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The Influence of Local Language Practices on Academic Writing: The case of Second-Year EFL Students at College of Education – Ajelat, University of Zawia

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Abstract
This study examines the influence of local language practices on the academic writing of second-year EFL students at the Faculty of Education, Ajelat College, Libya. A quantitative survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 50 students through a structured questionnaire focusing on first-language use during English academic writing and related writing difficulties. Descriptive statistical methods, including means and standard deviations, were used for data analysis. The findings indicate that students rely heavily on Arabic during idea generation and sentence construction, which contributes to difficulties in cohesion, organization, grammatical accuracy, and writing efficiency. Although students demonstrate some awareness of differences between Arabic and English writing conventions, their ability to reduce first-language interference remains limited. The study concludes that local language practices significantly shape EFL students' academic writing.

Keywords: Local language influence, academic writing, EFL students, L1 interference, contrastive rhetoric, Arabic-English writing.

الملخص
تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على تأثير الممارسات اللغوية المحلية في الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في السنة الثانية بكلية التربية – العجيلات، ليبيا. اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج الكمي، حيث جُمعت البيانات باستخدام استبانة وُزّعت على 50 طالبًا، ركزت على استخدام اللغة العربية أثناء الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية والصعوبات الناتجة عن ذلك. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام المتوسطات الحسابية والانحرافات المعيارية.
وأظهرت النتائج أن الطلبة يعتمدون بدرجة كبيرة على اللغة العربية عند كتابة النصوص الأكاديمية باللغة الإنجليزية، مما يؤدي إلى صعوبات في تنظيم الأفكار، والربط بين الجمل، والدقة اللغوية، وسرعة الكتابة. كما بيّنت النتائج أن وعي الطلبة بالفروق بين أساليب الكتابة في اللغتين العربية والإنجليزية ما يزال محدودًا. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن اللغة المحلية تؤثر بشكل واضح في مستوى الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:
تأثير اللغة المحلية، الكتابة الأكاديمية، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، التداخل اللغوي، البلاغة التقابلية، الكتابة العربية–الإنجليزية

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Academic writing is a crucial skill for EFL learners, as it reflects their ability to express ideas clearly and accurately in an academic context. In the Libyan educational context, many university students rely heavily on Arabic when writing in English. This reliance often influences their grammatical accuracy, vocabulary choice, sentence structure, and overall coherence of academic texts. As a result, students may face difficulties in producing well-organized and fluent academic writing. Understanding the influence of local language practices on EFL students' academic writing can help educators develop more effective

teaching strategies to reduce first-language interference and improve students' writing performance.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Second-year EFL students at the Faculty of Education, Ajelat College, face significant challenges in academic writing due to interference from their first language (Arabic). This interference affects the coherence of ideas, cohesion between sentences and paragraphs, and overall writing efficiency, often resulting in texts that are disorganized or grammatically inaccurate. Despite some awareness of differences between Arabic and English writing conventions, students struggle to minimize the influence of their L1. These difficulties can hinder academic achievement and limit students' ability to communicate effectively in English. Understanding the nature and extent of L1 interference is therefore essential to develop targeted instructional strategies that improve EFL writing performance.

1.3 Aims of the Study

- .To examine the extent to which first-language (Arabic) practices influence the academic writing of second-year EFL students.
- . To identify specific writing challenges, including issues in coherence, cohesion, grammar, and organization, resulting from L1 interference.
- . provide evidence-based recommendations for instructional strategies aimed at reducing the negative impact of L1 on English academic

1.4 Research Questions

1. To what extent do local language practices (Arabic) influence the academic writing of second-year EFL students?
2. What specific challenges in writing—such as issues in coherence, cohesion, grammar, and organization—result from L1 interference?
3. How aware are students of the impact of their first language on their English academic writing?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides valuable insights into how local language practices influence the academic writing of second-year EFL students. The findings can help instructors design more effective teaching strategies that minimize first-language interference and improve students' writing performance. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader understanding of L1 influence in the Libyan EFL context, offering evidence-based recommendations for curriculum development and pedagogical planning. By highlighting specific challenges in coherence, cohesion, grammar, and organization, this research can inform both classroom practice and future studies in the field of EFL writing.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on second-year EFL students at the Faculty of Education, Ajelat College, Libya. It investigates the influence of local language practices (Arabic) on English academic writing, particularly on grammar, cohesion, organization, and discourse. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The study is limited to this group of students and their questionnaire responses.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

