done?

It would seem that for the lower level students, the teaching of writing is currently more a case of producing a fixed number of sentences based around a particular grammar point or lexical set. This was not considered by the teachers to be teaching of writing - just a very structured practice of formulating sentences.

One teacher suggested that for lower levels, translation could be used as consciousness raising tool for certain language points. This is an interesting concept as in the college, the use of translation is discouraged; electronic dictionaries and translators are banned from the classrooms and the first language is not allowed. These rules are implemented with varying levels of success, and students are often still very dependent on translation. Using translation as a tool could be an interesting way of delivering some of the content of the intervention in an area which has clear differences between Arabic and English.

T5 *But because at this level they are so dependent on translation, I actually use the translation process to identify and to help them understand that translation is a different subject to learning English, ergo, if you persist, you are going to continue to make this error.*

(line 193)

Regarding sentence length and punctuation, all that is done currently is written or oral feedback on writing. The teachers felt that more could be done – starting with teaching students basic sentence structure and then building upon this. However, they do not feel that they are able to tackle this problems as much as they would like to as there are other needs within the class with the different nationality students.

T2 *I think it's quite difficult, because we've got, so many Arabic students but then say half of the class will be Arabic and half of the class will be Chinese. It's really quite difficult sometimes because of the difference in level with their writing.*

T3 *I suppose you can try to address it can't you, in the feedback on their writing. You can point out, you know, that this is a very long sentence. You could try to break it up in some way.*

T1 *You can just raise their awareness more than anything. I don't think there's a particular task that we do or a specific part of the lesson that focuses on it.*

There were, however, suggestions of using the nationality mix within the class to the teacher's advantage by doing collaborative writing with students of different nationalities. By working together and having to justify their decisions and linguistic choices, the students may gain more of an insight than they would just by reading teacher's written feedback. Similarly, peer and self-correction was suggested as a way for students to become more competent in the skills of drafting and re-drafting their own writing, which would hopefully result in a lower rate of errors. That is, provided that they are what James (1998) refers to as 'corrigible' and students would be able to correct their mistakes un-aided.

T3 And maybe doing collaborative bits of writing, rather than giving them individual tasks. If they have to jointly construct something. They will have to talk about it won't they and discuss their options?
(line 360)

T3 I suppose then maybe an idea is, when you give them a piece of writing and rather than you going away and marking it, you could get them to go around the class and look at others and maybe correct each other's and comment on each other's and get them to recognise themselves which one is more understandable.
(line 320)

4.1.3. Overall findings and action plan

The results of the focus group were positive, if somewhat predictable, They served as a confirmation of the information already known through the literature regarding the types of problems faced by Arabic students when writing in English. The errors which were deemed to be most prominent, and therefore in most need of attention, were: spelling, punctuation, run-on

sentences and lack of structure when writing,

The teachers were aware that more needs to be done in the classroom to help Arabic learners with writing; however they feel somewhat restricted to what they can do as the classes are mixed nationalities. It was apparent that the teachers had some good ideas of how to deal with the problems inside the classroom (teaching basic sentence skills, translation, peer and self-correction) but did not feel that they were able to employ all of these tools without disadvantaging or even patronizing the other students. This provides some evidence of the necessity of an extra writing class specifically tailored to suit the needs of Arabic students.

The teachers had varying levels of experience with Arabic students, from the newly qualified through to teachers who actually spoke Arabic as a second language. This difference was noted in conversation and most teachers said that they would like to be more informed regarding the key differences between the two languages and the problems that this may lead to. This is another important finding which highlights the importance of the current study as professional development tool, which may serve to benefit the teachers as well as the students.

4.2. Stage Two: Analysis of Writing Sample One

A sample of the students' writing was collected at the beginning of the five-hour intervention. Students were given a past-paper essay question (appendix F) representative of the type of writing that the students would need to do for their exam. This was an individual composition task with a time limit of 40 minutes, again representative of the exam conditions.

The writing samples provided were analysed using an adaptation of the taxonomies used by Scott & Tucker (1974) and Abisamra (2003) which focussed primarily on five categories of error: conjunctions, run on sentences, punctuation, paragraph structure and overall essay structure. To ensure reliability of the results obtained, 25% of the samples were second marked by an independent teacher and discrepancies were reviewed (appendix L). The two markers had a 73% agreement rate for sample one, with the differences occurring in the three categories of conjunctions, run-on sentences and punctuation.

Table 4.0 Writing Sample One Error Classification

	B2 Grade	Conj	Punc	Run on	Para	Structure	Total
1	4.5	2	7	4	3	1	17
2	3	2	8	3	4	1	18
3	4.5	4	13	8	3	0	28
4	5	2	7	4	4	0	17
5	4	2	8	3	2	0	15
6	3.5	4	13	8	1	0	26
7	4.5	0	6	0	1	0	7
8	4.5	2	4	3	0	0	9
9	4.5	2	3	3	0	0	8
10	4	0	6	0	1	0	7
11	4.5	5	4	5	0	0	14
12	4.5	2	3	3	3	1	12
Total		27	82	44	22	3	178

Table 4.0 and Figure 4.1 show the error classification of the first sample of writing taken from the students. From this table we can see the total number of errors per student; per type of error and, overall.

