

## Mother Tongue Influence on Writing Apprehension of Jordanian Student Studying English Language: Case Study

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**ABSTRACT:** Numerous researchers in the area of English writing instruction have highlighted that writing apprehension is an important factor that affects the quality as well as perception of writing amongst students. Thus, this research aims to investigate the cause of writing apprehension of Jordanian EFL students at Yarmouk University in Jordan. The sampling of this study consisted of 24 third year students studying B.A English Language at Yarmouk University in Jordan for the academic year 2010/ 2011. The instruments used in this study were focus group interview. The results of this study showed that majority of the Jordanian EFL students at Yarmouk University in Jordan experienced high level of writing apprehension . A valuable insight revealed by the findings of this current study is that teachers using the mother tongue, that is the Arabic language in an attempt to explain while teaching in the English writing class, is seen by respondents as contributing to their high level of apprehension. It is clear here that what is being implied is that using Arabic in the writing classroom will not improve the students' proficiency level which in turn will affect their apprehension level and hence their ability to write in English.

**Keywords-** EFL, Jordanian Students, Writing Apprehension, Arabic language, Yarmouk University.

### INTRODUCTION

Due to all the obstacles and challenges in writing, many L2 students may feel strained or discouraged and this will eventually cause them to stop trying due to all the apprehension. Such apprehension may become a personal trait that negatively influences the acquiring and learning of a language. In real life, the degree of apprehension differs from one individual to another. Usually those who suffer high levels of apprehension may suffer in their learning of the language. In comparison the opposite may also be true for some other language learners. Instead they may be motivated or driven by apprehension to work harder or repeat the attempt in the

learning task till they can achieve success (Kharma & Bakir, 2003).

It is also the case that in the researches that have been conducted to investigate writing apprehension as well as the behavioral characteristics and psychological make-up of students, most have been carried out on L1 learners that are native speakers in an American setting. According to Cheng (1999), one possible reason for this neglect to investigate writing apprehension in ESL/EFL contexts could be due to the fact that often in second or foreign language instruction, oral proficiency in the target language is viewed as a more important skill to master than writing skills in the target language. Consequently, extant studies in writing apprehension in L2 contexts have 'reported mixed and confusing results' pertaining to writing apprehension (Cheng, 1999).

In this regard, Hassan (2001) remarked that "...there is a need to investigate the variable 'writing apprehension' in an Arabic speaking context given that studies investigating writing apprehension and self-esteem in their relationships to the writing quality and quantity of university students in such context, to the best knowledge of this writer, do not exist". (p. 12-13)

Thus, given that researchers as well as practitioners in the area of English writing instruction and learning have highlighted the problem of apprehension as crucial determinants of students success in learning to write effectively in English, this study proposes to undertake a case study in the context of Yarmouk university students in Jordan to investigate firstly, the veracity of such a claim and secondly, to investigate the extent of the problem.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have been conducted to identify the factors that can contribute to as well as raise the level of writing apprehension among students. The findings from these studies identified two causes of writing apprehension in students. The first cause or factor relates to the experiences of a student in classroom writing instruction and the second one relates to the traditional classroom instruction which focuses on product rather than process of writing (Abdel Latif, 2007).

Other studies, for example, (Leki, 1999; Pajares and Johnson, 1994) have revealed that writing apprehension is caused by a number of reasons. They encompass areas like individual's writing skills (Leki, 1999), to the amount of preparation taken to complete a writing task (Pajares & Johnson, 1994), to being afraid of being evaluated and judged based on writing tasks (Raisman, 1982), and finally to the mixed messages students are given by their teachers in the form of direct and indirect feedback in their class (Smith, 1984). In their discussion on the role of fear of test and negative evaluation in L2 writing apprehension, Horwitz et al., (1986,p. 127), refer to "a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure". The fear of failing a test pervades every school environment and is the prevailing cause of writing apprehension in L2 writing situations. This is on account of the fact that writing is a productive activity that is performed under time constraints. Thus, even the best students tend to falter when taking tests. While the fear of negative evaluation is similar to fear of tests in its effect, nevertheless, it encompasses a wider context as it includes academic as well as and personal evaluations that are

made by students based on their writing abilities and proficiency in the target language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 105). As such fear or anxiety is present or arises in any social, evaluative situation, for example when a student receives negative comments from the teacher; has to correct errors in essays or even when tasked with a written assignment at a job interview.

