

Academic Writing in a Multilingual Context: A Study of Learner Difficulties¹

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I. Introduction

Although the importance of the writing skill in university course work in comparison with the other skills is sometimes rated differently by students and faculty depending upon varying needs (Johns, 1981; Zughol, 1985; Bacha, 1993; West, 1994), few researchers, linguists and teachers of English as a second/foreign language² challenge its significant consolidating role in an academic context. Writing is the medium through which students communicate their ideas, but more importantly, studies have shown that it helps to develop students' cognitive skills and, therefore, their learning (Vygotsky, 1962; Olson, 1996). It is crucial in any educational institution that students develop a certain proficiency level in academic writing, it being hard to visualize any type of learning without an appropriate standard.

This importance of the writing skill has led to a proliferation of studies to identify the particular writing tasks students need in their academic courses (Abboud and Shaaban, 1984; Abuhamdia, 1984; Horowitz 1986; Zughoul and Husain 1985; Badr, 1992; Jordan, 1997; Bacha, 1999). Among tasks found necessary to students' academic course work are exams, reports, summaries, note-taking, research projects, and various business and scientific writing genres related to their careers. Although the 'traditional' essay considered important for a long time in language composition courses is not rated highly necessary, its significance is worth noting as it not only provides a cognitive framework for many of the more specific genres (Purves, 1988) but also it emphasizes the

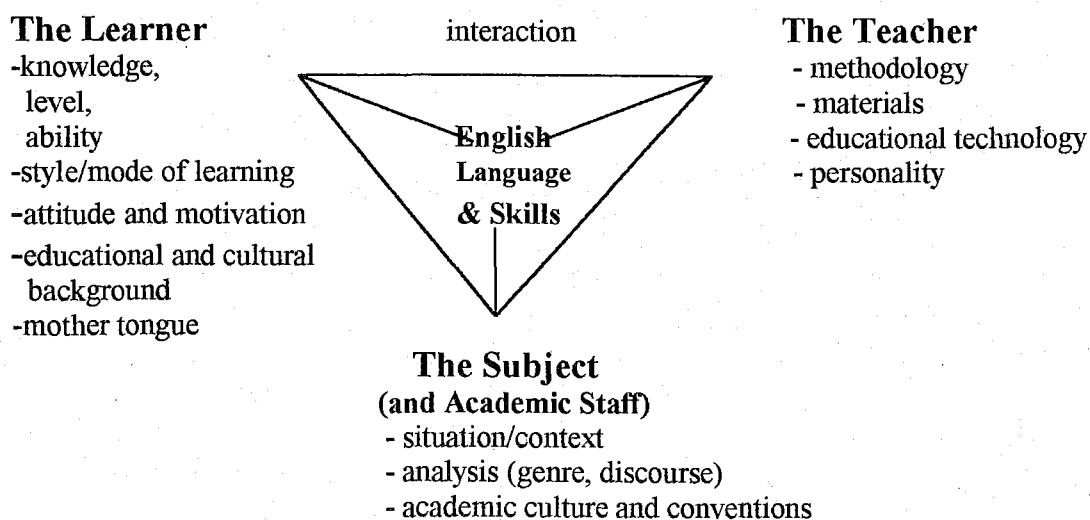
difficulty, true of most writing and best expressed by Hunter-Carsch (1990).

“Essay writing is a major part of schooling and the development of literacy in primary, secondary and tertiary education in this society. It has long been considered as an economical means of developing clarity and fluency of written expression. Both for the writer and reader it is a way of sharing within a disciplined form, the exploration of a topic, marshalling of evidence to support or refute arguments and demonstrating the writer’s ability to communicate cogently... No wonder the essay can be daunting!” (77)

Studies (Bacha, 1993, 1999) done on Freshman students at the Lebanese American University indicated that both high and low proficiency level students consider writing significantly ($p < .05$) the most difficult when compared to the other skills of listening, speaking and reading. In fact, faculty and students find writing the major ‘stumbling block’ in the learning process (Ivanic, 1998; Bacha 1999).

Jordan’s (1997) presentation of the academic learning context in Figure 1 below gives a clear over-all picture of the main issues of the learner, the teacher and the subject involved in any study in English for Academic purposes. It is presented here as a framework for the points discussed in this paper.

Figure 1 The Eternal EAP Triangle (Jordan, 1997:277)



2. Aim of the Study

The purpose of the present study is an attempt to answer the question what learners at the Lebanese American University perceive as significant factors contributing to their writing difficulties. Furthermore, it is an attempt to find if there are any significant differences between the students' perceptions who had followed a pre-university education in the medium of French (referred to hereafter as French educated) and those who had followed one in English (referred to hereafter as English educated). Finally, the study examines any significant differences between these students' perceptions as a whole and those of the faculty.

3. Significance of the Study

The present research is a pioneer exploratory study into students' perceptions of the causes of their writing problems. The complex language background of the students also emphasizes the significance of carrying out the present study. In Lebanon, a student may do all his pre-university education in the medium of French (or English) and then study in a university in which English (or French) is the medium of instruction. This shift in the instructional language medium naturally makes the identification of factors contributing to student language problems even more difficult to examine. As Lebanon's National Curriculum is undergoing revision, this study becomes even more crucial in providing research findings from which English program developers, teachers and administrators could draw upon for both pre and university educational systems.

4. Student Writing Difficulties

Linguistic research into identifying academic writing difficulties of EFL students has been most revealing in the area of textual, social and cognitive discourse analysis specifically that related to the teaching and learning situation (McCarthy (1991). Research on non-native speakers indicates that they have more difficulty in the use of vocabulary than in structure and grammar, while their teachers perceived the main problems were to do with content (Hoey, 1991; Johnstone, 1999). Some textual problems relate to psycho-sociological issues in students having to draw upon appropriate schemata in the organization of their ideas. Benson (1993) in asking three students to reflect on their experiences of learning

to write at university (1989-90) reported that they all had "... a strong sense of writing ...at university as another 'world of literacy' into which with some difficulty and less than optimum support they had had to initiate themselves...." (1)