The overwhelming majority of the students began the intervention with exam grades between 3 and 4.5 out of a possible 10 for writing. These grades would not yet be sufficient to pass the exam, as a minimum score of 5 or higher would be needed, provided the students successfully completed other sections of the test. What is interesting to note from these results is that the students with

the lowest exam grades (students 2 and 6), were amongst the students with the highest numbers of structural errors (18 and 26, respectively.) This gives some support to the suggestion from the focus group that structural errors are amongst the biggest problems faced by Arabic students when writing in English.

Figure 4.1: Writing Sample 1: Error Distribution by Type

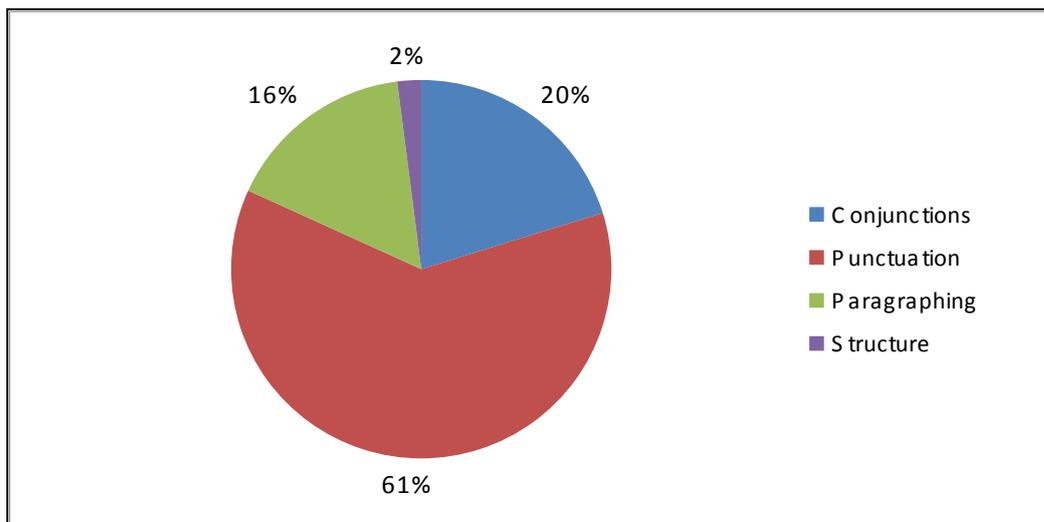


Figure 4.1 shows the error distribution of the first writing sample. It was decided during the marking process to exclude run-on sentences from this analysis as the three categories of conjunctions, punctuation and run-on sentences are interlinked, with the first two categories resulting in the third. It therefore seemed impossible to compare them numerically as separate mistakes when in fact they are one and the same.

Punctuation was by far the biggest issue facing the students when writing, as it represented 61% of the total structural errors committed. Paragraphing and conjunctions were fairly balanced accounting for 20% and 16% of the total errors, respectively. The errors related to the use of conjunctions is widely documented by researchers such as Yorkey (1974) and Johnstone (1987). Therefore, it comes as little surprise that they feature prominently in this writing sample. The

number of errors related to overall essay structure was negligible, accounting for just 2% of the total errors committed. However, it should not be forgotten that this category represents a small but significant minority, as failure to present writing in the correct format (i.e. in a recognised essay structure) is an important factor in the marking criteria (appendix A) and therefore would be penalised. A lack of essay structure, or even using a structure which would not be considered 'acceptable' in the current educational setting was something that had previously mentioned in the focus group and by Johnstone (1987) and Koch (1983a)

4.2.1 Examples of errors and Contrastive Analysis

It is important at this stage to define and exemplify the different types of errors, as they were considered by the researcher and second marker to be to be inherently interlinked.

4.2.1.1 Conjunctions

This category referred to the absence or misuse of a junctive. As can clearly be seen from the examples below, the most common mistake of this type was the over-use of the co-ordinating conjunction "and." Johnstone (1987) and Al- Khresheh (2011) also detailed the paratactic nature of Arabic, which favours the use of co-ordination rather than subordination. Comparison of the linguistics systems of the two languages helps to provide some explanation for this phenomenon, As outlined in Adam, (1991:67) the Arabic translation of the word "and" is "wa", which has four uses:

- (1) As an intra-utterance additive equivalent to "and" in English.
- (2) As a sense/unit divider, similar to the comma in English.
- (3) As a continuative-additive equivalent to a semi-colon in English.
- (4) As a inter paragraph continuative

As can be seen from the examples below, when the word “and” is substituted for “wa” in any other use than as an intra-utterance additive (1), it would be deemed as what James (1998) refers to as 'incorrect', or certainly 'unacceptable' in English.

Example 1.

“If children have mobile phones it is easy to find them and (3) if you need it any time and ()if you go to any place like a shopping cinter and (1) your child lost inside the cinter and (2) you can call him.”

Example 2.

“What is more and (2) there are many games and that would motivate them to study.”

Example 3.

“In these day there are many bad programmes and (1) websites to use from children and (co-ord vs subord) change their mind for something bad and (co-ord vs subord) they tetch the other children”

4.2.1.2 Punctuation

This category referred to the absence or misuse of punctuation and capitalization of letters. This is quite a difficult area to understand fully as the differences between Arabic and English are complex. Observation of the examples below highlights the complexity of this issue. In example 1, the student has failed to use a comma to divide the main and subordinate clauses. Mohamed & Omar (1999) tells us that Arabic does have a punctuation mark similar to that of the comma; however it has not been used in this occasion. This error could be attributed to a lack of understanding regarding clauses and punctuation – it could also, however, be deemed as what Edge (1989) refers to as a 'slip', caused by processing problems or carelessness and could easily be corrected if given the chance. In example 2, the influence of Arabic can clearly be seen, as the student is failing to use upper case letters where necessary (at the beginnings of sentences). This type of error does not obey prescriptive normative standards of punctuation, and would therefore be deemed an 'incorrect' use of punctuation. In example 3, one can observe quite a severe lack of

control over punctuation: no upper case letters; sentences split over different lines unnecessarily;
no punctuation between clauses and finally, incorrect uses of full stops.

