

L1 and L2 Effects on EFL Business Writing: A Holistic Evaluation of Interdependence

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Abstract

Transfer or cross-linguistic influence within the Tunisian ESP context has been subject of research which applied a discourse-based analytical approach in a qualitative design to attest for examples of cross-linguistic interference (Daoud, 1991a). Notwithstanding the fact that transfer might be attested for through a discourse analysis-based analytical approach, recent theoretical accounts on the cognitive stakes of such an enterprise paved the way to a new understanding of the concept of transfer and of the ways that are possible to gauge it. Under this understanding, Cummins (1991, 1987, 1981; Cummins & Bialystok, 1991; Cummins & Swain, 1986) proposes an 'interdependence hypothesis' to explain interdependence and development of proficiency across languages. Responding to a writing task, a group of thirty (30) students majoring in International Trade at the Business School of Tunis (BST) wrote a total of (90) letters of complaints. Nine (9) raters (three for each set of letters) were selected on the basis of their LSP teaching experience to assess our informants' LSP writing proficiency in terms of scores. Analysis of scores distribution and variability points to significant differences and similarities between our informants' writing samples across MSA, French and English. The holistic scores distribution tells us that our informants performed around and below average respectively on the MSA and English tasks and above average on the French task. Variability analysis indicates that our informants were equally variable on the MSA and English writing task, while they were relatively homogeneous on the French writing task. A correlation and a linear regression analysis did prove the significance of these interactions.

Key words: interdependence hypothesis, EFL business writing, holistic scoring, psycholinguistics

1. Introduction

Education can be defined as an ‘organized and sustained communication designed to bring about learning’ (UNESCO, 1976 cited in Hamers and Blanc 1989, p. 187). It aims at developing literacy (the organization of knowledge and skilled abilities). Attainment of these objectives is often reflected in the development of literacy skills (writing and reading) in school environments. Although the number of languages that serve as tools of sustained education and roughly as important link languages is small, these languages are often acquired by their speakers as second, third or fourth languages (Tucker 1998, p. 3). The dominant picture is that governments tend to give an ideal picture of monolingualism (the state of knowing one language) as a norm by leveraging important language policies to this effect. Tucker (1998, pp.3-4) attests that fewer than 25 % of the world’s approximately 200 countries recognize two or more languages as official, with a very small proportion recognizing more than two (e.g. India, Luxembourg, Nigeria, etc). However, evidence indicates that there are more bilingual or multilingual individuals (knowledge of more than two languages) in the world than there are monolinguals. In addition, many individuals throughout the world have been and continue to be educated via a second or a later-acquired language than the number of individuals educated exclusively via the first language. The state of being multilingual is becoming a norm and is part and parcel of people’s every day linguistic experiences. The use of more than one language for education may be an attribute or a reflection of that experience. Tucker (1998, p.4) sums up the issue of multilingual education in the following quote:

The use of multiple languages in education may be attributed to, or be a reflection of, numerous factors such as the linguistic heterogeneity of a country or region (e.g. Luxembourg or Singapore); specific social or religious attitudes (e.g. the addition of Sanskrit to mark Hinduism or Pali to mark Buddhism); or the desire to promote national identity (e.g. in India, Nigeria, the Philippines). In addition, innovative language education programs are often implemented to promote proficiency in international language(s) of wider communication together with proficiency in national and regional languages.

Language planning, the development of policies and mechanisms conducive to literacy, has varying forms and objectives which are essentially determined by the linguistic, social and economic contexts in which language planning occurs. As a consequence, the use of multiple languages for education has varying outcomes which are essentially cognitive, social and educational in nature. The most straightforward of these outcomes is the fact of having individuals acquiring/learning many languages with all the wash back related to such a fact. Indeed, the process of acquiring/learning several non-native languages (i.e. multilingual acquisition/learning) and the final outcome of this process (i.e. multilingualism) implicate all the factors and processes associated with learning a second language as well as the factors that are likely to affect or result from the interactions that might exist between the various linguistic systems in contact.

The idea that bilingual competence (knowledge of two languages) should be regarded as the sum of two monolingual competencies has been challenged (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998, p. 17), nevertheless, this challenge serves to raise similar discussions about multilingual competence. Cenoz and Genesee (1998) open up the debate by admitting the unique nature of multilingual competence. They state that:

.... Although all of the components that are generally regarded as part of communicative competence among monolinguals may be necessary for effective communication in multiple languages, multilingual competence presents specific characteristics that distinguish it from monolingual competence. More specifically, multilingual speakers tend to use different languages in different situations for different purposes. Therefore, while they may need all the components of communicative competence in total, they do not necessarily and often do not need to develop all competencies to the same extent in each language. (p.19).

From a strategic point of view, constructing multilingual competence presents specific differences and it is very likely that these differences may extend to include all aspects of linguistic knowledge representation and activation. The root for such a difference is expressed in what Cook (1992) termed the ‘monolingual prejudice’ which is the stipulation that second language learners should aim for a ‘native-like’ proficiency, where native-like is defined in terms of monolingual proficiency. However, it is all normal to think that bilinguals and multilinguals are exceptional language learners and users and it is unfair to judge their performance on the basis of an ideal-speaker hearer rather than on the basis of their needs and the specific uses of the languages they know which are likely to affect their total linguistic configurations. Thus, multilingual individuals will bear specific interactions and distributions of the linguistic systems they have and by implication they possess linguistic competencies that are distinct from those of monolinguals and bilinguals.