1. **Local Language Practices**: The use of students' first language (Arabic) during the process of learning or writing in English, which may affect their writing performance (Connor, 1996).
2. **L1 Interference**: The influence of the first language on second-language writing, often leading to errors or deviations in grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and discourse (Odlin, 1989).
3. **Academic Writing**: Writing that follows formal conventions, including clear organization, coherence, and cohesion, used in educational and scholarly contexts (Hyland, 2003).
4. **Coherence**: The logical and consistent connection of ideas in a text, making it understandable to the reader (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).
5. **Cohesion**: The use of linguistic devices such as conjunctions, pronouns, and linking words to connect sentences and paragraphs within a text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of L2 Writing

Second language (L2) writing is widely recognized as a cognitively demanding and linguistically complex process. According to Tony Silva (1993), L2 writing differs fundamentally from first-language writing in terms of planning, linguistic encoding, and revision processes. Unlike native writers, EFL learners must manage content generation and linguistic form simultaneously, increasing cognitive burden.

Process-oriented models of writing, such as those proposed by Linda Flower and John R. Hayes (1981), conceptualize writing as recursive stages of planning, translating, and reviewing. When applied to EFL contexts, these models suggest that L1 interference may occur during the planning stage, where ideas are first conceptualized. If learners generate ideas in Arabic and later translate them into English, this dual-processing mechanism can slow fluency and increase structural errors.

From a socio-cognitive perspective, writing is also shaped by discourse conventions and academic literacy practices. Ken Hyland (2003) argues that academic writing is not merely grammatical competence but mastery of disciplinary conventions, argument structure, and rhetorical expectations. Therefore, L1 influence may extend beyond grammar to discourse-level organization.

2.2 Linguistic Transfer and Interlanguage Theory

The concept of transfer originates in interlanguage theory, which views learner language as a dynamic system influenced by L1 structures. Terence Odlin (1989) defines transfer as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and the native language.

Transfer may be:

Positive (facilitating learning)

Negative (causing interference)

In Arabic–English contexts, negative transfer is frequently documented due to structural differences in syntax, tense systems, article usage, and rhetorical development. However, scholars debate whether transfer is automatic or strategically employed. Some researchers argue that learners consciously use L1 as a compensatory strategy when linguistic resources are limited.

Importantly, transfer is not restricted to grammar. It also operates at lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, and rhetorical levels. This multidimensional view suggests that L1 interference must be examined holistically rather than through isolated error categories.

2.3 Contrastive Rhetoric and Discourse-Level Transfer

The discourse dimension of transfer is rooted in the work of Robert Kaplan (1966), who proposed that rhetorical patterns vary across cultures. Kaplan characterized Arabic discourse as circular and repetitive, contrasting with the linear and thesis-driven structure of English academic writing.

While Kaplan's early diagrams were criticized for oversimplification, Ulla Connor (1996) refined the theory, arguing that rhetorical patterns are culturally shaped but adaptable. Connor emphasizes that differences arise from educational traditions and genre expectations rather than inherent linguistic limitations.

Empirical studies confirm that Arab EFL learners often demonstrate:

- Delayed thesis statements
- Overuse of coordination
- Repetition for emphasis
- Limited paragraph unity

However, an important theoretical debate remains unresolved:

Are these features evidence of rhetorical transfer, limited proficiency, or strategic adaptation? This ambiguity underscores the need for context-specific empirical research.

2.4 Cognitive Load and Writing Efficiency

Beyond rhetorical structure, L1 reliance may affect cognitive processing during writing. Eli Hinkel (2004) argues that translation-based writing increases cognitive load because learners must:

Generate ideas in L1

Convert them into L2

Monitor grammar and vocabulary simultaneously

This dual-processing reduces fluency and slows production speed. Recent empirical research supports this claim. Ezza and Hammad (2023) found a significant correlation between L1 cognitive reliance and reduced writing efficiency among Arab university students.

Cognitive load theory suggests that working memory has limited capacity. When learners allocate substantial resources to translation, fewer resources remain for higher-order concerns such as argument development and cohesion. This may explain why writing efficiency and organizational clarity often decline simultaneously.