In this regard, Daly (1977) pointed out that when teachers gave only negative comments to their students it had a corollary effect on their students in that it dented their confidence and sense of self-worth. On the other hand, when students receive positive comments, they were more likely to develop positive attitudes toward writing (Daly & Wilson, 1983). Similarly Raisman (1982) pointed to the correlation between positive comments and confidence and the resulting positive attitude to writing.

While the negative comments of a teacher, as discussed above, is a contributory factor to writing apprehension, it is also the case that when the teacher does not provide any comments at all, a student would also be affected negatively. For example, Grundy (1985) revealed that teachers who fail to provide any feedback may also be the cause of writing apprehension in their students. This is evident in cases where students with high levels of writing apprehension had felt more confident in their writing abilities when they received positive feedback from their teachers. Other possible causes of writing apprehension can be traced to students viewing writing assignments as a form of punishment or negative past experiences like having to do difficult writing tasks. It would appear that teachers are sometimes not at fault as their teaching strategies are often dictated by the higher authorities like the education ministry which design the curriculum and spell out the objectives of a course (Grundy 1985).

In this regard, it is instructive to note the views of Wiltse, (2002) who stresses that the overall objective of a teacher's role in providing feedback is to guide and help students to improve the quality of their written work by teaching them to do things in a different or more effective way. It is the case that sometimes, teachers are not provided with guidelines or trained in the correct or appropriated way to give feedback on students' written assignments. An example is when a teacher provides feedback that is incomprehensible or not specific. In such a situation students as well as the teacher do not benefit at all (Wiltse, 2002). In addition, most teachers are generally reluctant to share or exchange opinions regarding their evaluation of their students' writing other teachers. Even the more complete and free-standing comments found at the end of papers are not generally preserved or shared, and teachers rarely have the time or opportunity to re-read comments they have made on student papers (Smith, 1997).

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is based on one instrument of measurement, that is, focus group interviews to obtain data and information. Focus group interviews collectively gather data from (24) students who volunteered were selected. Then they were divided into 4 groups with 6 students in each group. Each of the four groups was interviewed from one hour to two hours on separate days. This study decided to place 6 students in each group and limit the interview time to a maximum of two hours based on the recommendations of Patton (1990). The questions

selected for the interviews were adapted from the questions used in a study by Atay and Kurt (2006). These questions were designed to seek answers to the research questions in this study, that is, the difficulties faced by students in their writing process in relation to writing apprehension. They were also asked to suggest solutions and perceive as strategies that will reduce their level of writing apprehension.

The interviews were conducted in the lecture hall in the Department of English Language at Yarmouk University according to the schedule as earlier determined by the researcher and respondents. During all the interviews, a lecturer who had M.A in English language assisted the researcher to manually record the responses from the respondents. Each time respondents answered a question, the lecturer would manually record the responses on a sheet of paper. Interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and all four interviews were carried out consecutively four days in a row.

The analysis of the interviews that were conducted with the respondents were qualitative in nature and hence subjective. Thus it was necessary for the researcher to structure the data in order to facilitate the analysis in a systematic way. Bearing this in mind the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data were conducted following a sequence of processes based on content analysis.

There are certain advantages to content analysis. According to Bouma (2000) content analysis is a different method of examining records, documents or publications as it enables researchers to ascertain the frequency of certain ideas, words, phrases, images or scenes in a recording, a text sample or a film. In short it categorizes information into groups or corpus. This enables group or collective work as several people are able to analyze the same content material and it helps them to evaluate the material to see what elements can be observed and counted and categorized into groups. Or as Cohen (2000) puts it, content analysis is a method that serves as a basis of inference from word counts to categorization. Thus by analyzing content, a researcher will be able to identify appropriate categories and units of analysis which reflect the nature of the document.