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Subscribing to these views, Cook (1992) proposed the notion of ‘multicompetence’ to define a unique form of language proficiency for multilinguals that is not comparable to that of monolinguals. Two paradigms, however, are sorted out with regard to the specific interconnections between the linguistic systems and sub-systems making up the notion of ‘multicompetence’. A *separatist* and a *holistic* dimension of these interconnections are given and they both relate to specific aspects of multicompetence: the syntactic (linguistic and grammatical) aspect, the cognitive, and the metacognitive (metalinguistic) aspects.

The interconnection between language systems is at stake and evidence for it is abundant in the relevant literature. Cook (1992) discusses evidence for the possible configurations that may impinge on multilingual individuals and it all relates to the linguistic advantages multilinguals score on monolingual individuals. The discussed evidence (lexical and semantic knowledge, grammaticality judgment, metalinguistic knowledge, general cognitive processes, and hemispheric location) seems to indicate that there is a high connection between the language systems stored and the processes involved in their actualization and that:

The knowledge of the L1 and of the L2 are different in L2 users; metalinguistic awareness is improved; cognitive processes are different. Many of these differences are not immediately apparent; nevertheless, they consistently add up to the conclusion that people with multicompetence are not simply equivalent to two monolinguals but a combination that is *sui generis*. (p.565, italics original)

Such evidence assumes the dynamic rather than the static dimension of the linguistic, cognitive and metacognitive configurations of multilingual competence. However, it does not explicitly designate an operational relationship between them across language systems, i.e. how, for example, L1 linguistic, cognitive and metacognitive configurations relate to L2 and/or L3 configurations. Is there a positive or a negative relationship between them across languages? How does this relationship apply to specific literacy domains, e.g. reading and writing?

In sum, we understand that it is against these assumptions that Cummins proposes what he terms the ‘interdependence hypothesis’ which, as a perspective about transfer, methodologically departs from traditional transfer models in that it goes beyond error description to explain parallel development of cognitive/academic proficiency across languages and language systems. It relies mostly on the strengths of proficiency measurement tools. In the following section, Cummins hypothesis is reviewed and discussed within this cognitive framework, beginning with how proficiency in terms of literacy skills develop in multilingual individuals (multilingual acquisition) and how relevant research dealt with it within an interdependence scheme.

2. Linguistic Interdependence

Within an educational context, proficiency and literacy are but instances of the same label. Literacy has always been linked with formal education in the same way proficiency is. Srivastava (cited in Hamers & Blanc, 1989, p. 187) defines literacy as follows:

In an educational perspective literacy can be viewed as a communication skill which involves a written mode of verbal transmission (reading and writing) employed by literate societies for effective functioning in a changing socio-ecological setting.

The importance attached to the development of literacy skills is based on the conviction that literacy is an instrument for developing ‘the individual’s perception and organization of cognition’ (Hamers & Blanc 1989, p. 188). Kaplan (1982) narrowly defines literacy by making a distinction between what he calls *oracy* and *literacy* and the fusion between language as a logical and cultural system and oracy and literacy as its embodiments. Kaplan (1982) explains that different language communities have oracy or literacy modes to encode experiences. He reiterates that literacy is reflected in the development of writing which is the mode with which information is fixed and which “permits the user to externalize both the experience so fixed and the language in which it is fixed” (p.1). These broad and narrow statements about literacy are, we believe, interconnected since both relate language knowledge to cognition. Such interconnection serves in particular the study’s concern with writing.

Thus, attainment of literacy by multilinguals is subject to educational and psycho-educational practices and is reflected in the development of literacy skills (writing and reading) in academic environment, where literacy skills are concerned with construction of meaning from interactions with text (Bialystok, 1991, p. 128). For a monolingual, constructing or externalizing the language and the experience of a text, whether through reading or writing, depends heavily on a fair

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command of the mechanisms and strategies (which are essentially cognitive and metalinguistic) that are needed for the accomplishment of this construction/externalization process. For a multilingual, the assumption is that experiencing these linguistic, cognitive and metalinguistic operations in a first and/or a second language should enhance their activation when acquiring these skills in another language. Multilingual education, in this sense, should sustain these mechanisms throughout. Cummins and Swain (1986) argue for this perspective by saying:

However, any language task which is cognitively demanding for a group of individuals is likely to show a moderate degree of interdependence across languages. In general, significant relationships would be predicted between communicative activities in different languages which make similar contextual and cognitive demands on the individual (p.155).

Relying on the inter-connectionist assumptions about multilingual proficiency, the questions of relevance here are: (a) how do literacy skills develop in multilinguals across linguistic systems? (b) Is there evidence for such development? and (c) how is this development explained in the relevant literature?

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The question of cross-linguistic influence at the level of proficiency remains an empirical question for multilinguals since research on it is very scanty and mostly limited to studies on bilingualism. Numerous studies have reported that bilinguals are likely to learn specific linguistic and strategic mechanisms more than monolinguals are (see Bialystok, 1991; Cummins, 1987; Cummins & Swain, 1986 ; Hamers & Blanc, 1989, for reviews). Extrapolating these possibilities to multilingual acquisition leads to two interesting hypotheses: (1) multilingual acquisition is enhanced by the greater cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness that are reported to develop as a consequence of bilingualism. (2) the experience of acquiring a second language enhances the development of strategies that help develop multilingual acquisition. This perspective pulls us back to Cummins and what he terms the 'interdependence hypothesis' (1987, 1991; Cummins and Bialystok, 1991 ; Cummins & Swain 1986), which we would like to restate here

To the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly (Cummins, 1981, cited in Cummins 1987 , p. 156).