2.5 Cohesion and Coherence in Academic Writing

Cohesion and coherence are central components of academic discourse. According to Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (1976), cohesion is achieved through linguistic devices such as reference, substitution, conjunction, and lexical ties. Coherence, by contrast, refers to the logical progression of ideas at the discourse level.

Arab EFL learners frequently demonstrate sentence-level grammatical competence but struggle with cohesive linking across paragraphs. Al-Jarf (2007) reports that translation-based writing often results in fragmented cohesion despite grammatically correct sentences. This suggests that discourse-level competence may lag behind syntactic knowledge.

2.6 Empirical Studies in Arab and Libyan Contexts

Research across Arab EFL settings consistently identifies grammar, vocabulary, and organization as major challenges. Tahaineh (2014) attributes lexical inaccuracy to direct

translation strategies. Alharbi (2021) highlights rhetorical transfer as the dominant influence in academic essays.

However, within Libya, systematic quantitative research remains limited. Existing studies often rely on small-scale qualitative analysis without correlational or predictive statistical models. Additionally, few studies focus specifically on second-year university students, a transitional stage where academic writing expectations intensify.

Thus, despite extensive regional research, there is:

Limited Libyan empirical data

Insufficient quantitative correlation studies

Weak integration of cognitive and rhetorical explanations

2.7 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature suggests that L1 influence operates at multiple interconnected levels:

Cognitive (idea generation and planning)

Linguistic (syntax and vocabulary)

Rhetorical (organization and argument development)

Discourse (cohesion and coherence)

However, few studies integrate these dimensions within a single empirical model, particularly in the Libyan higher education context. Furthermore, the relationship between cognitive reliance on Arabic and measurable writing efficiency remains underexplored.

Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by quantitatively examining the relationship between L1 reliance and specific writing challenges (cohesion, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and efficiency) among second-year EFL students in Libya.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive quantitative survey design was selected because it allows systematic measurement of students' language practices and perceptions across a defined population. This approach is particularly suitable for identifying patterns of L1 influence and comparing levels of writing difficulty among EFL learners (Creswell, 2014). Although writing samples can provide detailed linguistic analysis, questionnaires are effective in capturing cognitive processes, awareness, and self-reported strategies, which are central to the objectives of this study

3.2 justification of research design

This study adopts a descriptive survey design to examine the influence of local language practices on the academic writing of second-year EFL students at the Faculty of Education, Ajelat College. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary instrument to collect data on students' language practices, writing challenges, and perceptions of L1 influence. This design was chosen because it allows for the systematic collection of data from a relatively large group of participants while providing both quantitative and qualitative insights.

3.3 Participants

The participants of this study were 50 second-year EFL students, including 3 males and 47 females, selected through convenience sampling. The focus on second-year students was intentional, as they have already completed foundational English courses and are engaged in academic writing tasks, making them suitable for investigating L1 influence.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of four sections: demographic information, language practices, writing challenges, and open-ended questions for additional qualitative insights. The Likert scale (1–5) was used to measure the extent of students'

agreement with various statements. Open-ended questions were included to capture students' personal experiences and perceptions that could not be fully addressed through closed-ended items.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Likert-scale items were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to describe patterns of L1 influence and writing challenges. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic coding, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and student perceptions regarding L1 interference in their writing. In addition to descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between students' reliance on Arabic during writing and reported writing difficulties (cohesion, organization, grammar, and writing efficiency). The analysis revealed moderate to strong positive correlations, indicating that increased reliance on L1 was associated with higher levels of writing difficulty. These findings support the claim that L1 interference significantly impacts English academic writing performance

3.6 Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthiness

- The questionnaire was reviewed by two EFL experts and piloted with 10 students to ensure clarity and relevance.
- Cronbach's Alpha = 0.82, indicating good internal consistency and dependable results.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Participants' anonymity was ensured, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All data were used solely for research purposes and handled confidentially.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results and discussion of the study conducted with second-year EFL students at the Faculty of Education, Ajelat College, University of Al-Zawia. It includes the demographic profile of the participants, their local language practices, and writing challenges, followed by an analysis linking the findings to L1 influence and previous research.

4.2 Demographic information

The participants included 50 second-year EFL students, of whom 3 (6%) were male and 47 (94%) were female, reflecting the current enrollment pattern at the Faculty of Education.

