

A Review of Problems Arab Students Encounter in Academic Writing¹

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1. Introduction

The steady increase in the number of international students studying at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels has attracted attention to the deficiencies in their academic writing. Writing is considered to be the core of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and learners are usually assessed based on their writing especially in higher levels of education. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is defined by Hyland (2006, p. 2) as:

Specialized English-language teaching grounded in the social, cognitive and linguistic demands of academic target situations, providing focused instruction informed by an understanding of texts and the constraints of academic contexts.

Chandrasoma (2010, p. xi) mentions that "student writing takes precedence over the other macro skills as it is the most important instrument in exposing one's performance and competencies in a course of study." Academic writing has also been considered an essential component at all education levels and in all disciplines. In order to write a good academic piece, there are a number of features that need to be learnt and reflected in academic writing.

This paper discusses the features of written academic texts, the role of language discourse functions in such texts and presents some of the challenges that non-native speakers (NNS) of English, particularly Arabic speakers, may encounter when engaged in academic writing.

2. Academic writing

Tardy and Courtney (2008, p. 73) note that academic writing "is used to describe a wide range of writing, from personal writing in educational contexts to very specialized disciplinary writing." In order to write a good piece of academic writing, some "text-

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external and text-internal features" (Johns, 1997, p. 125) should be known and reflected in the written work.

3. Features of academic writing

Surveying the literature on academic writing, I have found a number of researches discussing the various features that academic writing should exhibit. However, these studies showed some discrepancies regarding the number of features discussed. Therefore, my discussion of the features of such texts will be limited to the most commonly discussed and agreed upon features as presented below.

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Formality

Formality is considered to be the most important feature in academic writing. Academic texts are more formal than other writing genres. For example, they differ from writing personal letters and email messages to family members and friends. In academic writing, the writer needs to take into account the intended reader's academic expectations and tries to meet them. For instance, academicians, be they university lecturers, these examiners or journal editors, have a set of formal standards and conventions that a piece of writing should demonstrate. Consequently, in written academic English there shall be no use of slang words, e.g. 'guys', 'kids', 'chap', 'a lot of', etc., and idiomatic expressions, such as 'work your fingers to the bones' which means work hard. These colloquial terms and expressions may decrease the level of formality of a text and may not be understood by some readers. The example below from Buscemi, Nicolai and Strugala (2005, p. 429) illustrates this point:

Slang: They weren't into laying guilt trips on their kids.

Formal: They tried not to make their children feel guilty.

In addition to this, contractions or abbreviated forms, such as 'I'll' instead of 'I will' or 'won't' instead of 'will not' should be avoided in academic texts. Furthermore, academic writing utilises formal transition signals as 'however', 'nonetheless', 'therefore', 'furthermore', 'conversely', etc., and uses less of common everyday conjunctions, such as 'and', 'but', or 'yet' to link sentences or paragraphs.

Writing a formal academic piece may not be an easy task for NNS. This could be due to the lack of vocabulary variety they possess which results in their using informal and restricted sets of words and expressions. Another cause for NNS frequent use of informal conjunctions may be due to interference from their mother tongue. Research (e.g. Kharma and Hajjaj 1997) shows that Arabic speakers; for example, tend to heavily use the conjunction 'and' more than any other conjunction which may lead to a weak academic style and result in misunderstanding of the communicative intention.

Organization

The rhetorical structure, i.e. organization, is an important feature of academic texts. Blanchard and Root (1994, p. 1) state that "organization is the key to good writing". The text structure refers to the logical order of ideas and components of the text. In order to achieve a well-organized piece of academic writing, the writer has to fully understand the question or the task instructions and look at writing as a process. That is, the writer needs to brainstorm ideas, plan and outline these ideas, read on the topic, write a first draft, edit this draft, redraft, proofread it, and then write the final version.

An academic essay or a piece of academic writing is usually divided into sections. These could be the introduction, the body and the conclusion. In some other types of extended academic writing (namely, at the postgraduate level) more sections and sub-sections may be included under the previous mentioned sections. These sections and sub-sections should show cohesion, coherence, relevance (points that will be dealt with later) and be well-organized. First, an introductory section should contain a thesis statement which usually comes last in the section. This statement gives the reader a clear idea of what will be discussed throughout the essay. Second, all other sections, i.e. body paragraphs, should also be related to the purpose referred to in the thesis statement. Oshima and Hogue (1999, p. 17) and others (e.g. Gillett, 2012; Buscemi, Nicolai & Strugala, 2005) note that each paragraph should start with a topic sentence that indicates its main idea, then supporting sentences that support and explain the main idea, and a concluding sentence to indicate the end and sum up the paragraph. Finally, the concluding paragraph summarises the ideas put forward in the text.