Studies describing L1 Arabic non-native speakers of English written work in the various academic genres have also noted weaker organization, unity, coherence, cohesion and lexical variety than those of native speakers (Dudley-Evans and Swales, 1980; Khalil, 1989; Kroll, 1990; Bader, 1992; Al-Abed Al-Haq and Ahmed, 1994; Silva, 1993; Connor, 1996). Shakir (1991) more specifically described the texts '...as generally characterized by excessive use of coordination, parallelism, repetition, and exaggeration' (399). Holes comments (1984 in Al-Abed Al-Haq and Ahmed, 1994) "... that teachers of academic writing should be acquainted with the difficulties that face the advanced Arab learners whose writing is 'relatively free of gross grammatical error' but has a 'persistently un-English "feel" to it" (308). Further research has shown that Arab students' use of vocabulary and lexical cohesive devices are limited and lack variety). In comparing the relative difficulty the students have with the different components of the writing skill, Al-Abed Al-Haq and Ahmed (1994) report:

'Within this continuum of difficulty, the most difficult components for the sample are ..quantity.., argumentativeness..thesis statement..whereas the least difficulty are ..unity..relevance..grammaticality. Between these two ends of the continuu fall ..cohesion..wording..and coherence' (ibid., 312).

The question then is what factors contribute to these students' writing difficulties?

5. Causes of Writing Difficulties

Causes of student writing difficulty may stem from various factors, a few of which related to the present study are 1) developmental and psychological factors (Goodman, 1987; Ellis, 1990; Zamel, 1992), 2) the relative complexity of the writing task itself (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1983; Hunter-Carsch, 1990), 3) negative transfer from L1 to the target language based on contrastive rhetoric and lexicography studies (Kaplan 1966; Kharma, and Hajjaj, 1989), and more recently to 4) lack of or inefficient instruction the learner receives (Zamel, 1983; Zughoul and Husain, 1985; Odlin, 1989; James, 1990; Kroll, 1990; Swales, 1990; Johns, 1981, Sa'Addedin, 1991; Zamel, 1992; Reid, 1993, Connor, 1996;

Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). This list of possible causes for writing difficulty is by no means exclusive of one another or exhaustive, but are considered relevant for the context of the present study.

5.1. Developmental and Psychological Factors

Developmentally, speech comes before writing (Goodman, 1987). Thus, when a child begins to learn to write, there are features of speech that are often transferred to early attempts at writing. These do not necessarily disappear at later levels. Pronunciation may influence spelling, e.g. '*Deer Gadmtr I luv yu*' and the coordinating structure of the oral mode may influence written discourse, e.g. '*One day the horse got lost and the oner was sad and then the oner found the horse and the horse ...*' (Goodman, 1987). Also, as has been outlined above, writing is inextricable from the thinking process and in this way "... becomes a task of representing meaning rather than transcribing language (Bereiter and Scardamelia, 1983:25)

Furthermore, recently, researchers and teachers have noted the important role of individual student learning style that influences how best a learner processes material, works individually and/or in groups, and uses different strategies in undertaking tasks and have formed profiles of different learning styles (Reid, 1995; Nunan 1997). The importance of learning styles in learning has been to identify the best way students learn in order that classroom methodology accommodate to these needs for more efficient teaching/learning. In the survey used in the present study, this is referred to as the student's writing habits. Another important psychological factor considered relevant in learning is student motivation. Teachers have recounted experiences indicating different levels of motivation of individuals and groups in engaging in the acquisition of the language skills. These experiences related to levels of student motivation in language learning and specifically in writing indicate a need to constantly identify ways to instigate student learning, writing being no different. Since it is a 'difficult' skill motivation is imperative to the attainment of required proficiency levels to cope with university course work. Although studies abound in this area in the non-Lebanese context, very few have investigated its significance in the Lebanese context. The few studies, however, have indicated that students are significantly instrumentally motivated to learn a language when they find it necessary for success in their academic course work (Zughoul and Husain 1985;

Yazigi 1991) in Jordan and Lebanon respectively. In the survey, motivation was included as a possible factor.

5.2. Writing Task

Another factor for writing difficulty is the writing task in itself. First, not having an audience present in much of academic writing (except for the teacher or a hypothetically posed one) makes the planning of units of discourse a formidable task. The writer has to be both encoder and decoder and revise and edit information to conform to the syntax of appropriate written discourse and to match reader's academic schemata.

Second, writing is meaning or thoughts that must be clothed in 'correct' structure according to standard conventions of the academic community. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983) group these problems mainly according to the proficiency level of the student: the 'low road' (acquiring basic structure) or the 'high road' (analytic development of ideas) and although there are overlaps, they view the 'high road' as being more difficult for students.

In academic writing, there are different modes of writing or genres which involve units above the sentence; local features such as cohesion and grammatical structure; and more global features dealing with coherence or style. Cohesion and coherence connect the 'low' and 'high' roads. Writing is even more difficult when the important role of cohesion and coherence is considered and the difficulty further appreciated when Hatim (2000) comments "...texts cannot be seen only in terms of their linear arrangement but as hierarchies which serve certain plans and within which certain elements enjoy more prominence than others do (130). Added to the latter is also 'information structure' such as given and new, information focus, theme, topic, word order that offer writers strategic choices (Khalil 2000) making writing quite challenging.

Writing can be viewed as even more complex when structure for stylistic purposes is manipulated. Kress (1982) gives an extract from one of Ernest Hemingway's novels which emphasizes the use of the simple, unconnected, short sentences to create an atmosphere of sadness and allow the reader to imagine the scene. Kress says of the short passage quoted below '...in creating textual incoherence Hemingway is creating precisely the world of someone in severe shock, unable to prevent

sensations from reaching his mind and unable to impose any order on these sensations” (ibid., 98).

“Nick sat against the wall of the church where they had dragged him to be clear of machine-gun fire on the street. Both legs stuck out awkwardly. He had been hit in the spine. His face was sweaty and dirty. The sun shone on his face. The day was very hot.” by Hemingway from *First Forty Nine Stories* in Kress, 1982:97)

Hemingway’s sentence structure does not show weakness in the use of subordinating structures. This is clearly an example of style which differs from that of other types of expository written genres in the academic discourse community. However, it is generally believed by teachers that students should first focus on maintaining coherence in their writing before attempting to use sentence structure ‘creatively’ to depict a certain mood such as that in Hemingway’s text (although some students have proved to be more ‘creative’ than academic writers and creative writing may be viewed as ‘easier’ to produce than expository writing).