Example 1.

"If they go somewhere and they lost they can call their parents to reach them."

Example 2.

"Next, it effects your learning. this case when you are in the school and you using your mobile in the class. this way you will not be constrating on the lecture."

Example 3.

"firstly, when the the child uses the mobile phone if you ask him about anything. he/she maybe pounch me or ignore me to focus with the game."

4.2.1.3 Run on sentences

This category referred to sentences which were deemed to be excessive in length for natural written English. This was quite a difficult category to define for two reasons. Firstly, it is something of an intuitive nature on the part of the marker which, as can be noted in the lack of consistency of the two markers, (APENDIX) lead to problems with reliability in the marking. Secondly, the first two categories of junctives and punctuation are interlinked with run on sentences. In fact, the misuse of junctives and punctuation are essentially what causes the run-on sentences. Two examples of this can be seen below.

Example 1.

"One of the disadvantages so that student and children might forget what they had learned. and for children may lose their language. and long holidays might be not good for some students."

Example 2.

"As long as, the negatives things are, sometimes the children using mobile phones in a bad way, such as, playing all the time and calling their friends, for example, if they playing all the time it will effect on their eyes because as we all know all the mobile phones have a small screen and the high concentration on the small screen and their eyesight going to decrease gradually, then they'll wear glasses."

In example 1, the student has tried to use both junctives and punctuation to mark the division of ideas into sentences. Although each division could be deemed, grammatically, as a complete sentence, the clauses are unusually short, which suggests influence from the paratactic nature of Arabic outlined in Johnstone. (1987) This produces what seems more like a list of ideas rather than the development of an argument which would be expected in English persuasive discourse. This concept of an utterance being technically correct, but not what would usually be expected would fall under James' (1989) category of 'strange' language.

Example 2 highlights how the incorrect use of punctuation can lead to abnormally long sentences, which could in fact be considered as a full paragraph. In English, these ideas would be more clearly divided into sentences with the use of full stops. However, as previously mentioned by Mohamed & Omar (1999) it would be fair to assume that In Arabic, as this whole stretch is thematically linked, it would be considered to be a complete idea, therefore would not require division into separate sentences.

4.2.1.4 & 5 Paragraph and Essay structure

These categories referred to a lack of structure beyond the sentence level. Although too examples can be found in appendix M. Errors related to paragraph structure were categorised in two ways. The first was the physical formation of paragraphs (clear indentation/spacing) and the second the substance of the paragraph – the use of topic sentences, development of ideas with examples or supporting details. These are two very different problems, which can both be linked to an influence from Arabic. In terms of the physical formation Mohammed and Omar (1999) explain that written Arabic does not have paragraphs. With regards to the substance of paragraphs, Arabic persuasive

discourse makes use of what Koch (1983a) describes as “presentation.” This style of discourse makes use of repetition to keep the idea in the forefront of the readers mind, thereby persuading them of the subject being presented. This is extremely different to the style of discourse expected in English persuasive writing, where one would expect the development of ideas through examples and supporting information.

4.2.2 Overall findings and action plan

Analysis of the first sample of writing has clearly shown that the students in this sample have a number of difficulties when it comes to sentence and intra-sentence structure, most notably the mis-use of conjunctions, lack of punctuation and overall paragraph structure. A comparison of the expected norms in English and Arabic written discourse has helped to provide some possible reasons why students commit these errors, as their L1 continues to have an influence on their performance in their L2. The next step will be to devise a series of materials that can be used to help students understand the kind of errors they are making, the reasons behind them, and, most importantly, and opportunity to reduce their frequency when writing in English.

4.3. Stage Three: Development, rationale and implementation of materials

The outline of the intervention is shown below, and copies of the classroom materials can be found in appendix F. The content of the classes was based on the frequent types of errors present in the first writing sample: sentence combining skills, punctuation, paragraph structure and overall essay structure. Where possible, the extracts of different genres of writing were used; however there was a particular focus on Essay writing as it was considered by the researcher, and the students, to be the most relevant to their current needs. Throughout the course of the intervention, a reflective journal was kept by the researcher to monitor and evaluate the progress. Extracts of this journal are shown below, the full text can be found in appendix G.

4.3.1. Lesson one: Sentence combining skills.

Rationale:

Previous studies by Yorkey (1974), Johnstone (1987) and Adam (1991) have shown that the sentence structure of Arabic persuasive discourse is considerably different to that of English. Arabic favours paratactic sentence structure: short, simple clauses with the frequent use of co-ordination and repetition. In contrast, English is characterized by the use of subordinating structures and development of arguments through the use of supporting evidence; showing the relationship between different ideas within the text. This was also shown in the high frequency of errors related to the incorrect use of conjunctions and sentence fragments from the initial writing sample. The aim of this lesson was therefore to raise students' awareness of the difference between co-ordinating and subordinating clauses, and different ways of linking them together using conjunctions.