The actual process of effectively analyzing the qualitative data had to be done in a sequential manner. As Wiersma and Jurs (2005) affirm, in general, a qualitative research is a sequence of processes toward an accurate description or interpretation of the phenomenon accordingly; firstly, the researcher organized the information and reduced the data. It was done by categorizing the data and then comparing the information with statements from the students' interview transcripts, following Cohen (2000) who states that the categorization of content is usually determined after the initial evaluation of the text and will cover the main areas of content. Then the researcher coded the categorized data. This was done to pave the way for the effective analysis and discussion of the results.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

Some of the feedback from the interviewees about suggestions to reduce writing apprehension, suggest that part of the respondents' writing apprehension resulted from their

teachers using the Arabic language in an attempt to explain while teaching in the English class. This led to their lack of confidence in using English on their own or independently. They felt that if their lessons were conducted only in English, then they had to think and write in English. Thus, they would be able to learn more English vocabulary and eventually use the words in their writing. All these are exemplified in the following views:

- (1) “how you need us to be a good English students and... eh.. and then write in a good English and we think we in Arabic class not English class” (S2Int3)
- (2) “Teacher use a lot of word in Arabic ....not word only, sometime he talk a lot in Arabic all the time” (S3Int4)
- (3) “from the first year in this department, all teacher use Arabic word, how we will use English language in writing and we don’t have more vocabulary .... I mean English vocabulary” (S2Int4)
- (4) “Yes, Ah...English is difficult for me, so I’m worried about whether or not I can write in a good English as the doctors tell us, he think we can write in a good English and use good vocabulary but we don’t have vocabulary enough to write about topic.”.

A valuable insight revealed by the findings of this current study is that teachers using the mother tongue, that is the Arabic language in an attempt to explain while teaching in the English writing class, is seen by respondents as contributing to their high level of apprehension. It is clear here that what is being implied is that using Arabic in the writing classroom will not improve the students’ proficiency level which in turn will affect their apprehension level and hence their ability to write in English. Thus the students find themselves in a catch-22 situation, which is translated into a fear of writing and hence they avoid writing because of the fear of being negatively evaluated by others, whether their peers or their lecturers. Such is fear is not unfounded as evident in the following remarks: “*I read the comment ... ah... teacher comment... he write to me I must be at fifth grade not in university*” and “*many students like us in writing, six or seven students I think is very good in writing, all the time they laugh when they ask them to read what I write*”.

Subsequently, teachers should be reminded, that in the English writing classroom, the focus is on the target language, thus they should only use the English language in the class and not the mother tongue. As the findings reveal, it was common practice for the lecturers to use Arabic in the English writing classroom.

Such a practice is entirely retrogressive and does not work to anyone’s advantage more so if we take into account the fact that these students are in their third year of studies and finishing their writing courses. As Swain et al., (2011) point out, students’ first language can be used to scaffold the use of second language inside English classrooms but not to replace it. In other words, using the mother tongue should be seen as a last resort, and whenever possible the target language should be used as this will immerse the learners in the target language even if as the findings of this study reveal there is very little exposure to English outside the Jordanian EFL classroom. As Griffiths (2008) notes, exposure to the target language is a necessity to acquire better target

language proficiency. While the teachers may have a valid reason for using the mother tongue, that is, the students are generally low proficiency learners; they should be made to realize that by doing so they are perpetuating the state of low proficiency amongst their students. It may be perceived by the teachers as an expedient move in the face of insurmountable odds, but in the final analysis, as it has been pointed out earlier it effect the many situation. Perhaps the Jordanian authorities could come up with a directive to ensure the usage of English in the EFL classroom by highlighting to the teachers the consequences of their action as detailed above.

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