Worth noting here that Swales and Feaks' (2004) work presents the IMRD pattern, i.e. introduction, methods, results and discussion, and how it can be utilised in writing

research articles. This model and many others (Dudley-Evans 1986, 1989; Johns, 1997; Swales, 1981, 1990) have informed academic English in teaching the rhetorical structure of the research paper. Nevertheless, some NNS may struggle to establish a well-organized essay. In some cases, they may not have a clear controlling idea for each paragraph. Moreover, some students lack the skill of subdividing the topic into main and supportive ideas. This may affect the clarity of ideas and the overall view and impression of their writing style.

The physical layout and format of a written text is also important in establishing a well-organized piece of writing. As most written work and assignments are done by using word-processing programmes, writers need to make use of the different tools such programmes offer. For example, alignment, spacing and font style and size of the written text should be in line with the guidelines given for the production of a particular academic text. This, of course, could differ from a writer to another and from an institution to another. Some students in third world countries who intend to study in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and many other European countries may be at a disadvantage when it comes to the use of word-processing facilities. For example, although Jarvis (2005, 2009) writes about more people having access to computers, there are still in the Arab World some countries and cities where students have no access to computers to gain "electronic literacy" (Jarvis, 2005, p. 214, 2009, p. 54).

Mechanics of writing

Punctuation is an essential element in writing and in academic writing in particular. It affects the meaning of sentences. That is, a sentence may be understood in a different way or even not understood if punctuation marks were not used efficiently. The following example from Azar and Hagan (2009, p. 285) illustrates this point:

We took some children on a picnic. The children, who wanted to play soccer,
ran to an open field as soon as we arrived at the park.

The use of commas means that all of the children wanted to play soccer and all of the children ran to an open field. The lack of commas means that only some of the children wanted to play soccer. This example shows how the use or non-use of punctuation marks may alter the sentence meaning and; consequently, it will be differently interpreted.

In this respect, some Arab students may make mistakes in punctuation as a result of interference from their mother tongue; where fewer punctuation marks are used. Kharma and Hajjaj (1997, p. 107), based on analyses of Arab students' written essays, point out that some Arab students "tend to join sentences unduly".

In addition to the insufficient and inappropriate use of punctuation marks, Arabic speakers may also make mistakes in capitalisation since Arabic does not have capital letters. This problem affects the quality of the written work and makes it look unprofessional.

Cohesion and coherence

Cohesion and coherence are important features of academic writing quality. Cohesion refers to how clauses and sentences are linked together. Hyland (2006, p. 119) emphasises the role of cohesion in presenting ideas explicitly. Cohesion could be achieved through the appropriate use of conjunctions, such as 'yet', 'and', 'but', etc. to link parts of sentences together. Another strategy is the use of theme-rheme relations. For example, when writing, old information (theme) is usually presented before new information (rheme). This helps readers to understand the sequencing of sentences as a whole text (Witte & Faigley, 1981, p. 190).

Coherence, on the other hand, is "the link between the communicative acts which sentences perform" (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997, p. 180). It is the logical organization and flow of ideas and paragraphs in a smooth and logical pattern. That is, each idea and paragraph leads into another. Coherence could be accomplished through linked and related paragraphs using transition signals, or what Bruce (2011) and Hyland (2006) call "metadiscourse markers", e.g. 'on the other hand', 'for example', 'to begin with', 'for this reason', 'finally', 'to conclude', 'by contrast', etc. This is essential in helping readers to easily understand the text.

Arab students may stumble over these specific features, not because of lack of such devices in the Arabic language, but because the curriculum does not prepare them for this. Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000, p. 175) in a comparative study of Arab students' academic writing ability in both Arabic and English, came to the conclusion that the Arabic and English texts produced by the participants lacked cohesion and coherence, which made it difficult for readers to understand the texts. From my personal experience,

I only got to know about cohesion and coherence devices when I first started studying and majoring in the English language.

Complexity

Complexity is also an important feature in academic writing. Writing, in comparison with spoken discourse, is believed to be more complex. It tends to contain more complex sentences rather than simple ones; that is, sentences tend to be compound and complex. Besides, use of nominalised verbs is common in academic writing. Examples of these are: 'hospitalisation', 'industrialisation', etc. It also uses more complex linking words, such as 'on the other hand', 'nevertheless', 'moreover', 'on the contrary', etc.