Much of Cummins' assumption is explained thereafter in what he termed 'the common underlying proficiency generalization', which he explains in the following quote:

In concrete terms what this hypothesis means is that in a Spanish-English program, Spanish instruction that develops L1 reading skills for Spanish speaking students is not just developing *Spanish* skills, but is also developing a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency, which is strongly related to the development of *English* literacy and general academic skills. In other words, although the surface aspects (pronunciation, fluency, etc.) of, for example, Spanish and English or Chinese and English are clearly separate, there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency that is common across languages. This common underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of cognitive / academic or literacy-related skills across languages. (Cummins, 1987, p. 156).

Worth noting in Cummins assumptions is the focus given to 'instruction' and 'exposure' as necessary conditions and to the availability of a supportive affective environment for promoting proficiency. Indeed, Cummins 'interdependence hypothesis' seems to endorse some form of an input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), according to which achieving second language learning depends to a large extent on the quality of linguistic input invested, which has to be comprehensible, relevant, sufficient and motivating regardless of L2 proficiency. Much of second language learning has endorsed the input hypothesis (Gass & Selinker, 1994), creating controversial stands towards its foundation and pedagogical allocations. A case in point is the distinction made between 'in put' and 'in take' to differentiate between what the learner receives and what s/he internalizes for subsequent learning purposes. The implications for Cummins' hypothesis, however, are summarized in the following quote:

One important link between the principles of sufficient comprehensible input and the common underlying proficiency generalization is that the knowledge (e.g., subject matter

content, literacy skills, etc.) acquired in one language play a major role in making input in the other language comprehensible (Cummins, 1987, p. 159)

Before exploring the relevance of these assumptions to the present study, we have to be aware of the fact that not all bilinguals show cognitive and linguistic advantages, and that a distinction in this regard is to be made after Hamers and Blanc (1989), between *additive* and *subtractive* bilingualism. Additive bilingualism occurs in contexts where L1 is valued and forms the individual's vehicle to literacy. It is equated with the individual's cognitive and linguistic functioning in both L1 and L2. Subtractive bilingualism, on the other hand, occurs when (a) the L1-related language skills are not developed compared with an L2 ones; (b) the individual has not fully developed the function of his L1; (c) he is introduced to the cognitive function of an L2 of which he has a limited knowledge (p.80). Applying this distinction to multilingual contexts, we might expect the same outcomes but labelled differently, i.e. *additive* and *subtractive multilingualism* (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998, p. 24). With regard to the 'interdependence hypothesis', Cummins and Swain (1986) and Cenoz and Genesee (1998) report what they call 'negative' (no correlation found between measured skills), though not subtractive, evidence on proficiency development across languages. However, their discussion of 'positive' evidence remains instructive about the hypothesis' explanatory power.

Indeed, several studies of bilingual/ multilingual acquisition are consistent with Cummins' interdependence hypothesis and they report a positive proficiency transfer from second language learning to learning additional languages (Cummins, 1987; Cummins & Swain, 1986, for a review). Using quantitative approaches, these studies indicate that bilingualism does not hinder the acquisition of an additional language, and in most cases bilingualism favours the acquisition of third languages. For example, Cummins (1987), reporting studies conducted on US and Canadian bilingual programs, gathers empirical evidence and establishes the rationale for his 'interdependence hypothesis'. Cummins, surveying and comparing a number of monolingual and bilingual immersion programs, notes that exposure to an L2 is not enough a condition for success in it. The psycho-educational implications of his survey points to the success obtained by bilingual programs where emphasis is given to instructing L2 students through promoting their L1, the San Diego Spanish-English language immersion program and the Manitoba Francophone study are Cummins' representative cases (1987, pp. 151-152). Similarly, Swain, Lapkin, Rowen, & Hart (1990, cited in Cenoz & Genesee 1998, p. 23) found out that bilingual students who were literate in their first and second languages demonstrated advantages in third language acquisition over bilingual students who were literate in only their second language. Similarly, Klein (1995), in a study of lexical and syntactic learning by students learning English as a second language (Unilingual students (Uls)) vs students learning English as a third language (Multilingual students (Mls)), found that Mls outperformed Uls in both types of learning, suggesting that heightened metalinguistic skills, enhanced lexical knowledge and flexible learning procedures gained by Mls through sustained linguistic experiences helped lexical and syntactic learning. Friedlander (1990), investigating metalinguistic nodes of Chinese learners of English as a second language, found out that the Chinese learners when they plan in Chinese and then write in English would produce more accurate written prose, suggesting that L1 facilitates writing proficiency in English.