Implementation:

Students were able to identify conjunctions but had very little awareness about co-ordination and subordination. Visual aids and kinaesthetic activities were employed to demonstrate the difference between the two. This was time-consuming but seemed to be effective. The students coped quite well with the sentence combining task using different types of linking words. The work on “and” was of particular interest as this seemed to be the most overused conjunction in the initial writing sample. The students were quite shocked when they were told that it shouldn't be used to link series of sentences together in the same way that the Arabic “wa” can. This is an example of what Faerch and Kasper (1987) refer to as negative transfer – the role of the words 'and' and 'wa' is very different in the two languages, therefore cannot simply be transferred. Another area which still needed more work was the verb patterns related to the different junctives – particularly those which had to be followed by a gerund. Extra practice was given for homework but not completed by all students.

4.3.2 Lesson 2: Punctuation**Rationale:**

In the focus group with the teachers, a colleague has suggested the use of translation as a tool for students to recognise simple, straightforward differences between their L1 and English. Mohamed & Omar (1999) suggest that Arabic does, in fact have punctuation, but according to the results of the focus group, it is rarely used. This is something that the researcher wanted to better understand and convey to the students of the sample through the use of translation and subsequent comparison of English and Arabic versions of a semi-formal letter.

Implementation:

There were three main developments in this lesson that were noteworthy and needed further reflection:

Firstly, the results of the translation led to some debate amongst the students about what would be deemed “acceptable” in Arabic. Generally speaking, the consensus was that although Arabic does have similar punctuation features, very few of the students had used them in their translations. This confirms the original hypothesis suggested in the focus group regarding the existence but infrequent use of punctuation in Arabic writing. It was also something of an eye-opener for the students and seemed to help them understand some of the difficulties that they face with punctuation in English.

Secondly, during the comparison of the English and Arabic texts, the students were asked what they would naturally use in place of the various types of English punctuation (commas, full stop and semi-colons). They responded that they would, in fact, use the conjunction “wa.” This conversation served to confirm the suggestions of the teachers from the focus group and what had been inferred from the first writing sample.

Finally, throughout the lesson there were a number of times when the concept of a sentence being a complete statement arose. Freeborn (1987:280) defines a sentence as “the largest unit of grammatical meaning. It consists of one or more clauses, a clause of one or more phrases, and a phrase of one or more words.” Halliday (1985:6) says that a sentence can also be defined in orthographic terms alone, i.e., “as anything which is contained between a capital letter and a full stop.”

These definitions, although linguistically correct, do not help the students in understanding when a

sentence should begin and end, and therefore when punctuation needs to be used. In order for them to understand this, they need the concept of a “complete statement.” According to the students in this sample, the whole text was related to the same topic. They were therefore unable to see the division into units of into different statements or ideas. This concept of pragmatic completeness versus syntactic was something discussed in Mohamed & Omar (1999). The researcher was quite perplexed at this situation and it raises the question: How do EFL teachers with little or no knowledge of the students’ L1 or thought processes, teach them the concept of a 'complete statement' or idea? This was an area for further reading and reflection for subsequent lessons.

4.3.3 Lesson three: Paragraph Structure.

Rationale

The initial writing sample showed that paragraphing was something of an issue for the students. Most of them were able to physically form a paragraph (spacing/indentation etc) but very few demonstrated an understanding of the fixed structure of paragraphs that is taught in most EFL writing textbooks and classes (opening statement, ideas and evidence and summary statement) Students worked with examples of well and badly formed paragraphs to develop a set of rules and a model of what a good paragraph should look like.. Using the model they were then able to work in groups to distinguish where we would expect to see different paragraphs within a text, and what the constituent parts of the paragraph were. This was done using models of the text on the board and colour to help them visualize the structure and re-enforce the concept of the three parts of a paragraph.

An issue that began to arise at this time was the non-attendance of students. Some students did not attend every lesson and arrived extremely tired with no homework completed. This raised

concerns for not only their own progress and overall results, but also that of the project as well.

This is going to be an important factor to take into consideration when analysing the importance of the data and the validity of the results.

4.3.4. Lesson four: Essay Writing. (analysing,planning,composing)

Rationale:

The final session was designed to be a summary of the points covered in previous lessons and application to an essay style writing task. The lesson was broken down into three main stages: analysing the essay question; planning of ideas; and finally, composition. It was conducted as a collaborative writing task based on Hyland's (1996:136) genre of sequencing writing tasks, which is grounded in Vygotsky' (1978) views of collaborative learning and of scaffolding. (see figure 4.2 below.)

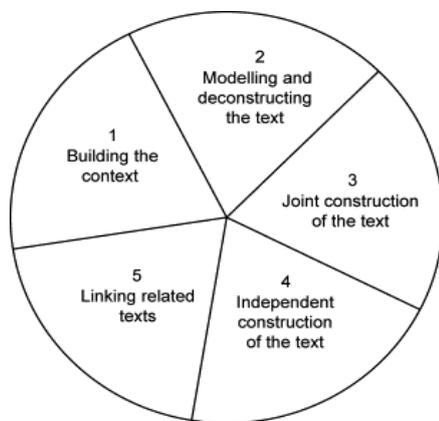


Figure 4.2 Stages of the teaching-learning cycle. Hyland (1996:136)

It was hoped that this style of writing would provide further insight into the thought process of the students when constructing their writing which had been an area for concern since the second lesson on punctuation.