Even within expository and persuasive discourse, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983:29) view the rhetorical types of narration and description as easier than that of persuasion. The latter is considered more ‘difficult’ in that it involves a higher level of complex cognitive processes of selecting, interpreting, refuting and concluding. However, it can be argued that complexity is relative to the content; some narratives can be quite complex when techniques such as flashbacks are used. All in all, writing is difficult.

5.3. Negative Transfer to the Target Language

5.3.1 Contrastive and Error Analysis

Transfer refers mainly to the carry over of linguistic items from L1 to L2, which in the past were thought to negatively affect the learning in the target language. Studies in contrastive analysis from the 1950’s well into the 1980’s examined the structure, pronunciation and lexical systems of languages and found differences which are held to influence or interfere with students’ language in L2. However, in the 1970’s, this view was challenged as second language acquisition processes were studied. Second language learning was seen to be similar to first language learning

in that the ‘...language learners are intelligent beings creating rules and systems based on the rule systems of language they hear and use’ (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, 12). This gave rise to models of ‘interlanguage’ (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972; Krashen, 1977 in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996) suggesting that text structures in L1 may not necessarily *determine* the structures used in a writer’s L2 text, though more recent studies show that they may be one factor (among others) which *influence* the L2 text (Odlin, 1989; Pere-Woodley, 1990; James, 1990; Connor, 1996).

In addition to contrastive analysis studies, research in *error analysis* analyzed non-native speakers’ texts to detect those structures that do not conform with the target language under study and to explain retrospectively possible causes for errors (Khurma and Hajjaj, 1989; Pere-Woodley, 1990, Connor, 1996; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). Since error analysis can be viewed as predictive of error, some reports detail structural and lexical features that cause problems for students and there are a few specifically for Arab non-native speakers.

This pedagogic method based on error analysis research to help students avoid errors in their writing has also been challenged as the field becomes more tolerant of error and as new insights into causes of error are obtained. Shaughnessy (1977) in her seminal work refers to the errors made by non-native students not as an inadequacy but as part of their learning process. As work in pragmatic linguistics developed, error began to be viewed as ‘normal’ and some were referred to as mistakes, slips etc. especially since even native speakers at an advanced level were found to make ‘errors’. Also, not all errors students make in writing were found to be due to negative transfer from L1 to L2 but rather some were found to be due to poor developmental writing learning in L2, or even to poor teaching.

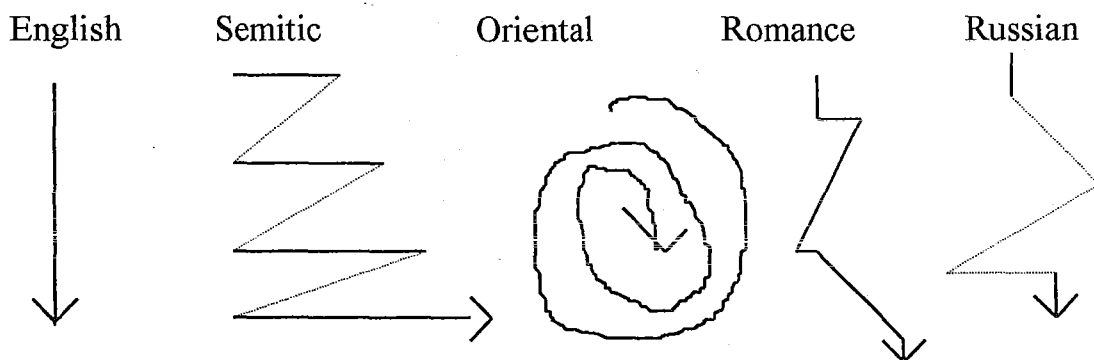
Studies done on L1 Arabic non-native speakers of English have also shown that student error cannot be totally accounted for by contrastive analysis descriptions and transfer (Mukattash, 1984, 1986; Sa’Addedin, 1989, 1991; Connor, 1996). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) further note that contrastive studies are ‘...beginning to consider the variation in American, British, and other “native” Englishes as well as nonnative varieties of English as norms. They also report that the number of native speakers of Englishes is around 350 million, but as many as 700 to 750 million people use English as a national, second or foreign language, or as a language for commerce, industry, science, or other purposes. Also, some researchers

are beginning to view error in relation to a 'discourse community' in Swalesan terms (Swales, 1990). This has made the study of error analysis since the 1990's very complex with various dimensions. The possibility of negative transfer causing writing difficulties for L2 learners has given rise to much research into contrastive rhetoric, text linguistics and lexicography.

5.3.2. Contrastive Rhetoric

Cross-cultural rhetoric is another area that studies have shown to be a possible source of learners' difficulties in the target language. Research has spawned a vast literature of its own, but a somewhat confusing one. On the one hand, linguists claim to have evidence of textual patterns in other languages not found in English writing; on the other hand, there is disagreement over whether these patterns are transferred and cause interference when the learner writes in English (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). The seminal work by Kaplan (1966), in which he posited a typology for textual progression with different types associated with different culture outlined in Figure 2 below has since been challenged by other studies. Kaplan suggested that English texts were characteristically linear and hierarchical, while Semitic (Hebrew and Arabic) text was characterized by parallelism; Oriental text had indirection and was cyclical, and Russian and Romance texts had a preference for digressions. Transfer of these patterns from one language family to another was only seen as negative.

Figure 2 Kaplan's Text Typology (Kaplan, 1966:15)



Certainly some evidence seems to support differences in textual structure between L1 and L2 (Purves, 1988). Even within the same language family differences have been suggested: German academic texts seem to

allow a greater amount of parenthetical information and freedom to digress than English writing of the same kind, and there is some evidence that English writers tend to use topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs where German writers might prefer a bridging sentence between paragraphs. However, Kaplan's (1966) early view has been challenged (James, 1990). Basically, the criticisms noted that Kaplan's model had been based on texts all written in English and not in the languages in question and that the description of the rhetorical organization was too prescriptive and general. Some research into academic expository and argumentative texts has found that both native and non-native speakers of English have similar developmental patterns at both the sentence and discourse levels and that audience awareness is not culturally determined. This implies that inadequacies revealed in their written texts may be attributed to a need for instruction (Johnstone, 1999).

