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Organization, Style, and Mechanics in Writing of Students Learning English as a Foreign LanguageAriel E. San Jose¹ and Jerome R. Vicencio¹Gulf College of Oman, Masqat, Oman

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the status of writing proficiency in terms of organization, style and mechanics and to understand the common issues in writing of EFL students. Using the Writing Analytic Evaluation Rubric and content analysis, the researchers found that in terms of organization, respondents could naturally express their feelings and opinions but lack focus for purpose and audience. On the other hand, in terms of style, it indicated that writers had the inability to elaborate ideas. In terms of mechanics, the use of punctuation, capitalization and correct spelling emerged as most problematic and needed attention. Discussions of the results and conclusions were provided.

KEYWORDS: Writing organization, style, mechanics, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing issues, Gulf College of Oman

INTRODUCTION

Writing is not an innate ability. Like the three macro skills, writing is a difficult skill to develop especially when the learners' target language is syntactically and grammatically different. Moreover, vocabulary and idioms are also concerns.

Mohan and Lo (1985) claimed that learners' struggle in writing organization is connected to the native or first language (L1) and developmental factors. They reiterated that if the L1 and the foreign or second language (L2) were somewhat the same, then learning the target language would be easy. On the other hand, learning of the L2 at a late stage likely hinders accuracy and organization. This observation was supported by Bacha (2002) who said that Arabic L2 writers in university were known to face writing difficulty because of their L1. Another study conducted by San Jose (2011) found that college students' proficiency in the L2 is affected by dialect use. Thus, he concluded that L1 influence the learning of the target language particularly in syntax, grammar and phonology.

This problem in writing is not only true to college students but even to postgraduate students. Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) found that Arabic students of post graduate program faced problems in relation to vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and referencing. Their study supported Khuwaileh and Shoumali (2000) who found that Arabic students' poor writing in English was correlated with their deficiencies in their mother tongue. Thus, Mohan and Lo (1985) previously pointed out that there is a need for greater awareness of students' native literacy and educational experience as factors influencing the development of academic writing in a second language.

In the mapping conducted on the essays and compositions of the college students, we found disunity of thoughts and ideas, lack of coherence and emphasis, graphological confusion, misspelling due to substitution (p's are changed into b), improper diction, and punctuation lapses. We hypothesized that L1 has greatly influenced these problems. Moreover, we observed that students speak only in English when they encounter foreign teachers and speak Arabic when dealing with their colleagues or even with Arabic teachers. Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) said for learners to obtain proficiency of a foreign language, students need to surround themselves with good language learning environment. He mentioned that in Arab world, learners have little opportunities to use foreign language in their society; hence, (Abbad, 1988; Hisham, 2008; Rabab`ah, 2003; Zughoul & Taminian, 1984) learners linguistically struggle when they study at a university where the medium of instruction is English.

Several studies were already conducted regarding Arab students' difficulty in learning English as a second language. Moreover, these studies have been the basis for intervention among institutions to plan for better English language instructions. However, only few studies focused on the level of organization, style, mechanics and common writing issues using qualitative content analysis. It was in this ground that this study was conducted.

Purpose of the Study. This study was conducted not only to determine the status of writing proficiency but also to understand the common issues in writing of students in the General Foundation Program (GFP). Specifically, it determined the level of writing proficiency of the GFP students in terms of organization, style, and mechanics; and explored specific organization, style, and mechanic writing issues in the participants' writings.

Theoretical Underpinnings. This study anchored on several propositions. First is the cognitive models of writing which argue that writing difficulties source out from the learner's 'attempt to map language onto his or her own thoughts.' A proficient writer, however, can face these problems including generation of new ideas; syntactically correct clauses; proper use of punctuation and spelling; tone and diction. On the contrary, neophyte writers make simple and 'natural strategy in composing and adopting' narrative as their ability to write is restricted by their limited knowledge of the language. Second, this study was anchored on critical age hypothesis, which proposes that second language acquisition is bounded by age. Second language is easily learned before puberty. It implies that children as second language learners have 'superior ability' compare to adults because of the lateralization of the brain. Lastly, this study was also grounded on the idea of the 'influence of first language to second language'. The influence L1 heavily lies on phonology, syntax and spelling. It also contends that L2 is easily learned if sounds and grammatical structures are closely similar with L1.