Such features may be a challenge for some Arab students as teaching Arabic in schools places more focus "at the single (mostly simple) sentence level" (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997, p. 108). This is further complicated by "the fact that Arabic does not distinguish between coordination and subordination (p. 115).

Explicitness and clarity

Although academic writing is characterised by its structural complexity, it remains explicit and clear. That is, a good piece of academic writing should be self-contained, clear in purpose and exposition. For instance, a writer may introduce valuable ideas but they may be vaguely presented and; consequently, may not be accessible and intelligible to the reader. Therefore, the writer needs to revise and reread the written work several times and have it proofread by others.

To write an explicit and clear piece of academic writing, there are some techniques that could be used. Signposting is a technique that could be used to make explicit the direction of the text. Words and phrases, such as 'moreover', 'however', 'for instance', etc. may be used to help the reader to understand the intended meaning and; therefore, make the link between what comes before and after these devices. Furthermore, to write an explicit paragraph, the writer needs to use specific words and avoid verbosity and redundancy, i.e. needless repetition, such as saying 'various different causes for this problem are found', 'free gift', 'return back', etc. This particular point is frequent in Arab students' written English, which may be a result of negative transfer from Arabic and the writer's desire to

stress and overstate ideas. This is supported by Kaplan (1966, cited in Khuwaileh & Al Shoumali, 2000, p. 175).

Precision and accuracy

Language used in academic writing tends to be more precise and accurate. For example, academic writers avoid use of words, such as 'thing' or 'good', as such vague terms do not convey an accurate meaning. The use of precise lexical items plays a great role in increasing the text's lexical density, transmitting the intended meaning and economises on the use of words. An example of this is the accurate use of reporting verbs. Choosing a reporting verb depends on the communicative purpose of the part of the text in which it is used. For instance, in the results section of a research paper, it is common to find verbs being used to express the outcome of statistical analysis, an experiment, etc. Some of these verbs are: 'results show', 'results support', etc.

Accuracy may be difficult to be maintained by some NNS. They may take more time to know the precise functional load of lexical items. This could be due to lack of vocabulary variety. Jordan (1997, p. 46), in a study conducted in the UK in 1981, pointed out that 62% of NNS found it difficult to use a variety of vocabulary. As a native speaker of Arabic, I faced a challenge in this particular area until I came to the UK and started the MA TESOL programme. The EAP module and the two voluntary in-sessional EAP courses I attended at the University of Salford sensitised me to several issues discussed in this paper.

Objectivity

Academic writing is usually objective. That is, all ideas and opinions expressed are supported by objective evidence based on previous studies or experimental results. To achieve this, there shall be minimal or no use of self-mentions, such as 'I' or 'we' and less reference to the reader, e.g. 'you', in academic texts (Evans, 2007; Gillett, 2012). However, the writer may need to use first person pronouns for certain reasons, such as expressing an opinion or describing a tool or a technique that s/he has developed.

From my personal experience and as a native speaker of Arabic, Arab students tend to adopt a personal style of writing based on emotions and feelings which may result in their using of flowery literary language; thus, blocking objectivity. However, they are not

resistant to learning such features if they are made aware of differences between Arabic and English.

Hedging

Hedging is an important feature of academic writing. It is defined by Hyland (2006, p. 314) as the "linguistic devices used to indicate either the writer's lack of commitment to the truth of a statement or a desire not to express that commitment categorically by allowing alternative voices into the text". The use of cautious language, in addition to being a standard academic practice, protects the writer's face and reflects her/his modesty. Examples of some hedging devices are: 'is probably due to', 'perhaps', 'in the range of', 'about', 'almost', etc.

Such a feature could prove difficult to NNS, particularly Arab learners. They may not use hedging devices as a result of being brought up in a culture which prompts "overassertion and exaggeration" (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997, p. 185). Nevertheless, Arab students could make careful use of hedging devices in English when they are shown how to do so. The proof for this is the cautious style used by Western educated Arabs, such as the late Palestinian-American philosopher, Edward Said.