Variable
Frequency
Percentage
Male
3
6%
Female
47
94%

Figure 4.1: Gender Distribution of Participants

4.3 Local Language Practices

Participants reported frequent use of Arabic in their English writing. They often think in Arabic (M=4.2, SD=0.8) and translate directly from Arabic (M=4.0, SD=0.9). The use of Arabic sentence structures (M=3.7, SD=1.0) and discourse patterns (M=3.8, SD=0.9) was also common. Awareness of differences between Arabic and English writing was moderate (M=3.1, SD=1.1), and attempts to avoid Arabic patterns were limited (M=3.0, SD=1.0).

Statement	Mean	SD
Think in Arabic	4.2	0.8
Translate directly	4.0	0.9
Arabic sentence structures	3.7	1.0
Arabic discourse patterns	3.8	0.9
Aware of differences	3.1	1.1
Arabic helps clarity		

3.6
0.9
Try to avoid Arabic patterns
3.0
1.0

Figure 4.2: Local Language Practices

4.4 Writing Challenges

The main challenges reported by students were writing takes longer (M=4.3, SD=0.8), maintaining cohesion (M=4.1, SD=0.7), and organizing ideas coherently (M=4.0, SD=0.8). Grammar issues (M=3.8) and vocabulary challenges (M=3.7) were also noted, reflecting the influence of L1 on English academic writing.

Statement
Mean
SD
Organize ideas coherently
4.0
0.8
Grammar issues
3.8
0.9
Vocabulary challenges
3.7