As far as Arabic is concerned, McCarthy (1991) illustrates the controversy related to Kaplan's (1966) theory by a few studies. Although Kaplan had spoken of parallelism for Arabic, Bar-Lev, (1986 in McCarthy, 1991:167) 'finds more of a tendency to 'fluidity' in Arabic text (i.e. non-hierarchical progression with a preference for connection with *and*, *but*, and *so*), and claims that parallelism is a property of Chinese and Vietnamese. Aziz (1988 in McCarthy, 1991:165), however, finds that Arabic text has a preference for the theme-repetition pattern...making it different from English and indeed suggesting a sort of parallelism'. McCarthy (1991) points out this conflicting evidence is confusing 'with regard to whether there is cross-cultural interference for learners' (165). McCarthy further comments, 'What we find frequently in examining Middle Eastern, Oriental and other learner data in English are the same problems noted in European data: that bad discourse organization often accompanies poor lexico-grammatical competence' (165). He concludes by stating that it is really left up to the teachers' expertise to decide whether the interference from the students' first or other language is a problem (*ibid.*, 165).

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) report that contrastive rhetoric studies have moved from examining only products to studying processes in a variety of writing situations that consider other influencing factors such as cognitive and sociocultural aspects of writing (Kachru, 1984 in Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Ting-Toomey, 1999). They also note this in the linguistic analysis of text products where a variety of discourse analysis and text linguistic research focus on analyses of the whole text as a dynamic entity.

Recent research has found that transfer could also be positive. One comprehensive work done on language transfer which challenges previous views is Odlin's (1989) in which the controversy of transfer from L1 to L2 in relation to lexical items is specifically relevant to the present study. He notes that a knowledge of French vocabulary may both help and hinder the learner of English as a second or foreign language due to the similarity or the differences of the items. He gives the example of similar cognates in French and English: *justfier* and *justify* but mentions the pitfall in two 'false friends' such as the French *prevenir* and the English *prevent*' (ibid., 79).

To Odlin, transfer 'is not simply interference' (ibid., 26). It could be negative or positive. He defines transfer as 'the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired' (ibid., 27). At the same time, Odlin sees both native and non-native speakers facing similar problems in learning a language and illustrates this with examples in which spelling is problematic to both. (ibid., 127). Odlin also notes that there may be a deterministic relation between language and thought related to the Whorfian Hypothesis (1956 in Odlin, 1989). He illustrates this by showing that French speakers may have different mental associations as they view each noun as either masculine or feminine marked obligatorily in written discourse. This structural characteristic found in many languages, says Odlin, might 'influence cognition' (ibid., 72-73). He concludes that

'there is little question that lexical similarities in two languages can greatly influence comprehension and production in a second language ...What is less clear is the importance of linguistic relativism...although it might be easier to express a particular thought in one language..' (ibid., 83).

5.3.3. Contrastive Text Linguistics

A recent area of inquiry in contrastive rhetoric has been contrastive text linguistics. It is usually '...used synonymously with text analysis and written analysis...' (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996:19). Some aspects of this inquiry analyze texts for differences in local linguistic features (e.g. cohesive devices of anaphora) or global textual features between languages (Pere-Woodley, 1990; Connor, 1996). While such studies are sometimes revealing about textual descriptions in different languages,

different realizations of the same genre (e.g. medical research articles) may not show any significant results as writers tend to conform to the conventions of their community. Regent (1985 in Pere-Woodley, 1990) notes that 'there is now a tendency on the part of a certain number of [French] writers to follow the English model' of 'taking a more argumentative line than that in the French texts, which seem more data-oriented.' However, much work is being carried out in text analysis not necessarily for contrastive purposes but to obtain insights into the products and processes of writers.

An even more recent area of contrastive text linguistics is that of *contrastive lexicography* which compares the lexicon of two or more languages at the discourse level (Hoey, 1991; Jaszozlt, 1995) beyond structural contrastive studies. Lexical items are no longer viewed as separate entities to be studied in the text, but as part of the large discourse patterns and organization in texts. Issues that were solely related to grammar and structure are now being integrated with the study of lexis. In fact, many studies now indicate that the L2 learners' lexical repertoire needs to be widened for academic purposes (Silva, 1993; Jordan, 1997; Johnstone, 1999) as "The lexicon is not ... a list of words... [but] plays a dynamic and necesary part in the syntax" (Jaszozlt, 1995).

Two items on the survey cover the above on negative transfer and contrastive language studies: interference of French and of Arabic.

5.4. Teaching/Learning Context

Since Shaughnessy's (1977) seminal work on L2 learners, research on the teaching/learning situation has spawned the literature on EFL/ESL methodology. In the past decade emphasis has been placed on learner centered curriculums in which teaching/learning methodologies have been investigated and researched. It is believed by most in the academic community that with relevant instruction and an understanding of the students' learning styles, a lot can be done to develop the student's writing proficiency. Thus, the buck is now being passed down to the teaching/learning factor as the possible main cause for students' writing difficulties.

The situation is no different in many of the academic institutions in Lebanon. Let it suffice here that the pre-university system focuses mainly on traditional methods of teaching writing considered by most educators

to be the cause of students' problems. However, in recent years, with the universities requiring a writing sample in addition to objective entrance exams and the job market requesting more language proficient candidates, the teaching/learning methodology in the schools and university has come under quite a great deal of scrutiny. Also, innovations in the National Language Curriculum have focused more on learner centered curriculums, cooperative and content-based task methodologies emphasizing both process and product writing techniques in the classroom cognitive thinking and study skills and continuous language assessment procedures.

Since the experience of the teachers at the university and the student comments from various disciplines at the Lebanese American University, where the present study was carried out and the research literature focus mostly on the teaching/learning factor as being the most probable contributing factor in students writing problems, more items related to the foregoing were included on the survey. Items included textbooks, exam conditions, time allotment, type of assignments, syllabus (pacing of work, work load) correction and grading system used and pre and university teaching/learning methods. These were considered as much of the complaints had been focused on them. It is worth giving a review of the main approaches in the teaching/learning situation up to the present some of which describe the situation at the university.