Implementation:

The first step of building the context was done by analysing an essay question and really drawing out the words and ideas in the question to become part of the planning process. Most students admitted that they very rarely plan essays that they are writing, particularly in exams due to a lack of time. At the same time they also freely admitted that sometimes their ideas and structure become quite confused when they are writing. The introduction and first main body paragraph were constructed jointly with particular focus on punctuation and the concept of one sentence being a complete statement and the next following on and explaining it more. It was pleasing to see the students using the appropriate linking language with little prompting. Self or peer correction was encouraged where possible. However, further intervention or explanation was sometimes needed showing that the errors that the students are making would not yet be deemed to be corrigible.

4.3.5 Overall findings and action plan

The overall implementation of the intervention was mixed. Some concepts and tasks were well received by the students, most notably those on paragraphing an essay structure. The students seemed to find the mechanical nature of the topics easy to grasp and understand through the use of visual aids. Other areas, such as punctuation, proved to be more of a challenge, with some students unable to explain use of punctuation in their L1, much less that of the L2. Non-attendance and general lack of participation and concentration in class were an unfortunate by-product of the timing of the intervention, during quite a stressful and overloaded final term of their studies. It remains to be seen if this would have a serious effect on the results of the intervention.

4.4. Stage Four: Analysis of Final Writing Sample.

At the end of the five-week intervention, a final sample of the students writing was collected and analysed using the same error classification used previously. The results of the two samples were then compared to determine whether students had improved in the five categories covered by the intervention. As previously, 25% of the samples were second marked, with an agreement rate of 87%. Further details of the second marking can be found in Appendix L.

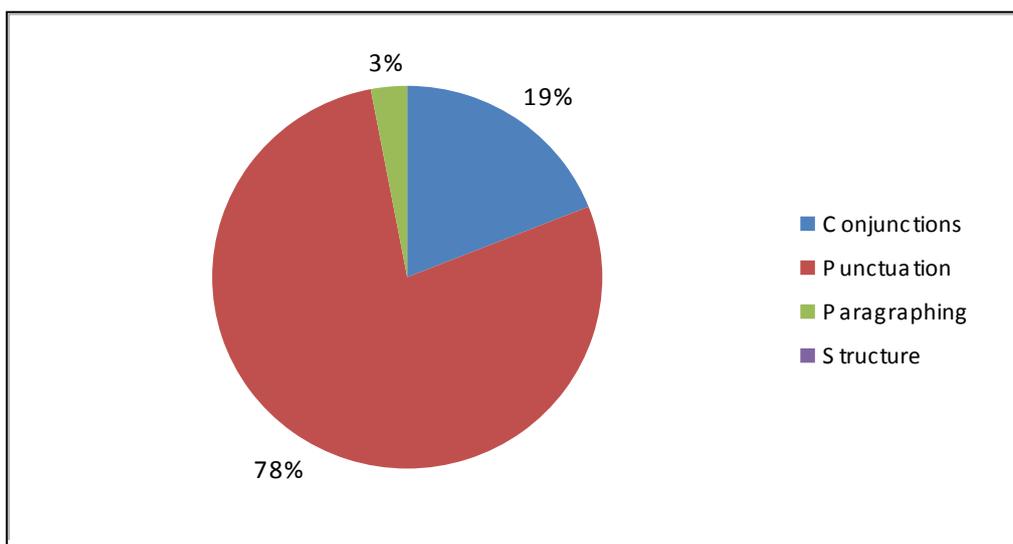
Table 4.3 Error Classification of Final Writing Sample

	B2 Grade	Conj	Punc	Run on	Para	Structure	Total
1	5.5	0	9	2	0	0	11
2	5	2	10	3	2	0	17
3	5	2	0	0	0	0	2
*4	6	1	2	1	0	0	4
5	5.5	0	2	3	0	0	5
6	5	4	6	4	0	0	14
*7	5	1	5	1	0	0	7
*8	4.5	0	6	0	0	0	6
9	6.5	1	0	1	0	0	2
10	5	1	1	0	0	0	2
11	4.5	1	8	3	0	0	12
12	6.5	0	3	3	0	0	6
Total		13	52	21	2	0	88

Table 4.3 and Figure 4.4 display the results of the analysis of the writing sample. As can be seen from these visuals, there have been significant changes in the number of errors committed by the students in almost all aspects of writing. Issues related to paragraphing and essay structure have been almost completely resolved in this sample, with just two recorded errors in these categories. Problems with run-on sentences persist, with a total of 21 errors made across the twelve samples of writing. A possible reason for this persistence in errors is the fact that some students continue to commit errors with punctuation and conjunctions. Of these two remaining issues, it would appear that punctuation is the most serious, as it accounted for 78% of the total

errors. An area of particular interest outside of this study is the exam grades. As can be seen, the exam grades for the majority of the students now rest at the pass level (5.0) or above. Although the aim of this project was not to ensure that the students pass their exams, undoubtedly it was the principal motivation of the students in attending the extra support classes.