Other studies of specific literacy skills development by multilinguals have developed Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, but targeted specific interconnections between the linguistic and the strategic knowledge across language systems. Cumming (1988), surveying writing of francophone learners of English as a second language, distinguished between writing *expertise*, which is the processes and mechanisms responsible for making decisions about discursal features (*metalinguistic knowledge* in Bialystok's and Sherwood-Smith's terms) and second language *proficiency*, which is knowledge of the linguistic, rhetorical and discursal features of a particular L2 (*analysis of linguistic knowledge* in Bialystok's terms and *knowledge processing* in Sherwood-Smith's). Cumming found out that both writing expertise and second language proficiency accounted for the differences among students in the qualities of texts and writing behaviors. However, these effects were judged independent from each other, suggesting that they are psychologically distinct abilities and that linguistic knowledge is but an additive factor to the overall quality of written production (p.81). The implications of Cumming's results relate specifically to the fact that, (a) writing expertise is common across languages; (b) effective writing in L2 requires both expertise and linguistic knowledge of L2, and (c), (b) holds true for writing in L1, implying, on the basis of Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, that proficiency/deficiency at the level of L1 writing expertise may affect positively/negatively L2/L3 writing behaviour.

Thus, it seems reasonable to state that multilingual proficiency is most likely to succeed in settings where the learners' first language is given every opportunity to develop fully. This, however, may raise some interesting challenges in *diglossic* (D) situations, where "two functional varieties within one language, one of which, called the High (H) variety, is used for formal functions and is formally learned, the other, the Low (L) variety, is used in informal situations" (Hamers & Blanc, 1989, p. 174). From a language planning perspective, the H variety receives all support in countries where the linguistic

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situation calls for particular linguistic adjustments (*Arabization* in former francophone Arab countries) (Daoud, 1991b; Ezzaki & Wagner, 1992). For example, in most Arab countries, literacy is achieved in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the H variety and L1, which is often acquired through formal education and mostly written and read, but rarely spoken for daily life purposes. A variety of Arabic, the L variety and the mother tongue (MT) of all Arabs, is however very operational in spoken form. This functional distinction has its pitfalls on the social and psychological appreciation of these varieties among most Arabs. The magnitude of this distinction is echoed in Hamers and Blanc's (1989) statement:

The child's social network will usually reflect the societal values of the languages and transmit them to the child. The child will develop shared representations of the languages which will include the status, values and attitudes transmitted by his social network; he will thus more or less valorise his own mother tongue(s) relatively to the other languages around him (p.76)

Valorization of the mother tongue in this sense may be detrimental to developing the H variety and the language of literacy which may remain upheld from imminent functional attributes in spite of adjustment efforts (Daoud, 1991b; Ezzaki & Wagner, 1992), and thus literacy-related functions are cognitively delayed for those individuals. This may imply a form of subtractive literacy skills development.

This cross-lingual literacy skills development may be exposed further not only on the basis that L3 literacy skills development may depend on L1 or L1/L2 literacy skills development, but also on the basis that particular discourse (genre) may have different organizational, rhetorical and interpersonal modes which need specific educational intervention across languages. These issues need to be investigated, especially in LSP contexts and from the view point of Cummins' interdependence hypothesis. If L3 literacy-related proficiency development depends on L1/L2 literacy-related proficiency development, then development of particular literacy skills and specifically development of a particular literacy-related discourse (genre) in L3 depends as well on its development in L1/L2.

In fact, the linguistically complex academic context of this study appeals to the above interdependence concerns. Within Tunisian universities where foreign languages enjoy the status of LSP courses (the context of this study), all scientific and specialized fields of study like computing and business use French as a medium of instruction, with French and English included as language courses. Surprisingly, no MSA language course is included in the curriculum of Business School of Tunis (BST), the source of our data, and in which the researcher is currently working as an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teacher. The school has French as the exclusive language of instruction of all business courses, with French and English included as LSP courses in this school. From an 'interdependence hypothesis' perspective, it should be reminded that developing one's own first language, with its related cognitive and literacy dimensions, is highly conducive to promoting second and third language development than mere length of exposure to these latter languages. As a matter of illustration, Swain, et. al (1990, cited in Cenoz & Genesee 1998, p. 23) found out that bilingual students who were literate in their first and second languages demonstrated advantages in third language acquisition over bilingual students who were literate in only their second language.

Against these assumptions, the following three research questions may be asked with regard to the present study:

- (1) Does the informants' business letter writing in MSA, French and English show similarities across the three languages?
- (2) To what extent does the 'interdependence hypothesis' provide an explanatory framework for the development of LSP-related proficiency across the three languages?
- (3) What are the possible implications of the 'interdependence hypothesis' on the teaching of language for specific purposes in the BST?

3. Methodology

3.1. The context of the study

The linguistic context of this study addresses some if not all of the above communicative and psycho-educational issues. A former French colony and an active proponent of the concept of “global village” in its economic, cultural, and linguistic senses, Tunisia is described as a linguistically complex situation characterized by a diglossic High-Low continuum in Fergusson’s (1959) sense and by language contact (Battenburg, 1997; Daoud, 1991b; El Arbi, 1981, 1997, 2000; Grandguillaume, 2000; Salhi, 2000; Maamouri, 1983; Walters, 2000).