5.4.1: Approaches in Composition Instruction

Developments in L2 contexts have drawn much from L1 writing theories, research and instruction. However, there is a sharper focus on the learners' different languages, cultural and social backgrounds drawing on contrastive analysis studies. Researchers have noted the developments in the L1 field but at the same time the need for more research into L2 writing problems especially the need for more research to be done in countries other than USA (Kroll, 1990; Reid, 1993; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996).

The L2 composition developments are given below according to four main instructional approaches: 1) Controlled composition, 2) Current-traditional rhetoric, 3) The process approach, and 4) English for academic purposes (Kroll, 1990). These approaches are not to be viewed wholly

discretely since teaching/learning situations commonly involve a mixture of the practices.

5.4.2. Controlled Writing

Controlled writing or guided composition was based on the audio-lingual approach (Fries, 1945 in Kroll, 1990) that advocated learning as habit formation through exercises. Some linguists advocated exercises in the form of 'free writing', while others believed that writing reinforces the other skills and is best learned through pattern practice through substitutions, transformations, expansions, completions etc. without considering audience or purpose of the task (Kroll, 1990) Writing in freshman classes mainly dealt with practising grammar at the sentence level (Reid, 1993). However, this approach is still being used to a great extent in many of the pre-university classes in Lebanon with reports of very little success when students have to write full texts on their own. In fact, most students show almost excellent performance on the sentence level, but fail to write acceptable stretches of written discourse. With the emphasis in the new national curriculum students focusing more on process/product writing methods, better results may be obtained in the future.

5.4.3. Current Traditional Rhetoric

In the mid 1960's, controlled composition and pattern drill was found to be inadequate to teach ESL writing above the sentence level. With Kaplan's (1966) theory of contrastive rhetoric, teaching/learning of writing began to focus on discourse patterns and such rhetorical structures as comparison/contrast, definition, description, cause-effect. Thus, the 'pattern drill' focused more on the rhetorical level rather than at the syntactic level; for example, in sentence-combining exercises. The organization of students' discourse into paragraphs and topic, supporting, concluding sentences and transitions became important in developing expository discourse suitable for academic university work. The teacher was viewed as the 'judge' of the written discourse and students had to comply to the conventions in language and organization. The approach is still dominant in ESL teaching/learning situations today and textbooks abound in the rhetorical format. It is dominant in the English Program at LAU with the process approach expounded below being introduced along with it. However, students find difficulty with this approach especially

those coming from schools that have had a traditional type or more controlled type of writing instruction

5.4.4. Process approach

This approach was a direct response of the expressive school theorists of writing. Supporters argue that the composing process is non-linear and recursive and stress the importance of a sequence of pre-writing, writing and post writing strategies that students employ to produce a final product (It has been influential in initiating cooperative and collaborative techniques in composition classes). There is much emphasis on communication based on the communicative approach to teaching language which stresses: authentic materials, issues such as the purpose of the text, the audience, the context, the individual learner's need and the importance of individualized learning, collaborative writing techniques, teacher-pupil conferencing, and peer group work. Grammar is learned in context at the discourse level (Kroll, 1990; Reid, 1993; Johnstone, 1999).

Theories that students acquired language 'naturally' as Krashen's monitor hypothesis (1984) claimed were viewed with caution as more researchers and teachers found that instruction in a second language was significant in developing students' writing. Textbook formats changed to include sections on pre-writing, brainstorming techniques, planning, outlining, drafting, revising and editing in the process of writing. Critics of the process approach argue that it is not practical in an academic context as it emphasizes the process and invention skills of the writer to the detriment of focusing more on the final product. However, when combined with traditional rhetoric writing, the process approach can form an integrative approach necessary for writing in an academic community (Robinson, 1988; Kroll, 1990; Reid, 1993). Although, the 'marriage' of the process and product approaches is being adopted in both high schools and tertiary education in Lebanon, given the culture of learning of the students in high school classes relying mostly on using model texts, rote dictation, memorization of words etc. students still face a lot of difficulties in writing on entering universities.

5.4.5. Academic Writing

As a reaction to the process approach, many researchers and teachers saw the need to teach English, specifically the writing of texts, with an

academic orientation (Kroll, 1990; Reid, 1993; Jordan, 1997). Some saw a need for more classroom based research to focus on the problems and needs of the students. Basically, the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) approach involves giving the students the necessary language skills to deal with certain academic genres and academic schemata to join a discourse community (Swales, 1990). Although there are controversies within the approach itself on how far writing should be emphasized in specific disciplines and whether it is the role of the English teachers to teach the content of the courses, its importance to academic success can not be denied in the L2 context. Many English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs have attested to success even as far back to the mid late 1980's (Fulwiler and Young, 1990; Jordan, 1997).

Very much related to instruction is assessment and evaluation (referred to in this research as 'grading') (Hamps-Lyons, 1991). Although the various departments at the university use different criteria and scales (analytic, holistic, etc.) in assigning a final grade to students' work depending on the subject being tested, all departments must report final letter grades which correspond to the following raw percentage scores: A=90-100; B=80-89; C=70-79; D=60-69; F= Below 60. Syllabi indicate the grading breakdown for the assignments and the work load and pace to be covered throughout a fifteen week semester. These syllabi are comparable to most liberal arts universities in the U.S.

Given the above factors and taking into account the complex linguistic milieu in Lebanon, identifying causes of students' difficulties in writing is certainly no easy task.

6. Procedure of the Present Study

6.1. Sample and Research Tool

At the end of the academic year, June 1999 students from different disciplines in the four main schools: Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering and Architecture, Pharmacy, filled out a survey by rating their perceptions on twelve factors that might contribute to their writing difficulties. A total sample of 1,055 student surveys was obtained. Three main factors were considered: psychological (individual writing habits and student motivation), language transfer (interference of Arabic and French on the target language), and teaching/learning methodology

(textbooks, conditions, time, type academic assignments, syllabus load and pacing, grading system, methods in university and high school). The items were placed in random order for more objectivity in collecting the data. Students rated their perceptions on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 representing the least agreement that the item rated causes writing difficulty.