Figure 4.4 Final Writing Sample: Distribution of Errors by Type



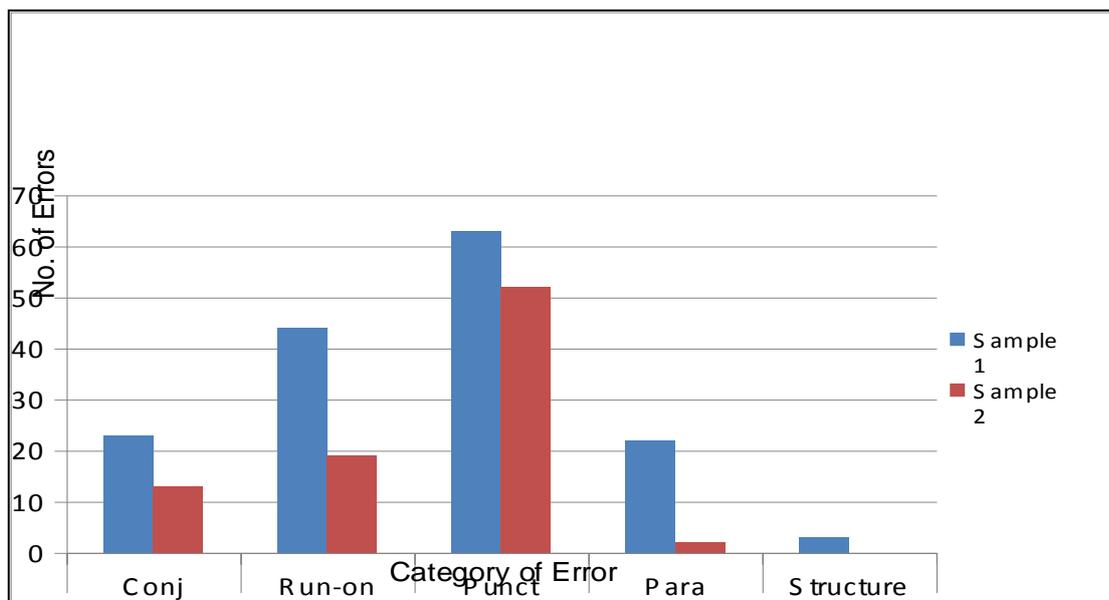
4.5 Stage Five: Statistical Comparison of Samples One and Two

Table 4.5 Comparison of Samples One and Two

	Conj		Run-on		Punct		Para		Structure		Total	
Totals	22	13	44	19	63	52	22	2	3	0	154	86
Change		9		25		11		20		3		64
% change		41%		57%		17%		91%		100%		42%

Table 4.5 and Figure 4.6 show the statistical comparison of the two writing samples taken at the beginning and end of the 5 hour intervention. A more detailed breakdown of these results, with results shown for each student, can be found in appendix K. The table shows that there has been an overall trend of improvement, with a 42% reduction of errors related to the five structure-based categories selected. Appendix K Shows that the overall grades of the students improved in the majority of cases, meaning all but 2 of the students achieved a passing grade of 5.0 or above. A more detailed analysis of the changes according to error type will now be reviewed.

Figure 4.6 Comparison of Samples One and Two – Changes over time



4.5.1. Conjunctions

In the first sample, there were 22 errors related to the misuse of conjunctions, which accounted for 20% of the total. In the final sample, this number has reduced to 13, representing a 41% decrease.

What was quite disappointing was that some students appeared to make more errors with conjunctions in the second sample than they did in the first. Reference to the reflective journal

(appendix G) shows that the students did find certain aspects of the lesson related to conjunctions challenging, particularly the application to more complex sentences. The journal also shows that the extra homework given on this topic was not completed by all students. Given that the rules of use of different conjunctions in English is quite complex, and, according to Yorkey (1974) and Johnstone (1987), very different to that of Arabic, it would be fair to assume that the students would need ample practice of this point if they wish to acquire and use it successfully in their own writing.

4.5.2 Punctuation

According to appendix G, the researcher felt that the success of the lesson on punctuation was mixed, particularly when it came to the concept of a 'complete statement,' a concept previously discussed by Mohammed & Omar (1999). The partial success of the lesson on punctuation is reflected in the results of the second sample. There were still 52 mistakes related to punctuation across the 12 samples of writing. Although this represented a 17% decrease in number of errors, it highlights the fact that there is still quite a long way to go for these particular students related to the use of punctuation in writing. Appendix K also shows that a number of final samples (2,4,8 & 11) actually contained more errors related to punctuation than the first, which indicated a possible negative influence of the intervention in this area.

4.5.3 Run-on sentences.

As stated previously, the issue of run-on sentences is closely related to that of the misuse of conjunctions and punctuation. In the first sample, there were 44 examples of run-on sentences – which could all be attributed to problems with either lack of punctuation, the misuse of a junctive, or in some cases, both. This number reduced to 17 in the final sample, representing a decrease of 57%. This figure is approximate to the combined rate of improvement of conjunctions (41%) and

punctuation (17%) Further analysis of the individual student's results (appendix K) show that in the large majority of cases, the occurrence of run-on sentences were reduced, with certain students eradicating the problem completely. Unfortunately, other students failed to make any improvements in this area, perhaps due to their lack of progress in the related factors of punctuation and conjunctions.

4.5.4. Paragraphing and Essay structure

Issues related to paragraphing and overall essay structure have been almost eradicated, with a 100% drop in essay structure errors, and a 91% drop in paragraphing errors. Paragraphing in particular is quite significant as in the first sample; the vast majority of students had problems with paragraphing, which in turn was a probable contributing factor their low exam grades. However, after the five hour intervention this issue seems to have been almost completely resolved, with the exception of one student. Appendix M shows examples of samples of students' writing which have shown marked improvement related to paragraph and essay structure after the intervention.

Reference to the reflective journal (appendix G) shows that the lesson on paragraph structure was well-received by the students and that they were able to work with a sample text to create well-structured paragraphs. The use of group work and visuals was employed to enable learners to visualize the structure of paragraphs. This appeared to have a positive impact, as inspection of the final samples of writing shows that student used this structure successfully in their own writing.