The diglossic Tunisian context as described by Maamouri (1983), El Arbi (1981, 1997, 2000), Daoud (1991b), Battenburg (1997), Salhi (2000), and Walters (2000) amounts to some disagreement concerning the number of language varieties co-existing together and functionally distributed. Maamouri (1983), El Arbi (1981, 1997, 2000) and Walters (2000) describe four varieties which are: Classical Arabic (CA), the variety which owes much of its semantic, syntax and lexicon to the language of Qur’an, hardly written or spoken in informal settings. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is a learned variety which is simplified in syntax and lexicon from CA and which is essentially existent in written form and serves educational purposes, hence the language of literacy and the High variety (H). MSA is the language of literature, science, press, media and political public speeches. Educated Arabic (EA) is the variety which is similar in some respect to MSA, but it is reduced in formality, existent in spoken form and correlating in some respect with education. Tunisian Arabic (TA) is considered the mother tongue of all Tunisians, present essentially in informal everyday speech and the variety that can be said to be cherished by most Tunisians for its wide functional uses (Grandguillaume 2000), the Low variety (L).

Likewise, Salhi (2000) sorts out a list of three varieties; MSA, TA and EA, and maintains the related functional attributes presented above. The source for such disagreement as pointed by Salhi pertains to some confusion concerning the linguistic, stylistic and functional boundaries of identifying these varieties, which adds to the complexity of the linguistic situation (p.32). Nonetheless, it is clear in all of these accounts on diglossic Tunisia that a stress is on the functional distinction between TA, the L variety and CA/MSA, the H variety, i.e. the variety which is restricted to formal education, the expression of national and pan-Arab membership, enjoying a significant administrative role, superseding in some respect the traditional role of colonial French (Salhi, 2000, p. 34).

The complexity of the linguistic context of Tunisia is also depicted in the presence of French and English in addition to diglossic Arabic, and in a controversial language planning policy as revealed in the Tunisian government’s official statements and decisions on MSA, French and English teaching. Indeed, Salhi (2000), surveying the language situation of independent Tunisia acknowledges that French is losing functional attributes in favour of MSA in some domains. However, he admits that French is still a privileged language in some sectors. In fact, Salhi maintains that French is still the language of business, financial and banking sectors. Scientific subjects in secondary and tertiary levels are taught in French, and it is highly unlikely to see MSA taking on this role (p.36).

Planning the status of English in the Tunisian educational system adds to the complexity of the language situation of Tunisia. Nevertheless, its importance is primarily seen in its growth as a third/foreign language (L3) as predicted by Moortel (cited in Salhi, 2000) in sectors considered exclusive to French. In fact, from the early 1970s and onward, interest in promoting foreign languages and particularly English to serve specific scientific, business, occupational and research needs was clear in the Tunisian government’s official statements and decisions. Driss Guiga (cited in El Arbi, 1983, p. 79), the then Minister of Education, explained that promotion of foreign languages “implied in the shift of emphasis from humanities to technology and science is a need for better communication in English and for more training to handle specialized languages”. In 1976, a decree made the Institute Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes (IBLV) a university establishment in which the teaching of languages, interpretation and translation is scheduled and “as much is needed at the university level, courses both for those who need English for special purposes and

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for those who require training as future teachers of this kind of language” are offered (Guiga, cited in El arbi, 1983, p.79). Much of Guiga’s pioneering thinking explains in part the creation of the English-medium Lycée Ariana in 1983, the teaching of English as from the 4th year of national secondary education, and its promotion throughout the Tunisian educational system. In 1996¹, a significant decree, suggestive of Guiga’s supportive thinking and the idea that the earlier a language is taught the better⁴, came with the introduction of English as a language course in 8th and 9th levels of the new national Basic Education system. Actually and as from September 2000², English is taught as from the 1st level of Basic Education⁵. Guiga’s wanted to maintain English as a language course for students of arts, sciences, medicine, law, engineering, business and technology at university level (El Arbi, 1983, p.80). At present, at the university level, English, as an ESP course, enjoys the same coefficient as that of content courses in some universities; the Business School of Tunis is just an example.

To sum up, the linguistic situation of Tunisia is characterized by a French-Arabic bilingualism (El Arbi, 1997, 2000; Walters, 2000), an Arabic-English-French language contact, and the MSA/CA-TA diglossic continuum, which means that a university Tunisian student, for example, uses TA and a mixture of French and TA in his daily life, writes and reads in French and MSA and uses English in specific situations.

3.2. The Participants

Thirty (30) fourth level BST business students majoring in international trade were targeted to examine the questions and hypotheses under study. According to the Head of the Languages Department of the BST, international trade students are required to perform well in foreign languages because of the linguistically various communicative situations they might encounter in their future business careers.

The informants underwent a bilingual education throughout Basic and Secondary school education and to a lesser degree throughout university education and they often show complex linguistic behaviour like code-switching from English to TA and/or to French and from TA to French while conversing informally in the corridors of the school. On the basis of what we mentioned about the absence of a LSP-tailored MSA language course in BST curriculum, these informants’ proficiency in MSA and particularly their proficiency in writing business letters in MSA is expected to be very low. Seen from Cummins’ interdependence hypothesis, these informants would replicate this low performance while writing business content in English.