The survey was administered in the English classes by the English instructors so that the largest possible sample could be obtained. The questionnaire had been piloted to a comparable group of students in the previous semester and slightly modified in rephrasing the factors more clearly. Data were then input into the computer and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

6.2. Language Background

It is obvious to anyone visiting Lebanon that there is a complex socio-cultural-linguistic make-up. American and French influences predominate in both public and private sectors. More than half of the population are bilingual, speaking French and Arabic or English and Arabic, and many are tri-lingual and multi-lingual. In almost all sectors of society, a mixture of languages is in daily use. During a conversation there is frequent code switching. Children often grow up with multiple mother tongues, follow elementary, primary and high school education in a language which is not their mother tongue(s) and often each of their parents may belong to a different cultural background. For example, a child may have a parent who is of Lebanese nationality, L1 native speaker of English whose spouse is of American nationality but who is L1 native speaker of Arabic/Armenian/French.

Few deny the advantages of a child's education being in the mother tongue (UNESCO, 1951:691 in Gupta, 1997:496). However, As Gupta (1997:505) further points out "In the cosmopolis, language shift is an accepted part of life, and seems not to be emotionally fraught. Children do not seem to suffer emotionally or educationally by not receiving education in the mother tongue, which in any case may not be clearly defined or of much importance to the child or family. There is a long tradition of 'school languages' and part of the purpose of going to school is precisely to develop skill in the school languages." Lebanon is similar to this situation as Gupta (1997:505) describes of a few other countries in

which "...citizens have a relaxed attitude towards learning and speaking a variety of languages and ... accept that some languages are privileged and that the learning of them will confer advantages."

In Lebanon, the mother tongue, Arabic, is not considered instrumental in the educational system since it does little to help students to compete on the global market. Thus, in both the governmental public schools and private schools, the child has the option aside from Arabic language classes to follow a course of education during elementary, primary and high school years either in French or English, both considered prestigious languages in Lebanon which give the child a higher status. In fact, there is no choice to be made between mother tongue as the medium of instruction or another language. Due to the French colonization of Lebanon in the first quarter of 20th century, the lingual and cultural influence extended from the home to the schools and to the workplace. Also, the American and British influence in Lebanon have had the same far reaching influence, and in recent years seem to be surpassing that of the French.

Thus, the choice parents must make for children is whether to choose a predominately French or English system of education. Often times, this choice does not depend upon whether the parents know French or English but which language is considered more prestigious, which school accepts the student, future job opportunities and so forth. In the predominately French system of education in both public and private schools, children also must take language classes in English and Arabic and vice versa. It must be pointed out, however, that the government public schools focus more on French as the medium of instruction rather than English (although English language classes are given between 2-5 hours/week). Husen (1994) comments on the study of languages in Lebanon:

More than half of the Lebanese people are bilingual. At every level of schooling, students learn two languages: Arabic (the official language) and French (75% of all school students) or English (25%). Students frequently learn a third language, particularly in private schools. (3350)

6.3. Nationality

Table 1 indicates that a little under three quarters of the sample are Lebanese nationals and approximately one quarter have a double nationality, which is very common in Lebanon due to the increasing immigration over recent years.

Table 1 Nationality of Sample

	%
Lebanese	71.1
Lebanese American	2.1
Lebanese Australian	2.7
Lebanese Belgian	1.2
Lebanese British	1.3
Lebanese Bulgarian	1.2
Lebanese Canadian	2.4
Lebanese French	2.4
Lebanese Ghanian	1.2
Lebanese Greek	1.2
Lebanese Italian	1.2
Lebanese Syrian	1.2
Lebanese Venezuelan	1.2
Palestinian	3.1
Syrian	3.4
UAE	3.1
<i>Total</i>	100

6.4. Native Language

The figures in Table 2 indicate that Arabic is the native language of the majority of the students. The first languages under *other* in Table 2 are Greek, Twi (from Ghana), Italian, Armenian and Bulgarian. Percentages may add up to over 100% as some of the students may be bilingual or multilingual.

Table 2 Native Language of Sample

	Arabic	French	English	Others
<i>Total %</i>	94.55	1.98	1.98	3.47

6.5. Language of Instruction in High School

The sample population indicated that 50.8% are English educated, 40.9% French, both French and English 6.4%, and others 1.9%. This reflects the move over the past few years to a pre-university education in the medium of English.

6.6. English in Use

However, a large proportion of approximately 70% of the sample use English mainly for their studies, 25% when socializing, and 12% when at

home. The overlap shows that students may use English in all situations. Once 'outside' the classroom, however, Arabic is the main language in use. This also confirms Yazigi's (1991) point that English in Lebanon is mainly learned as a foreign language as she defines.*

7. Results and Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to find out what the English and French educated learners consider to be the main factors contributing to their academic writing difficulties and to identify any differences between these perceptions and those of the faculty. Results and discussion are given below according to these two main aims.

7.1. Comparison of French and English Educated Students' Perceptions

Figures 3 and 4 below indicate that the French educated students viewed the interference of French as being the main cause for their writing difficulties (mean=3.3), while the English educated did not view their L1 Arabic or L2 French as being a significant hindrance in writing (mean 3 and 2.3 respectively). Usually French educated students view themselves 'inferior' to their English counterparts and often report to their teachers that their writing problems are due to having had a French education rather than an English one. However, some research at the university shows that the French educated do as well as their English colleagues at the higher proficiency level and significantly better in lexical variety at the lower proficiency level than those who are English educated and at the same level (Bacha, 1997). Students' perceptions such as those of the French educated indicating a high rating for French interference, may not necessarily reflect the situation. It is not uncommon to find students' perceptions quite different from that which is revealed by detailed linguistic analysis. French educated students' awareness to the positive transfer of French to English needs to be raised.

Both the French and English educated, however, found that the high school instruction did not sufficiently prepare them for university academic writing (means of approximately 3.2). Also, although students often complain about not having sufficient time for their writing assignments, it did not seem to be problematic when other factors were considered. Textbooks and classroom environment were also not viewed as problems. In fact, both groups did not show any strong opinions on

any of the given twelve factors, there being no mean ratings above 3.3. Usually students are hesitant to record negative comments. Education culture in Lebanon dictates in general the acceptance of the educational system and for students to be involved in its process is usually not the practice.