4.5.5 Overall findings

The results of the comparison of the two writing samples appears to show an overall improvement in levels of errors in all five areas investigated as part of this project. The level of improvement was somewhat inconsistent across the five areas – with improvement rates ranging from 17%

(punctuation) to 100% (essay structure). Gass and Selinker (1979) argued that some aspects of certain languages, due to their salient nature, may be likely to transfer than others. This viewpoint is supported by research of Eckman into the concept of 'markedness' of certain language points. His (1977) Markedness Differential Hypothesis hypothesized that differences between the L1 and L2 will result in varying levels of difficulty depending on the 'markedness' of the language point in question. It stands to reason therefore, that certain aspects of structure in English persuasive discourse would be more 'marked' and therefore more difficult to acquire. This could be the reason behind the inconsistency in the levels of improvement across the five categories.

On the other hand, reference to the reflective journal (appendix G) suggest other, non-linguistic factors which could have had an effect on the level of progress of the students, including the non-attendance of students, lack of participation in and outside the classroom. If one accepts the view that certain aspects of the study were inherently more difficult to acquire than others, then it would be fair to assume that students would need more targeted practice of those points. Most language courses employ the techniques of recycling and repetition of key points to facilitate acquisition. This process is grounded in the principles of Second Language Acquisition (hereafter SLA) Corder (1987a) cited in Ellis (2008: 393) proposed that the development of a student's interlanguage was a "restructuring continuum," meaning the more proficient a learner becomes in their L2, the less evidence of transfer from the L1 is present. It is necessary therefore to consider by what means a learner becomes proficient. Krashen (1981, 1982) argues that acquisition of language can only occur through comprehensible input of language at a level slightly higher than the learners' current linguistic knowledge. Closely related to this is Vygotsy's (1978) theory regarding the Zone of Proximal Development , which stated that learners are able to produce more when in collaboration with more capable peers than they would alone. This input would then, according to Krashen's theories, lead to acquisition and ultimately the learner becoming more

proficient. If one agrees with these theories, then it would be therefore fair to assume that with increased input and more opportunity for practice, the learners in this sample may have a higher rate of improvement in the areas of punctuation and conjunctions as they would experience less influence from their L1 the more proficient they became

Chapter 5. Limitations and suggestions for further study.

5.1. Sample Size

The principal limitation of the present study is the size of the sample. The low sample size meant that results obtained from the statistical analysis of the writing samples were not generalizable to the theoretical sample of all Arabic learners of this level, and were applicable only to this particular group of students. The study would need to be replicated with a larger group of students and at different levels before the results could be generalized.

5.2 Timing

The timing of the study was unfortunate, as it took place in the final, undoubtedly most stressful term of their studies. The result of this was that the attendance, levels of concentration and participation in class were quite poor and in some cases meant that students had to be withdrawn from the study. In such a short intervention (5 lessons) missing just one or two of the lesson would have a serious impact on the overall results. Unfortunately, the timing of the class was something that was beyond the control of the researcher. However, it is recognised that the project may have been more successful had it been run at a more convenient time for the students.

5.2 Length of study

The intervention took place over a five week period, however the amount of contact time with the students was unusually short with only 5 hours' classroom input. The restricted time was largely due to timetabling issues and exam deadlines. The theories of Corder (1987a), Krashen (1981) and Vygotsky (1978) suggest that through increased input and collaboration with more able peers, the learners' rate of acquisition would increase. This increased acquisition would lead to them

becoming more proficient and therefore less likely to experience negative transfer from their L1. Therefore a study of greater length, or with more contact hours may have yielded improved results.

5.3. Problems with Error Analysis criteria.

The error analysis criteria were based on Scott & Tucker (1974) and Abisamra (2003). The exploratory nature of the project meant that upon collection of the first sample, all error types were analysed, however this was subsequently narrowed down to just structural errors. This caused a problem as the definitions regarding structural errors in the criteria of Scott & Tucker (1974) and Abisamra (2003) were quite vague and therefore needed elaborating using EA theory in James (1998). However, in the subsequent application of the newly devised categories, it was found that the three categories of punctuation, conjunctions and run-on sentences were in inherently liked and therefore their recognition and classification would be highly subjective. This was demonstrated in the second marking process. Although an overall agreement rate of 80% was achieved, the categories of punctuation and run-on sentences had a low agreement rate of 67%. When considering these figures, it is, however, important to remember that the second marking was carried out on an extremely low sample size, so just one disagreement in mark would have a high influence on the agreement rate.

5.4 Quantification of errors

Upon reflection it is suggested that quantitative analysis of errors with such a small sample may not have been the most valid and reliable testing method. A more qualitative approach may have been more suitable as it would have allowed the researcher to analyse the errors in more depth and gain a better understanding. Some attempts at this were done by selecting specific errors from the samples and using contrastive analysis to hypothesize possible causes if the error. Another

possible option could have been a stimulated recall task with the students after each sample of writing was written. Erroneous sentences or structures could have been selected and students asked to explain their thoughts and decision making process whilst writing. This could then have been repeated at the end of the intervention to see whether any significant changes had taken place. This method does, however, rely upon the students' knowledge of and ability to explain complex metalanguage regarding the different structural covered.

5.5. Genre of writing

Although attempts were made to include input from a variety of genres of writing, the errors analysed were taken from just one type of writing; essays. The aim of the current project was to investigate structural errors in persuasive discourse; therefore the use of essays was successful in fulfilling the intended purpose. However, in order to gauge a true understanding of the students' progress, it would also need to be replicated with different genres of writing.