Initially, we thought that each single informant should write three written business letters in English, French and MSA and only those who would write the three business letters in these different languages would be retained for the study. At the outset, we thought that the informants’ number can be fixed once all of the participant students would perform on a data collection instrument, i.e., the writing task. This data collection stage took place over three successive weeks, in which participant students worked on a writing task during a 90-minute English course session in each week. The number of participant students who wrote three business letters during the three-week data collection period is given in Table 1 below:

| <i>Data collection week</i> | <i>number of Students</i> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Week 1 : English data | 44 |
| Week 2 : French data | 50 |
| Week 3 : MSA data | 43 |

Table 1: Number of informants Who Sat for Data Collection

4 Decree n° 96-680 of April 15, 1996, published in JORT n° 34, April 26 1996

5 Decree n° 2000-2168 of September 25, 2000, published in JORT n° 79, October 3, 2000.

After collecting the business letters, we cross-checked them in order to determine the number of letters to be retained as data for this study. This cross-checking resulted in only 36 business letters in English, and the same number in French and MSA, as only 36 students were regular attendants to the English course during those three weeks. Then we photocopied the business letters and submitted them to raters for scoring. Finally, only 30 business letters were retained as some letters were illegible after having been photocopied because some students wrote letters using pencils. The data provided are labelled for the purpose of the study as follows:

- Data **I**: 30 letters of complaints written in English by the informants responding to an English writing task prompt.
- Data **II**: 30 letters of complaints written in French by the same informants thereby responding to a French writing task prompt.
- Data **III**: 30 letters of complaints written in MSA by the same informants thereby responding to an MSA writing task prompt.

3.3. The Raters

Nine (9) interraters with a mean teaching experience of 9.3 years and an age range of 30-45 years are called upon to evaluate the informants' business writing ability, using for the purpose a holistic scale. The use of nine interraters for scoring is primarily meant to improve interrater reliability, i.e. the extent to which interraters are consistent in their judgments of our informants' complaint letter writing ability. Indeed, it follows from writing assessment practice that certain features of the assessment context should be respected. These are *raters* and the *rating procedures* for the influence they have on the scores assigned, regardless of the performance they are meant to measure (MacNamara, 1996). In this regard, Brown & Bailey (1984), El Arbi (1997) and Johnson, Penny & Gordon (2001) suggest that two or more interraters be used in performance assessment, adding that scores averaged from summed ratings of several interraters are likely to be more reliable than scores awarded by a single rater.

The choice of three interraters for each data label is informed by common testing practice which proposes that when two independent interraters arrive at different scores for a single writing sample (a case of discrepant scores), we resort to a third rater to resolve the problem by creating an operational score summed up from the three interraters' assigned scores. This difference resolution technique is more likely to add to the reliability of the scores given as much as it does to the evaluation instrument itself (Johnson et al., 2001). Avoidance of a large number of raters in this study comes essentially from testing conventions which try to avoid variability related to the raters' judgments, i.e. more raters equals more variability which reduces the reliability of assigned scores and reliability of the evaluation instrument.

3.4. Instruments

3.4.1. The Writing Task

Testing writing practice proposes that the best way to evaluate FL learner's writing ability is to ask them to write. Tasks can be used to test learners' written abilities. Testing literature distinguishes between direct evaluative methods of writing ability which incite learners to produce continuous texts to be then evaluated, and indirect methods which attempt to measure rather disconnected parts of what evaluators judge as the construct of writing ability (Weir, 1993, p.133). Since the study's concern is to uncover the informants' writing productive abilities, the instrument used for collecting the business letters is *a controlled task* (Weir, 1993, p. 144), through which and by using a *stimulus* (prompt), learners are asked to provide full written texts which are considered by evaluators as sources for statements about FL learners' writing ability in its productive sense. Controlled tasks are thought to be sensitive to issues of writing ability in its targeted

context and can sample ‘important productive skills, which indirect forms of assessment cannot’ (Weir, 1993, p. 144).

In fact, the writing task used in this study is embedded in a test-like format where the students have to fill in certain biographic data (name, age and sex) followed by the prompt and the task instructions. To take care of the feasibility, appropriateness and realistic requirements of tasks (Weir, 1993, p. 135), we included information about the contextual features of the correspondence which relate to the companies’ names, the addressee, the job specifications and titles. The prompt, with which the students were familiar to enhance business letter writing skills during the English and the French language courses, consists of a description of a transactional business situation, the object of which is a reception of damaged sweaters, and to which the students were instructed to respond by writing a letter of complaint. The same test format is translated into French and MSA. The transactional situation is held consistent in the French and MSA translated versions. For matters of feasibility and authenticity of the situation, slight changes occurred in the contextual features related to the addressee. For example, for the English transactional situation the informants were asked to deal with a company based in England. In the French and MSA versions, the students were asked to deal with companies located respectively in France and Morocco.

3.4.2. The Holistic Scale

Holistic scoring “involves one or more readers awarding a single grade based on the total impression of a composition as a whole text or discourse” (Perkins, 1983, p. 652), and exhibits high degree of validity and shows high sensitivity to degree of achievement. However, Perkins considers holistic scoring ‘highly subjective’ which according to him presents a threat to its reliability due to interraters’ ‘bias, fatigue, internal lack of consistency, previous knowledge of the student, and/or shifting standards from one paper to the next’ (p.653). Homburg (1984), taking the objective-subjective issue in focus, showed evidence for objectively validating holistic scoring, outgoing thus in some respect Perkins’ early claims about holistic scoring. The value of Homburg’s study, however, is that the results show specifically that holistic evaluation can be validated objectively when “readers base their holistic evaluations on a number of characteristics of ESL compositions and that they use these characteristics in a specific manner” (Homburg, 1984, p. 102). Among other things, Homburg’s comments report to an analytical approach to evaluating writing.