Figure 3 – French Educated Students’ Perceptions (N= 431)

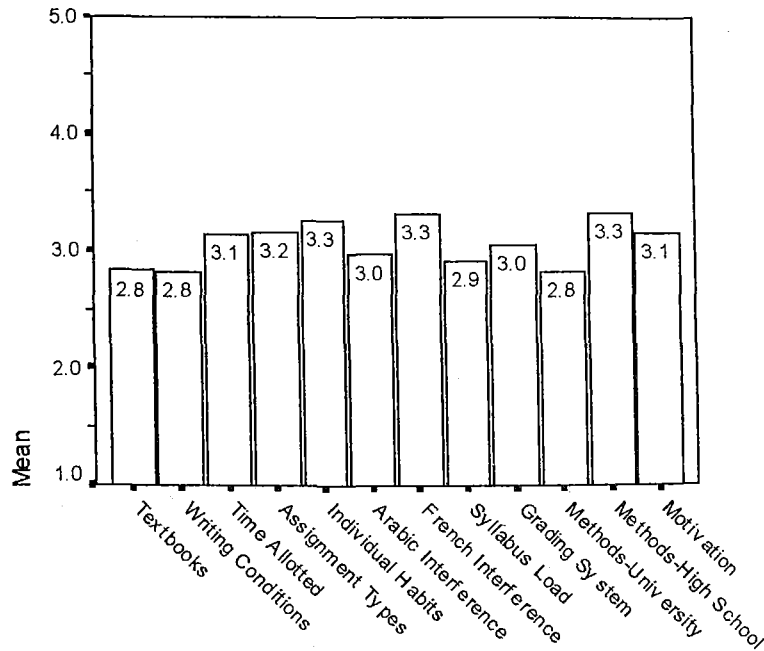


Figure 4 – English Educated Students’ Perceptions (N=536)

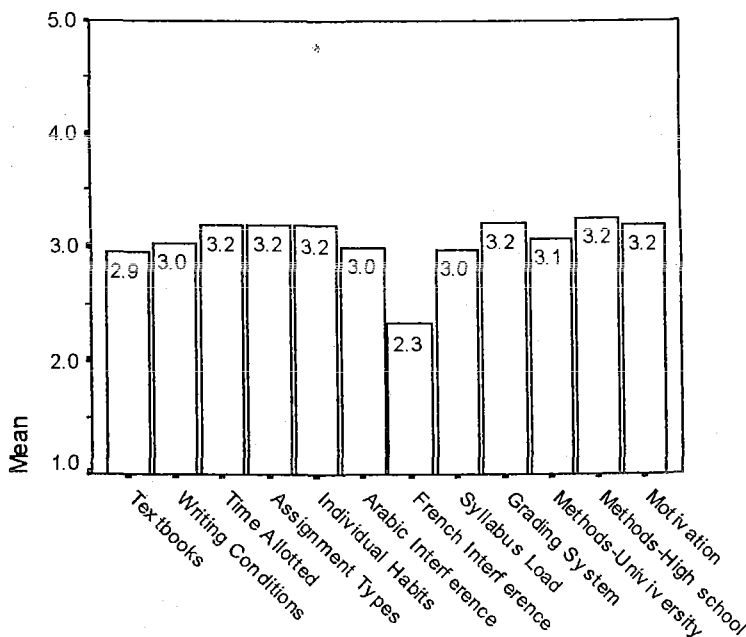


Figure 5 indicates that students who studied in the mediums of French and English equally seem to have fewer complaints about their writing. Also, no factor is significantly more problematic than another. Again textbooks and time pose the least problems.

Figure 5 – French/English Educated Student Perceptions (N=68)

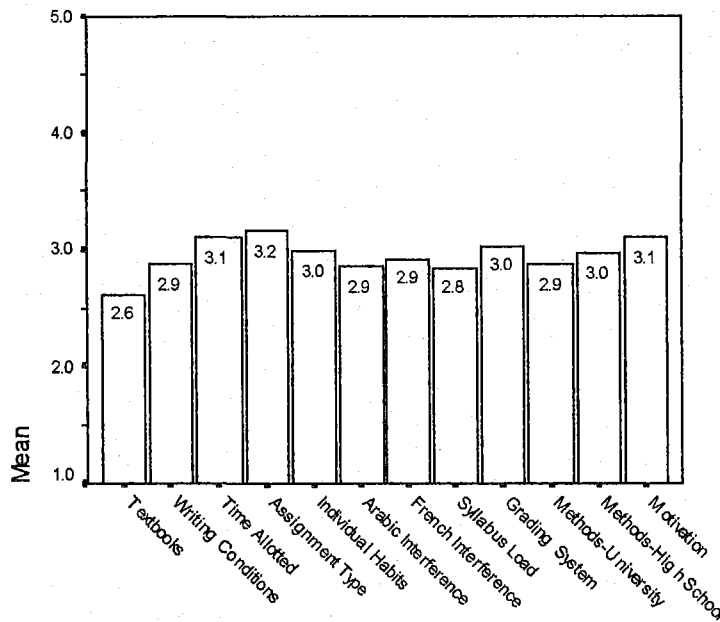
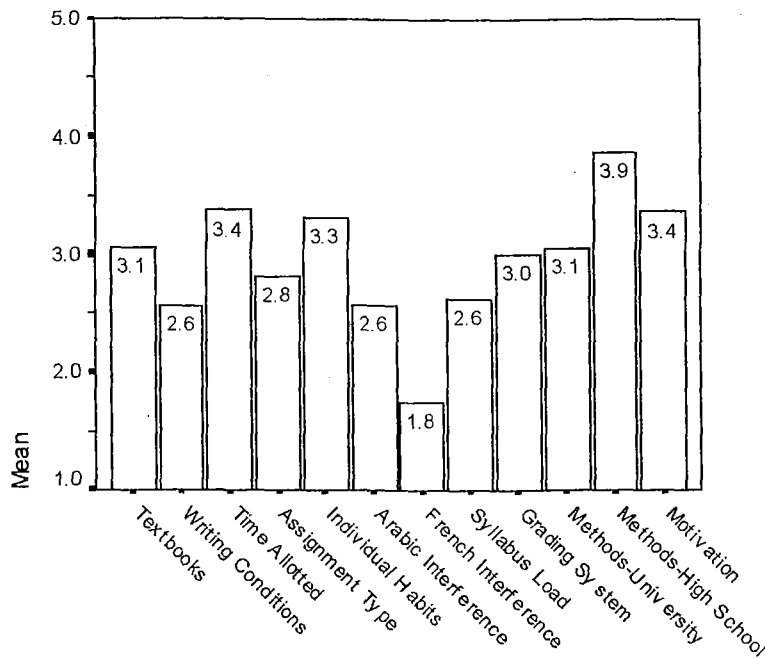


Figure 6 clearly shows that students who have studied in mediums other than English or French have more problems. Their high school instruction seems to have negatively affected their writing in university. This is expected since many students who have not studied a foreign language have been known to face many problems in their academic writing especially students who study only in the medium of Arabic. It is no wonder that these students find the textbooks, the time, the assignments and even their own motivation to be problematic when writing at the university. It is surprising, however, that the interference of Arabic shows a low rating; it could be that many of these students are coming from schools where Italian, Greek or other languages are taught.