In this study, the samples of writings were taken from freshmen students. Most of them were beyond adolescent. English was taught to them only when they were in secondary level. Moreover, they most of the time communicate in their first language outside the classroom. Lastly, Arabic and English are distinctively different in phonology and syntax. These conditions made this study interesting.

METHOD

This study used the mixed methods research design. The quantitative method was used to determine the level of writing organization, style and mechanics of the respondents while the qualitative method was used to closely look at the written text. The combination of these two methods would make the findings reliable and valid. In this study, the quantitative method was first used in the form of inter-rater evaluation. The essays written by the respondents were subjected to assessments using the Descriptive Writing Analytic Evaluation Rubric developed by McGraw-Hill. On the other hand, content analysis of the essays was conducted to specifically determine organization, style and mechanics. According to Morse (1991) the use of at least two methods, commonly quantitative and qualitative, is necessary to give answer to research problems. On the other hand, Knalf and Breitmayer (1989) mentioned that if a single method is not enough to comprehensively address the problem, then, triangulation is an essential way to do.

This study did not directly involve individuals as research participants; rather it focused on the written texts by the participants. Sixty mock exam essays were subjected to inter-rater evaluation and content analysis. These mock exam essays were from the work of GFP students, who were chosen not only because they are fresh graduates from high school but also because they were considered as “at - risk”, which means that, they were in the adjustment period of their college life. In this period of adjustment, we hypothesized that freshmen were on the process of developing independence and self-identify of their communication abilities. It is here where they realized their professional survival. One of the challenges they could encounter is language for they are not fully exposed to English. Most of the time students use Arabic language in their daily interactions. Thus, believing in their own abilities to conquer language difficulties is essential. For Jones (2008), self-belief of learners was an essential factor which determines a writer’s success during their first semester in college.

There were two instruments used in this study. First were the mock exam essays of the respondents. Each essay contains 120-150 words. Also, these essays were subjected to content analysis to determine specifically the issues in writing. Second was the Descriptive Writing Analytic Evaluation Rubric, which was used in the assessment of the essays. The instrument particularly measured the essays’ organization, style and mechanics. The organization aspect deals with the expression of the writer’s views, thoughts and feelings, the clarity and significance of the writer’s idea and the appropriateness of the writing to the purpose and

audience; the style looks into the development of specific details, the use of vivid language and coherence using transitional words; while the mechanics assess the essay’s spellings, punctuation, diction and neatness of the text.

Procedures of the Study. For the smooth conduct of this research, we followed three stages. The first is identification of topic and gathering of information, which emerged after we noticed the writing difficulties of the students. Reading of literatures was done to know the gap, hence our decision to focus on the organizations, styles, mechanics and issues in writing. The second stage is location of materials. After the identification of the subject for study and gathering of information, we decided to use the writing mock exams of the students. Mock exams were formative assessment conducted by the college to determine the development of the students. Moreover, we also researched available writing rubrics from the web to guide us in the evaluation of the writing samples.

In the last stage, conduct of research objectives, the writing samples were evaluated by two writing experts based on the Descriptive Writing Analytic Evaluation Rubric. The rubric was composed of three aspects; organization, style and mechanics. A separate content analysis was conducted to look into writing issues. After formulating the findings, we wrote the discussions and implications.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In observing the verisimilitude of this study, the researchers anchored on Guba and Lincoln’s (1985) four standards: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Patton (1999) contended that credibility needs to ‘intersect with audience and intended research purposes.’ In this study, the target readers are the teachers or educators, administrators and curriculum developer. It was already expected that the findings of this study may be a basis for syllabus, curriculum or program development. The main purpose of the study was to determine the status of the writings of the freshmen students of the General Foundation Program and to look into some writing issues. Hence, the findings would give pertinent information that would guide in making interventions. Moreover, we demonstrated the real and exact status of the writings of the respondents by presenting some verbatim writing samples of the respondents.