0.8
Cohesion issues
4.1
0.7
Writing takes longer
4.3
0.8

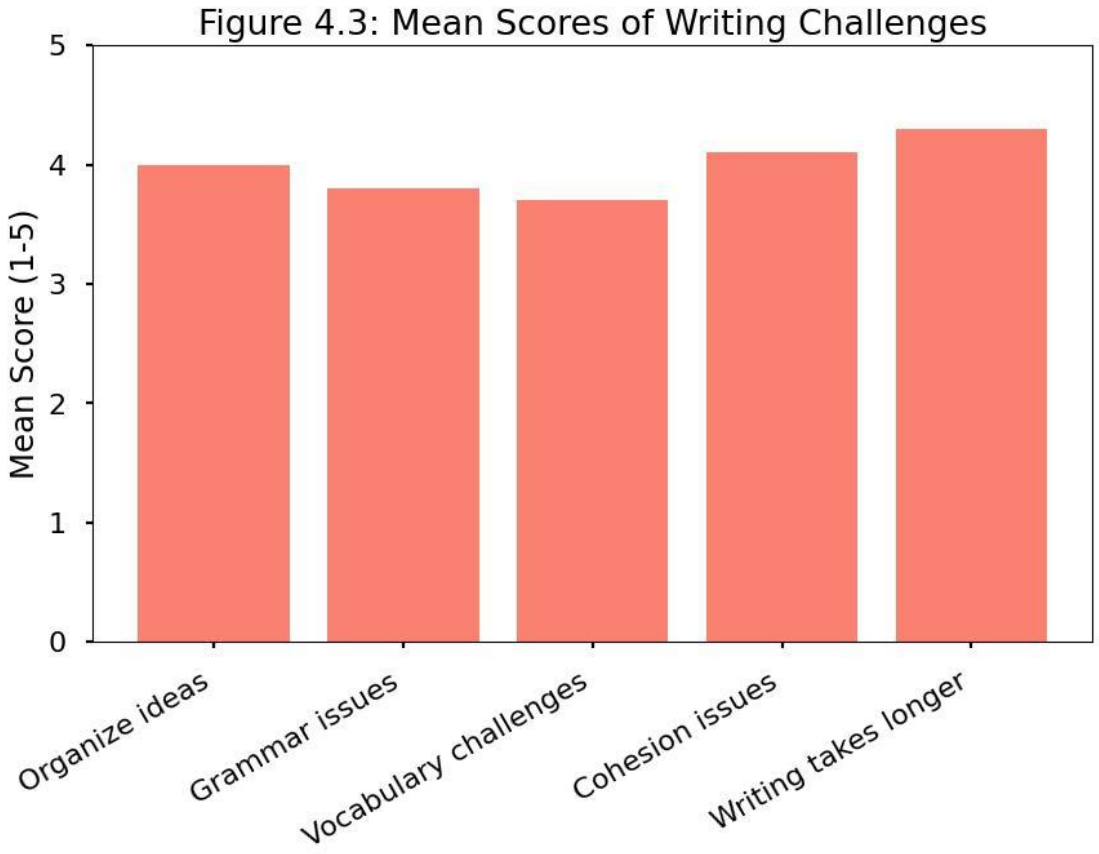

Figure 4.3: Writing Challenges

4.5 **Discussion**

The results indicate a strong influence of L1 at both sentence and discourse levels, consistent with previous studies (Al-Jarf, 2007; Tahaineh, 2014). Students rely heavily on Arabic for idea generation and sentence construction, while awareness of English writing conventions is moderate. Efforts to avoid L1 interference are limited.

The most significant challenges are cohesion, organization, and writing efficiency, which highlight the need for explicit instruction in academic writing strategies, including paragraph structure, linking devices, and direct English composition. These findings confirm patterns observed in other Arab EFL contexts and emphasize the importance of pedagogical interventions to reduce the negative impact of L1 on writing.

The observed correlations between L1 reliance and writing difficulties reinforce contrastive rhetoric theory and confirm that cognitive processing in Arabic prior to English composition increases both linguistic and organizational challenges, particularly among intermediate-level EFL learners.

5.Conclusion

This study examined the influence of local language (L1) practices on the academic writing of second-year EFL students at the Faculty of Education, Ajelat College, University of Al-Zawia. Findings indicate that students rely heavily on Arabic during idea generation, sentence construction, and paragraph organization, leading to challenges in cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and writing efficiency.

Although students showed moderate awareness of English academic conventions, effective strategies to minimize L1 interference were limited, and direct translation remained common. To address these challenges, pedagogical interventions should focus on raising L1 awareness, promoting direct English composition, enhancing discourse-level skills, providing targeted feedback, and improving writing efficiency through planning and time-management strategies. Implementing these measures can help students reduce L1 interference and develop more fluent, coherent, and independent academic writing skills.

Finally, this study provides valuable insights for EFL educators and curriculum designers in Libya, highlighting the need for teaching approaches that foster competent and confident English academic writers while gradually minimizing the negative effects of L1 reliance.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The findings indicate that L1 interference affects both linguistic and cognitive aspects of EFL students' writing. To address this, instructors should:

1- Raise L1 Awareness – Highlight differences between Arabic and English academic conventions and encourage students to reflect on translation-based writing.
2- Promote Direct Composition – Train students to brainstorm and outline in English, reducing reliance on mental translation.
3- Enhance Discourse Skills – Teach paragraph structure, cohesion, and linking devices explicitly, using model texts for illustration.
4- Provide Targeted Feedback – Offer corrective feedback addressing both grammar and organizational issues, reinforced through revision cycles.
5- Improve Writing Efficiency – Incorporate time-bound writing tasks and planning strategies to reduce cognitive load and enhance productivity.

These interventions, combining awareness, structured practice, and feedback, can help students minimize negative L1 influence and improve their academic writing outcomes.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to help EFL students reduce L1 interference and improve academic writing:

1- Raise Awareness of L1 Influence – Conduct workshops and classroom discussions to help students recognize how Arabic affects English writing.
2- Promote Direct English Composition – Encourage students to brainstorm, outline, and write directly in English rather than translating from Arabic.
3- Develop Discourse Skills – Teach cohesion, paragraph structure, and linking devices explicitly to enhance text organization and clarity.
4- Provide Targeted Feedback – Offer structured feedback addressing both language accuracy and discourse-level organization.
5- Improve Writing Efficiency – Include instruction on time management and writing strategies to help students complete tasks more effectively.
6- Design Focused Writing Exercises – Integrate activities that specifically target common L1 interference patterns, reinforcing practical application of writing skills.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to a single institution and a small sample of 50 second-year students. It relied solely on questionnaire data and did not include actual writing samples, which could provide deeper insights into L1 interference patterns. Additionally, the study focused on one academic year and one faculty, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could:

- Include actual writing samples to analyze the impact of L1 on students' written texts.
- Compare students from different years, faculties, or universities to examine variations in L1 influence.
- Investigate the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions in reducing L1 interference and improving academic writing skills.
- Explore the role of digital tools or peer feedback in minimizing L1 impact on writing.

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