5.6. Nationality of students

Although all students were native speakers of Arabic, there was a mixture of different nationalities within the class. Arabic speaking countries have two main varieties of language: Modern-Standard Arabic and regional dialect of Non-standard Arabic. Due to the small sample size, it was not possible to compare the results of students from different nationalities in detail. The study could be replicated with larger numbers of students from different countries, or a series of studies could be conducted with more homogenous groups of nationalities. This would allow for further investigation into the features transferred from different varieties of Arabic.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Increased interaction in the last 10 years between the Arab and Western worlds for the purposes of industry, commerce, education and religion, mean that more and more native speakers of Arabic are choosing to learn English as a second language. One of the results of this phenomenon is that the number of Arabic learners wishing to study at universities is also increasing. The intense linguistic demands of study at this level mean that Arabic learners must become proficient in all areas before embarking on their studies. The vast difference between the two languages often makes this process difficult and causes them to encounter a wide range of problems when communicating in their L2, particularly when it comes to writing.

There has been great debate over the role of the L1 when it comes to L2 learning. Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis states that all problems faced by language learners can be traced back to a negative influence from their L1. It also went on to say that these problems could be predicted and therefore targeted through the comparison of the two linguistic systems. Others, most notably Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) disputed the role of the L1 in language learning and argued that errors were caused by the misunderstanding or misapplication of rules.

Regardless of which side of the debate one's interests lie, one cannot ignore the considerable research which details similar frequent grammatical, lexical, semantic and syntactic errors brought about by the transfer of linguistic features of the L1 into the L2. However, few studies have taken this knowledge and applied it to the classroom situation; it was therefore the aim of this study to ascertain the effectiveness of a five-hour writing skills class targeted specifically at structural errors within the writing in 12 Arabic students at a UK HE Institute. It was hoped that promoting a better

understanding of the problems faced by Arabic students when writing, staff and students alike would be better equipped to deal with them.

The first stage of the investigation was to better understand the problems that the students had with in their construction of persuasive discourse. The results of a focus group conducted with their teachers revealed that structure seemed to be the most serious issue. More specifically, they stated that Arabic students' writing was characterized by long stretches of text with little or no punctuation, often with the over-use of 'and' as a co-ordinating conjunction. Paragraphs were used inconsistently and the essays did not always conform to expected writing conventions.

The focus group also revealed that the majority of teachers were well aware of these problems but did not feel as though they were able to tackle them adequately due to mixed nationalities in the classrooms. All that was currently being done to help Arabic students was focussed feedback on their writing.

The first sample of writing confirmed the initial thoughts and predictions of the teachers. Punctuation was by far the biggest issue facing the students, as it represented 61% of the total structural errors committed. Paragraphing and conjunctions were fairly balanced accounting for 20% and 16% of the total errors respectively. The number of errors related to overall essay structure was negligible, accounting for just 2% of the total errors committed. A Contrastive Analysis between Arabic and English in these specific areas revealed probable causes of these errors, and drew parallels with the findings of previous studies.

A five hour intervention was designed based on the results of the focus group and initial writing sample. The intervention aimed to tackle the five main problem areas of punctuation,

conjunctions, run-on sentences, paragraphing and essay structure. Upon suggestions from the teachers, translation, collaborative writing and self and peer-correction were used as classroom tools to facilitate understanding.

The effectiveness of this intervention was measured in two ways: qualitatively through a reflective journal kept by the teacher, and quantitatively through the analysis of a final writing sample. The overall results were positive, with an improvement rate of 42% in the total number of structural errors committed. The level of improvement was somewhat inconsistent across the five areas – with improvement rates ranging from 17% for punctuation, to 91% for paragraphing and 100% for essay structure. These results seem to indicate that certain aspects of structure in English persuasive discourse (paragraphing and essay structure) may be more suitable for improvement through the use of an intervention than others (punctuation, conjunctions, run-on sentences). Reference to SLA literature (Gass and Selinker, 1979; Eckman, 1977; and Ellis, 2008) suggests that this inconsistency may be due to the ‘markedness’ of these features which results in them being significantly more difficult to acquire.

Comparison with the reflective journal began to hypothesize possible non-linguistic reasons for this fluctuation in results; including the limited time period and non-attendance of students. Again, theory (Corder 1987a cited in Ellis 2008; Krashen, 1981; and Vygotsy, 1978) suggested that with increased input and more opportunity for practice, the learners in this sample may have a higher rate of improvement in these problem areas. For this reason, it is now the researcher’s personal aim to conduct more detailed studies on these areas of the study to ascertain whether a longer, more targeted intervention would help to improve the error rate in this area.

Although the project has been successful in achieving its initial aims, there have been limitations which restrict the generalizability of the claims. The low sample size and inherent problems within the marking criteria mean that the results obtained in this project were highly subjective and cannot be realistically applied outside of the current sample population. This project has taken the initial steps towards understanding and resolving the problems faced by Arabic students in writing, however there is still a great deal of work to be done in this area. It is envisaged that the current study could be replicated with groups of a larger size and at different levels in the future in order to provide further empirical evidence to claims made in this study, or indeed to refute them if the case may be.

Further study may also be conducted into different types of error. The literature shows that structural errors are certainly not the only issue that Arabic students have with writing. The current study has shown that some errors seem to be more suitable for improvement through classroom-based intervention than others, it would therefore be interesting to research which areas can and cannot be improved with a similar project.

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