Figure 6 Other Educated Student Perceptions (N=20)



All in all, the results above show that interference of L1 is not the most problematic issue for students and thus confirms recent research in contrastive studies that L1 does not necessarily negatively affect L2 performance.

7.2. Comparison of Student and Faculty Perceptions

Figures 7 and 8 below indicate that when the students' perceptions (N=1,055) as a whole were compared with those of the faculty (N=48), it is the faculty that find students' habits, motivation and previous instruction to be the main causes for their writing difficulties. The interference of L1 and L2 do not seem to be that significant in comparison, but are still considered more problematic than the students do. The students, on the other hand, view previous instruction and their own habits as causes for their difficulties but not as problematic as the faculty view them. It seems that the interference of L1 or L2 is not such a significant factor as one might think.

Figure 7 – Student Perceptions (N=1,055)

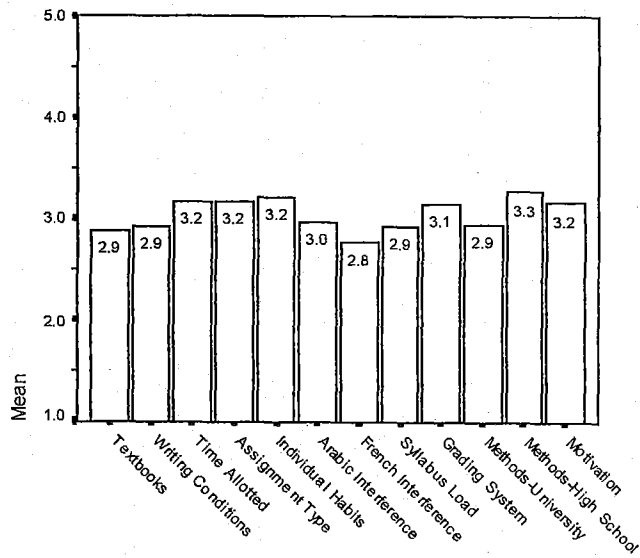
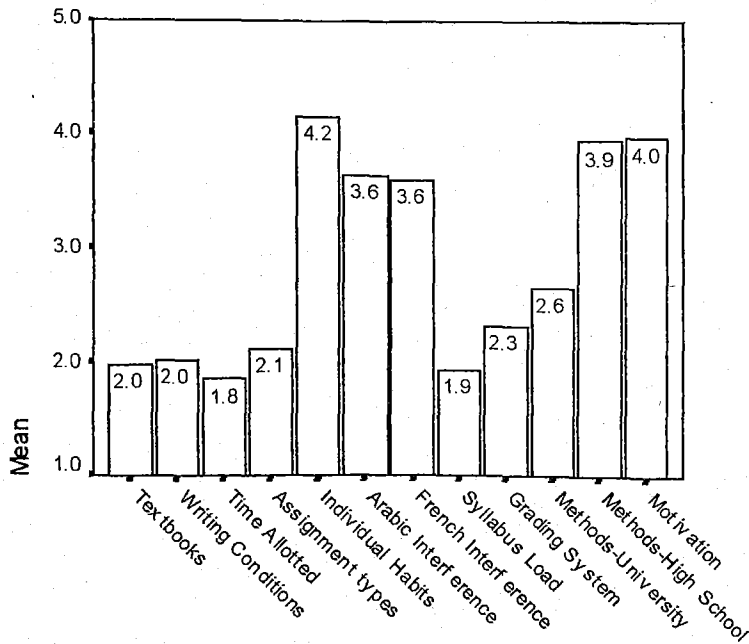


Figure 8 – Faculty Perceptions (N=48)



Faculty indicate strong views about the factors causing their students' difficulties. That faculty find fault with the students' writing habits and above all with their motivation is not surprising as it confirms faculty experiences. However, the difference between student and faculty perceptions does suggest, in the present context, a need to revisit the instructional methods at both pre-and university levels.

8. Implications and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to investigate students' perceptions of what they consider possible causes for their writing difficulties in an academic setting in light of the research in the field and the experiences at the university. The survey results indicated that although teachers should be aware of contrastive rhetoric and lexicography, writing conventions may not necessarily influence or be the cause of the students' problems in writing in English as it once was thought to be. Teachers, however, need to be aware of the possible influencing L1 factors on writing instruction and the importance of students acquiring relevant learning strategies to the development of their writing proficiency. Implications are far reaching for more emphasis on classroom teaching/learning methodology which could help initiate learners into the language of instruction.

As teachers, we know that the teaching/learning of writing is a very complex interrelation of multiple issues, and thus identifying one or two main causes is not the entire answer in solving student problems. Nevertheless, in our efforts in identifying the stumbling blocks, we can hope to better guide them in the 'complex' writing process.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of the paper presented at the *Multilingual/Multicultural Conference* jointly sponsored by the Lebanese American University and the Goethe Institute in November 1999. It is part of a wider research study into students' academic English needs across the curriculum at the university partly funded by the Center for Research and Development at the Lebanese American University.
2. The term English as a foreign language has often been used synonymously with English as a second language. They are also used in a broad sense to refer to English as an additional language whether it is the students' second, third, or fourth language etc. Yazigi (1991:11) applies a distinction between foreign and second language to Lebanon. She notes along with Grabe and Kaplan (1996) that the teaching/learning of English as a foreign language occurs when students only use it as the language of instruction and it is not the language of the community. English as a second language, on the other hand refers to contexts in which English is also the language of the community. For purposes of the present research, the terms EFL and ESL are used according to Yazigi's (1991) connotations.

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