On the other hand, transferability according to Shenton (2004) is addressed if the ‘findings of the current study could be applied to other setting.’ Thus, the

researchers need to provide sufficient details. In this study, we provided several literatures and readings which corroborated with the recent results. Moreover, those readings were of similar conditions and Arabic learners.

According to Marriam (1995), dependability is also equated with 'consistency'. However, this consistency does not refer to whether the current study is consistent with the first, second, or third study, but whether the 'results are consistent with the information collected.' This means that this is a straightforward connection between the information and findings. In this study, triangulation of the information collected was done. The results of the inter-rater assessments were compared to the content analysis of the sample texts. Moreover, verbatim texts were used as samples to strengthen the claim. On the other hand, Decrop (2004) claimed that dependability is achieved if there is a 'research plan' in the conduct of the study. In this study, we made sure that everything happened according to plan. Thus, the procedures on the conduct of the study were strictly observed. Further, prolonged engagement between the researchers and the participants was established. The researchers of the study were the teachers of the participants; thus, trust and understanding were established.

Lastly, conformability was addressed through following the neutrality. This meant that the results of the study were all based from the analyzed and triangulated information. Pandey and Patnaik (2014) maintained that conformability is following objectivity – 'the findings are shaped by the data not by the researchers' bias, motivation and interest. Further, the manuscript was subjected to peer-review by two disinterested writing experts. Their feedbacks were considered.

Study Limitation. This study was limited on determining the status of writing of freshmen students in the General Foundation Program, in terms of organizations, styles and mechanics. Additionally, it also identified writing issues. This study did not use persons as subjects instead 60 writing samples taken from the mock exams. The methods used were mixed and results were triangulated. Further, the study did not discriminate whether the writing samples were written by male or female students. Thus, the result of the study may only apply to this group of students. San Jose (2012) mentioned that due to limited samples 'results may not be applied to general populations because they were only representation of the samples.'

RESULTS

Based on the inter-rater assessments conducted on 60 essays, descriptive ratings were given that measure the level of organization, style and mechanics of the texts. Moreover, the results of content analysis are presented. Although content analysis falls under qualitative method, we opted to use tabular format for easy understanding of information. Further, elaboration of the information was provided.

Level of Organization of Writing

The results of the assessment on the organization of the writings of the participants revealed that generally, their writing organization is intermediate. It could be interpreted that the participants' ability to write was average. Their organization may be coherent and unified but ineffective at times and may demonstrate loose transitions between ideas. However, among the three indicators, expression of the writer's view or feelings obtained the highest main score while organization of the writing for the purpose and audience had the lowest mean score.

Level of Style of Writing

In terms of style, the inter-rated results revealed that the participants essay were at early intermediate proficiency. It specifically showed that the use of vivid language to add interest to the writing and the utilization of connecting words to make the organization clear were only at the early intermediate proficiency. However, putting supporting details to the opinions and general statements was in the intermediate proficiency.

Level of Mechanics of Writing

The overall results of the evaluation on writings of the participants revealed that the participants' cognition in writing was intermediate. Specifically, capitalization, punctuation and spelling emerged as the most problematic aspects of the participants' writings. Moreover, sentence fragments and run-ons were also one of the major concerns. However, neatness and legibility of writing obtained an early advance rating.

Issues in Writing

In a closer look at the writings of the 60 participants, it was observed by the researchers that most students' writings lack control of sentences in paragraphs. This lack of focus led to disunity of information and incoherence of ideas.

Sample 43 shows lack of connection among the sentences. The writer started with the idea that he loves football. However, in the succeeding statements did not support his main idea rather he made a characterization of how football is played. On the other hand, his final statement showed that he had passion for the game.