Stiggings and Bridgeford, cited in Perkins (Perkins, 1983, p. 652), define holistic scoring as the technique which ‘calls for the reader to rate overall writing proficiency on a single rating scale’. Interraters are asked not to pay too much attention to any particular aspect of the targeted performance, but rather to make a judgment on its overall effectiveness. Taking on this principal, we would have liked to instruct the interraters to read the informant’s complaint letter and then to assess his/her general performance by giving a score between 0 and 20. However, designing the holistic scale in this way raised the following concerns:

- a) interraters would differ in their reading of the student’s overall performance level,
- b) consequently, interraters would differ in giving a comprehensive holistic score.

To meet these we decided to focus our raters’ attention on five performance levels, which we thought would limit interraters’ biased holistic scoring. Five performance levels (excellent - to -very poor) corresponding each to a range of scores formed thus the holistic scale as is shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: The Holistic Scale

| <i>Score range</i> | <i>Performance levels</i> | <i>score you would give</i> |
|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 18 – 20 | <i>Excellent</i> | |
| 14 – 17 | <i>Good</i> | |
| 10 – 13 | <i>fairly good</i> | |
| 5 – 9 | <i>Poor</i> | |
| 0 – 4 | <i>Very poor</i> | |

The same French equivalents of the performance levels were kept for the French and MSA holistic scales. After being instructed to read carefully the informants' reports, interraters were asked to select one of the five performance levels which they think best represents the informant's overall writing ability and then to specify the score they would give for the performance level in which they locate the student's overall performance.

An interrater reliability analysis is undertaken to check whether our raters rated consistently the informants' writing performance. Table 2 below presents a summary of these estimates.

| | Arabic Rater 1 | Arabic Rater 2 | Arabic Rater 3 | French Rater 1 | French Rater 2 | French Rater 3 | English Rater 1 | English Rater 2 | English Rater 3 |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Arabic Rater 1 | 1,000 | ,347 | ,668 | | | | | | |
| Arabic Rater 2 | - | 1,000 | ,213 | | | | | | |
| Arabic Rater 3 | - | - | 1,000 | | | | | | |
| French Rater 1 | | | | 1,000 | ,109 | ,534 | | | |
| French Rater 2 | | | | - | 1,000 | ,258 | | | |
| French Rater 3 | | | | - | - | 1,000 | | | |
| English Rater 1 | | | | | | | 1,000 | ,371 | ,973 |
| English Rater 2 | | | | | | | - | 1,000 | ,270 |
| English Rater 3 | | | | | | | - | - | 1,000 |

Based on SPSS Correlation Matrix Out Put

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficient of the Three Rating Groups' Holistic Scores

Table 2 represents Pearson correlation coefficients of the three rating groups' holistic scores. The 1.000 figures on the diagonal are the correlation of one variable with itself. The horizontal column depicting Arabic Rater 2 shows the correlation of this rater with the rater labelled Arabic Rater 1 (.347), then with itself. Then Arabic Rater 3 is correlated with Arabic Rater 1 (.668), with Arabic Rater 2 (.213), and then with itself. Correlations between the French raters and between the English raters should be read the same way in this table. However, interrater reliability coefficient of holistic scores is measured through deriving an average of the three correlation coefficients (Hatch & Lazaraton 1990, p.533). Interrater reliability of the three rating groups over holistic scores is presented in Table 3 below:

| Interrater reliability coefficient | MSA Rating Group | FSP Rating Group | ESP Rating Group |
|------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | .40 | .30 | .53 |

Table 3: Interrater Reliability Coefficients of the Three Rating Groups over Holistic Scores

Table 3 shows a positive correlation for the MSA and ESP rating groups and a low correlation for the FSP rating group, indicating that the interraters of each group evaluated holistically the general writing performance of the informants about the same way, except for the French rating group which on the basis of the low correlation value shows inconsistencies in their evaluation of the general performance of the informants. Such findings, however, are expected for the reason that testing writing research (Tedick & Mathison, 1995; Johnson et al., 2001) point to the difficulties involved in awarding holistic scores, as the majority of rating discrepancies are attributed to the raters' judgments of the variable being evaluated and their subjective effects on the scores awarded. In this regard, Johnson et

al (p.233, referring to Veal & Hudson) report a standard range of .69 to .76 as an estimate of interrater reliability over holistic scores. With regard to this analysis, we suspect a kind of interraters' effect on the scores awarded. To substantiate this, and looking back into the raw data, we found out that most of the interraters of the three rating groups agreed on the assessment of the informants' general performance on the 5-point scale of the holistic grid. However, they tend to disagree on the score which best qualifies that performance. This, we judge, might be due more to the interraters' disagreement on what constitutes a 'poor' or a 'bad' performance, than to the impracticality of the holistic scale as such. On the whole, comparing these coefficients with Johnson et al's interrater reliability range mentioned above, the holistic grid can fairly be described as having an acceptable level of reliability.