Use of quotation, paraphrase and summary

Academic writing often includes ideas and viewpoints of others on a particular topic. This requires the use of quotations, paraphrase and summary. A verbatim quotation means copying another person's exact words. However, it is not professional to write a text full of quotes as using too many quotations may result in "losing ownership of your work" (Behrens and Rosen, 2010, p. 44). Hence, the writer needs to resort to paraphrasing and summarising. A summary is defined by Behrens and Rosen (2010, p.3) as "a brief restatement, in your own words, of the content of a passage". They mention that a good summary reflects three main traits: "brevity, completeness, and objectivity" (p. 3). They also refer to paraphrasing as a restatement of another person's words in your own words, but it is usually the same length as the original text. These three techniques are used to support the writer's ideas and to show evidence from the literature. Experienced academic writers prefer to use more summaries and paraphrases rather than quotes. They may only quote if the original text is extremely difficult to be put in other words or the original text

and its wordings are important in themselves. Indeed, using too many quotes points out to the writer's weakness.

This particular area may prove difficult for those Arab students whose English competence is limited and; therefore, may resort to frequent quoting or what Howard (1995, cited in Pecorari, 2008, p. 225) refers to as "patchwriting". Patchwriting is "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another" (Howard, 1995, cited in Pecorari, 2008, p. 225). Inexperienced students may also unintentionally plagiarise by including others' ideas in their writing as if they were their own as will be discussed below.

Citation and avoiding plagiarism

Quoting, paraphrasing or summarising another person's words requires a writer to acknowledge the sources the information obtained from; otherwise, s/he will be accused of plagiarism. Plagiarism is the use of someone's work as one's own and it is "the least tolerated offense in the academic world" Behrens and Rosen (2010, p. 53). Pecorari (2008) points out that it might be a difficult task to use sources and credit them. She argues that "warnings, handbooks, information sheets and explanations *telling* what to do and what not to do" are essential but not enough to help learners avoid plagiarising (p. 226). Students need to be taught about plagiarism, how to use and document sources and what needs to be documented. They also should follow the referencing system used by the institution, university or department in which they study.

I believe that citation of sources is not an easy task. I personally used to quote other sources without giving any in-text-citations, and only included a list of references used at the end of the written assignments I submitted. However, when I arrived in the UK I have learnt how serious this issue is and; therefore, started giving in-text-citations of all sources used in addition to full bibliographic details of these sources in the list of references at the end of the work.

4. Language discourse functions

The above mentioned features apply to all language expressed functions. Academic writers usually employ language to express various discourse functions, such as giving definitions, narrating, presenting arguments, exemplifying, comparing and contrasting,

showing cause and effect, etc. These functions are characteristic of written academic English. They play significant roles in academic writing as will be shown below.

Definition

In academic writing, a writer should not expect readers to know everything; that is, the writer shall provide definitions of terms that s/he thinks that some readers may not know what they mean. This depends on the amount of information shared by both the writer and the reader. For example, specific academic terms used in the English language field, such as English for Academic Purposes, may not be clearly understood by a student in the faculty of medicine unless a full definition is provided. Defining could be marked by expressions, such as 'x is defined as...', 'a definition of x is...', etc.

Narrative

Narration could be defined as a description of events that is told as a story, usually in chronological order, i.e. according to time sequence. Narration is often used when writing a story, an experience, or a book review.

As in any type of academic writing, a narrative essay should also be coherent and unified. This could be achieved through the use of temporal conjunctions and time sequence adverbials; for example, 'first', 'next', 'then', 'before', 'after', 'during', 'by', 'last', etc. In addition, narrative essays should use precise and vivid language structures and images to be easily understood.

This writing genre may be the easiest for Arab learners since their culture is deeply rooted in narration. However, they may tend to repeat ideas and make what they write boring to the reader.

Descriptive

Writing a descriptive essay is like creating a picture through writing and using words. A writer usually uses this function to describe a person, an object, a situation, etc. This type of texts gives the writer the freedom to describe the image as seen or understood. When writing a descriptive essay the writer needs to use effective, clear, accurate, relevant,

concise, specific and vivid language to appeal to the reader and to create the intended picture in the reader's mind. Besides, the use of effective signal words helps in demonstrating a coherent and well-organized essay. Moreover, the presentation of ideas in a logical order, depending on the subject and the writer's purpose, helps the reader to easily understand them.

Although this type of writing may sound easy to do; nevertheless, it may be challenging for NNS as it requires a wide range of vocabulary used for this particular discourse function.