Football is my favorite. I play football in the college yard with my friends There are 11 players all the time and there are 2 teams. When the ball in the net a goal in football you can use all parts of the body except on the one hand and allowed the guard only to use your hands. I love playing with my friends (Sample Writing 43)

Sample 46 shows disorganization of thoughts of the writer. The paragraph started with a statement about the writer's love for football and he explained his reason of not playing the game. However, in the middle of the paragraph he mentioned football teams, benefits of football and his other favorite sports. Further, the entire paragraph had run-on and grammar lapses which could hinder the readers' understanding.

my most favourite sport football when Im was young most of my time playing football I was play with muscat time but after 3 years I stop playing because accident in my leg but I did not stop see the match football. my best time Barcelona and Brazil and sport it's very importen for our life he give us a good healthy and a good body and I hope to visit Barcelone To see the club. my favourite player misse and also I like to swimming and play basketball sometime (Sample Writing 46).

Moreover, majority of the students write in simple sentences. Few attempted to write in longer sentences but resulted to run-on and fragments. Further, more than half of the writing samples showed the use of transitional words. However, there were only 14 conjunctions that were familiar to the students. These were "and, before, however, also, furthermore, firstly, secondly, but, because, finally, and also, then, after, and so". Among these conjunctions, and was generally used.

The conjunction and is commonly used:

A. to start a sentence

myfavourit sport is basctboll. I love thesport am platingthes a sport what my bad. I like is sports becous it is my favorite whan in baby. and I looking in thesport a verye easy (Sample Writing 18).

My most favourite it's Iron Club. He loved dramatically lamas in Iron Club. and I am one of the people interested in the sport on a Daily basis... (Sample Writing 16)

B. to give other idea

my favourite is Sports is football. every day im play football whit my friends in the stadium and we are make a team 12 player and the second team 12 player also and play the match for strok 45 minutes and the strok too also 45 minutes a total is 90 minutes and football is useful for health and give the strength the body (Sample Writing 12)

sports useful to me and give the human activity and vitality my body and sports furthest from diseases and avoids obesistysharklak be sporty and tidy and orderly and beautiful and the body is not blabby and you can afford to buy any clothes for your body limb and I play any game... (Sample Writing 11)

Another issue in the writings of the students was punctuation. This difficulty was generally observed in all the essays. Sample 48 shows the writer's lack of comprehension on the use of punctuation. Also, the paragraph had several misspelled words. However, there was unity of ideas in his narration. In Sample 23, the three or four ideas put in one long sentence resulted to run-on. The inability of the writer to put necessary punctuation made the thought of the paragraph unclear.

In the coming lines I'd Like to tell you about My most memorable trip it was three years back when I first time visited Al Wahiba sands a day befor the trip my cusin called me on my mobailofaring me to joine his grup on a trip to Al wahiba sands, so I imedeatlygraped a pin and wrot a list of thing which I might need during the trip that day I completed my shapping at mednigh and I packed my bagegge at five early morning ... (Sample Writing 48).

This is one of my memorable that was the unforgettable and so especial for my to be remembered in my lifetime because that was the my first time to have a trip to a beautiful small island in any country Timor Leste which is called Atauro (Sample Writing 23).

In bird's eye view, writing samples in general lack organization. Hence, a reader might find difficulty in comprehending what the writers want to convey. Specifically, the samples have less complicated sentences, few connecting words, and show ability of a novice writer.

In terms of word choice and grammar, the written samples show lack of vividness and preciseness in the use of modifiers. In samples 34 and 35, it could be observed that the writers use modifiers (adjectives and adverbs) in general terms. Elaboration of these modifiers were limited if there were any.

My Most Favourite sport is football. it's nice sport and beautiful. it has many benefits in strengthening you body. This as sport of the most important sports. The best time to baly football with my friends and I love team Barcelone (Sample Writing 34).