Expository

An expository essay or document is often written to explain or analyse (Smalley, Ruetten, & Kozyrev, 2001, p. 82). For the production of an expository essay, a writer may have to use other discourse functions, such as description, narration, exemplification, comparison and contrast, argumentation, etc. As it is the case in all types of academic writing, an expository text needs to have cohesion and coherence. It should also follow a clear rhetorical structure. Besides, all opinions and ideas expressed should be substantiated.

Exemplification

In order to write a good piece of academic writing, a writer may need to provide examples to corroborate the arguments presented. These examples could also be used to clarify a specific point or a definition. Smalley, Ruetten, and Kozyrev (2001, p. 137) state that numbers of examples to be given depend on the topic. That is when writing an argumentative essay the writer may need to provide more examples than in a narrative essay. Moreover, they mention that a general thesis statement may need more examples than another more specific one may need.

Coherence is not only important to link sentences, but also to relate paragraphs in an essay. In an example essay, the organization of paragraphs should indicate coherence and logical flow of ideas. This could be achieved by using transitions, such as 'for example', 'for instance', 'one example is...', 'another example is...', etc.

The problem that some NNS may face when dealing with such a function is lack of exemplification, or giving unclear examples.

Compare and contrast

In several writing genres writers may need to hold comparison, i.e. show similarities, and contrast, i.e. show differences. This is often beneficial in academic writing to determine the superiority of one item or aspect over another; for example, to challenge ideas or different viewpoints, or to compare and contrast between two cultures, objects, or people.

Smalley, Ruetten, and Kozyrev (2001, p. 164) note that the main objective of comparison and contrast is not only to show similarities and differences, but also to explain, inform, persuade and develop thinking. Therefore, the writer usually uses specific language and chooses significant points to compare and contrast between two aspects. The use of transitional expressions in such texts is important to establish coherent and well-organized paragraphs. For example, 'similarly', 'similar to', and 'like' could be used to indicate similarity; whereas, 'in contrast', 'on the other hand', 'unlike', 'different from', and 'compared with' could be used to indicate difference.

Cause and effect

Another important discourse function is the use of cause-and-effect relations in academic writing. Causes are the reasons behind an outcome; whereas, effects are the results of an action. That is, the occurrence of something is conditioned by something else. Several academic writing genres use this discourse function to describe the results of piloting some new teaching technique or other cause-based outcomes.

Again, cohesion and coherence are also important in writing a cause and effect essay. This could be realized through the use of transition signals, such as 'because of', 'as a result', 'therefore', 'consequently', etc. As a NNS of English I face no problem in this regard. However, some NNS may frequently use one specific transition signal more than others to express cause and effect.

Argumentative

Writing an argumentative essay is another language function through which students examine an issue, collect materials and evidences to support and evaluate their arguments and take a stance. This type of writing is intended to persuade or convince the reader of

the writer's point of view. In order to do so, the writer presents two different opinions then tries to support her/his opinion by providing evidences, such as facts, experts' opinions from the literature, or logical reasoning. Moreover, the writer tries to refute the opposing opinion logically and tactfully by providing evidences.

Similar to other academic writing genres, argumentative essays should be logically sequenced and based on logical and convincing arguments. This could be achieved through the repetition of key words, the use of coordinating conjunctions, e.g. 'but', 'yet', 'or', 'nor', or 'for', and correlative conjunctions, e.g. 'not only... but also', 'neither ... nor', or 'either ... or'.

Writing an argumentative essay may not be an easy task for some Arab students. For example, some may unintentionally express disagreement to the opposing viewpoint in an aggressive manner because of deficiencies in their linguistic and communicative competence. This could also be due to lack of practice and training in this type of writing. In addition, some may not be able to develop a voice as they "are often restricted to the ideas suggested by the teacher" (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997, pp. 186-187). Therefore, Arabic speakers may need intensive training and hands-on writing in this important genre.

Conclusion

To improve international learners' academic writing skills, and in an attempt to solve some of the previously discussed challenges, universities and other educational institutions in the UK, the United States of America and many other English speaking countries offer EAP classes and free-access online courses. Such courses, informed by research results in academic writing, are intended to enhance students' general academic writing skills. Some of these are pre-sessional; whereas, others are in-sessional. These courses are based on an analysis of what learners need to know to become better academic writers. However, these types of courses may be described as "common core of academic writing" (Etherington, 2008, p. 27).

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that academic writing may not be an easy task especially for non-native speakers (NNS). To become a professional academic writer, a person needs extensive reading in the academic discipline, writing practice and feedback and guidance from expert writers. This underscores the importance of writing instructors' immediate and clear feedback on students' written assignments and projects.

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