My most favowrite sport is footbal is easy and nice sports also has halthy for bady and give you fitness also my anther sport is tennis is one of the world most widely played of all ages. It also a popular spectator sport and tennis is one of the few professional sports in which women earn as much prize money as men (Sample Writing 35).

Lastly, mechanics in writing such as proper punctuations, correct spelling and capitalization were the most neglected. Almost all sample writings have these problems. Writers were not oriented when to use a full-stop, punctuations and capital letters. Moreover, spelling was generally poor. Substitution, dropping, and replacement were the common pattern used by the students. The following words were spelt incorrectly.

<i>basketball</i>	<i>basketbull basctball bastball bascatball bosketbull</i>	<i>because</i>	<i>becous becuse becouse beuces beacouse</i>
<i>beautiful</i>	<i>beautifull beuteful beautfull beautifl butiful</i>	<i>friends</i>	<i>friends frands farind firends frendes frinds</i>
<i>important</i>	<i>important importen importente importain</i>	<i>favourite</i>	<i>favourt favaurite fuvourit favourite</i>

It was also noticed in the sample writings have rampant substitution of “p” for “b”. This substitution is commonly seen in the following words.

<i>bebull</i>	<i>people</i>
<i>pest</i>	<i>best</i>
<i>bleng</i>	<i>playing</i>
<i>perb</i>	<i>bird</i>
<i>baly</i>	<i>play</i>
<i>broblem</i>	<i>problem</i>
<i>bosition</i>	<i>position</i>
<i>petter</i>	<i>better</i>
<i>bibol</i>	<i>people</i>

Also, the interchangeable sound of /e/ for /a/ affected the spelling skills of the writers. It was observed in many circumstances that /e/ sounds /a/ like in “Mohammed” pronounced as /mohammad/; Ahmed pronounced as /ahmad/. Learners adopted the sound of L1 for the L2. Here are some words which are wrongly spelled:

<i>angoy</i>	<i>enjoy</i>
<i>avreday</i>	<i>everyday</i>
<i>pleying</i>	<i>playing</i>
<i>hotal</i>	<i>hotel</i>
<i>fether</i>	<i>father</i>
<i>meny</i>	<i>many</i>
<i>regular</i>	<i>regular</i>
<i>bast</i>	<i>best</i>
<i>salf</i>	<i>self</i>
<i>capitel</i>	<i>capital</i>
<i>gethere</i>	<i>gather</i>

DISCUSSION

It is indicated in the findings that the students’ organization was transitional. It means that the students can write essays; however, their cognition in putting together the details, uniting similar ideas and knowing their purpose of writing need attention. The researchers believed that there are two factors which may contribute to this condition. First, the learners are non-native speakers of English and that they only use their target language in class. Thus, they use their mother tongue in communicating with others either spoken or written all the time.

Moreover, it was observed that most students were not seriously considering English as a subject to learn with. However, although these students used Arabic language in their day to day conversation, they were not also fluent of their first language. Thus, a more complicated scenario happened. Doushaq (1986) mentioned that Arabic students’ inability to write sensible essays in English was ‘due to their weakness in the mastery of their native tongue. This idea was confirmed by Khuwaileh and Shoumali (2000) that Arabic learners’ inability to write in English ‘correlated with similar deficiencies in the first language.’ On the other hand, Scarcella (2002) mentioned that difficulties in writing are closely associated with the non-native speakers of a language. On the other hand, Bojana (2005) revealed that students’ first language writing ability, English proficiency and composing experience in English affect the quality of an essay. Second, it is a teacher or curriculum factor. Rhetoric, that is unity, coherence, and emphasis may not be taught or included in the module or worst (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005) ‘teachers lack adequate knowledge and teaching skills which made them poorly prepared to help the learners.’ Thus, the researchers believed that training or re-tooling for teachers should be done regularly to make them professionally equipped.

Results also showed that the writings of the participants lack vividness or can be characterized in early stage. This indicates that students’ lack creative imagination to support their ideas. This is usually manifested among elementary writers. For Kennamer (1998) ‘vividness of information has something to do with the writer’s emotion and imagination.’ Thus, neophyte writers lack this aspect of writing. On the other hand, according to Jampole, Konopak, Readence and Moser (1991) creativeness of the mind of students could be enhanced through instruction and practice. With this result, the researchers believe that English classes should not only focus on letting the learners develop the topic in general terms but also to push further their writing abilities by offering specific and concrete details. We also contend the students’ late learning of the English

language may contribute to the learners' inability to give further details of their writings.

Although the participants' cognition on mechanics was intermediate, capitalization, punctuation and spelling was most neglected in their writings. Their inability to put a proper punctuations lead sentences to sentence fragments and run-ons. This result confirms Adas and Bakir (2013) finding which said that 'combination of two or more ideas in a sentence is not an error rather acceptable in Arabic.' Al Qainai (2008) said that although English and Arabic have similar punctuation marks, Arabic has its own way punctuating a sentence. Moreover, Habash (2010) mentioned that punctuations are not correctly used in Arabic and Zaghouni, Mohit, Habash, Obeid, Tomeh, Rozovskaya, and Oflazer (2014) found that 'omitting punctuation marks is a very common on Arabic writing.' We found in this study that in the 60 writing samples, the use of punctuation and capitalization are generally absent. It was also observed that semi-colon and exclamation marks do not exist in the writings. Thus, great attention in teaching punctuation and editing rules and exercises may be offered in the classroom. However, Adas and Bakir (2013) warned that run-ons and fragments may be corrected by teachers but Arabic learners will repeat this mistake because long and run-on sentences are not errors in Arabic. We believe that the best thing to do is to let the learners know that unlike Arabic, long sentences without punctuations are confusing English.

Lastly, spelling is the most problematic among all aspects of writing in all writing samples. We contend that this difficulty among Arabic learners is due to the phonological differences between the Arabic language and the English language. The students' inability to grasp sound of the English word leads them to commit mistakes in spelling. This finding corroborate with previous research regarding Arabic students orthographic abilities of the English language. Haggan (1991) pointed out that Arabic students' mispronunciation and awareness of English spelling rules and patterns were contributory to spelling errors. Ryan and Meara (1992) concluded that Arabic learners confused consonants and vowels' structures. Finder (2008) believed that Arabic learners' English reading fluency contribute to their spelling skills. Saigh and Schmitt (2012) also mentioned that 'Arabic learners generally dropped English vowels'. The researchers believed that the learning of spelling among Arabic learners was also influenced not only by L1 but much so with their environment. The researchers observed that establishments were not mindful of the proper English spelling. Droppings and substitutions of letters were common.

Conclusions

Teaching a second language is also teaching a culture. This is so because a language is a culture. Thus, in teaching a language, a teacher needs to understand the nature of the native language, the target language and the learners. However, this essential of teaching language is highly neglected by many language teachers. In the case of this study, Arabic language is phonologically, grammatically and syntactically different from English. These differences hinder the learners in learning the target language. It is but wise for the teacher to start with phonology and later the structure of the L2. But in real scenario, many teachers directly taught their learners with functional, situational and conversation, making it an uphill struggle for the learners.

The difficulties of students with organization, style and mechanics in English may be approached clinically. Teachers need to inquire why students have such organization and style in their writings; why students find spelling, punctuation and capitalization difficult; and what constitutes their struggles. If all these queries will be addressed then there may be a possibility of better learning of the target language.

Moreover, we believed that needs analysis may be conducted to the learners before any class starts. By this, teachers would be able to determine the capability of learners and they could make necessary strategies to address the needs. However, it was a sad reality that curricula do not do such. Further, we contend that if an institution gears towards making its students English speakers, the entire campus must be declared an "English Zone." By this, students would be forced to speak in English. Visual aids which showed spelling rules in English may be put up. Crash courses in courses in English may be offered and training of English may be conducted. If the teaching of English would only take place in each classroom without the cooperation and participation of the stakeholders, then it would be teaching English in vacuum.

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