4. The Results

4.1. Holistic scores distribution and variability

To account for the central tendency of our Holistic Scores, i.e. the most typical score which represents the typical performance of our informants on the three writing tasks, certain conditions concerning the distribution of our scores had first to be considered. One of these conditions was whether or not our scores obey the *Central Limit Theorem* which is the assumption that "the distribution of sums or means of a multitude of sufficiently large and equal sized random samples will be normal, irrespective of the shape of the population distribution" (Horvath, 1986, p.65). This theorem assumes that naturally observed events or behaviours yield values (scores) which are normally distributed having most of the obtained values symmetrically clustered around the midpoint of the distribution forming thus a bell-shaped curve. Given the central position the concept of normal distribution occupies in statistical analysis (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1990; Horvath, 1986), decisions about which value represents the most typical value in a distribution are affected. In a normally distributed data and when the data are in interval-type measurement, the mode, median and mean as properties of any distribution are equal values and thus the mean value is used to measure central tendency. When data are not normally distributed, mode and median are used to measure the central tendency. Table 4 below presents the mean, median and mode for the distribution of our Holistic scores of the three writing tasks.

| | | MSA Holistic Score | French Holistic Score | English Holistic Score |
|--------|-------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| N | Valid | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Mean | | 10,0667 | 10,5000 | 9,2667 |
| Median | | 10,0000 | 10,5000 | 9,5000 |
| Mode | | 8,50 | 11,00 | 7,50 |

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Holistic Scores (Based on SPSS output)

It is quite clear in Table 4 that the informants' rated overall performance on the complaint letter writing task is different across the three languages, which indicates that the shape of the score distribution varies from one performance in one language to another and implies that at some level the distribution is not in a perfect normal distribution. This can be inferred from the value of the mode which is different from the mean and median values across the three sets of scores. This is schematically reproduced in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Distribution of Holistic Scores of the Three Writing Tasks

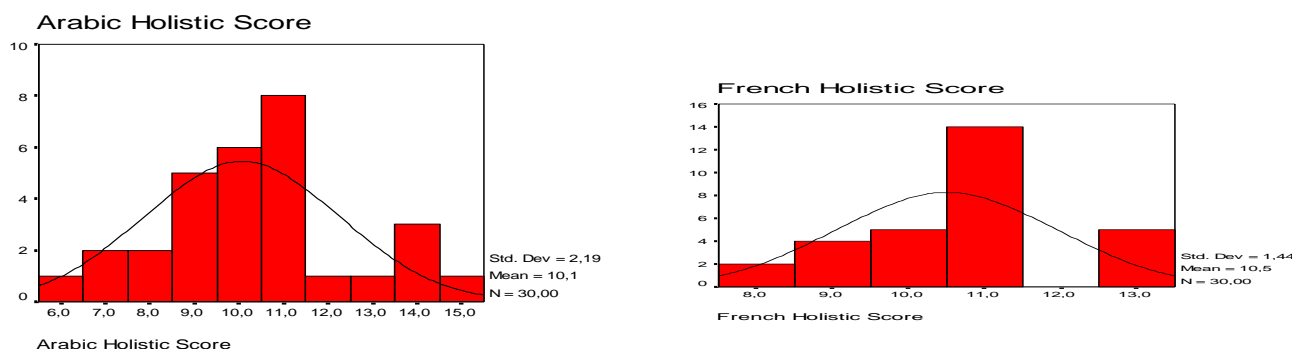


Chart a

Chart b

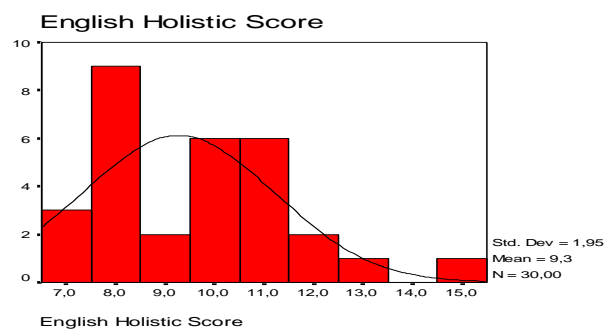


Chart c

In Chart (a) above which represents the distribution of the MSA holistic scores, the scores are in a relative positively skewed distribution, .i.e. the distribution is slightly inclined towards the left side of the graph, since the mean, median and mode values are not equal. For the French holistic scores (Chart b), and on the basis of the mean, median and mode values, it is apparent that the scores are not normally distributed which, by comparison to Chart (a), explains the slight flatness (dispersion) of the curve (Chart b above). In terms of performance our informants scored approximately around the average (10,00) out of a score of 20 on the complaint letter writing task in MSA, while they performed above average on the complaint letter writing task in French as the mode value of 11,00 indicates. The same observations on the shape of the distribution can be made about the distribution of English scores, except for the fact that our informants performed below average which explains the presence of a positive skewed distribution, i.e. the inclination of the curve towards the left side of the graph, indicating that the mean is obviously moved by means of the mode, the most frequent score in the distribution.

In all three cases, it seems that the mode value typically reproduces our informants' performance on the three writing tasks, affecting thus the shape of the distribution of the scores. The mode value, then, appears to be qualified as the value which typically represents the Holistic scores' central tendency. However, it cannot tell us for example how our informants' performance differs within the distribution itself. Such information is conveyed by looking into the variability of our holistic scores in terms of range, variance and standard deviation.

Table 5 below summarises variability values for the holistic scores obtained by our informants on the three writing tasks. It is clearly shown that our informants' performance as assessed by the three rating groups differed on each writing task, clearly substantiating earlier observations on the distribution of scores presented above.

| | N | Range | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|------------------------|----|-------|----------------|----------|
| Arabic Holistic Score | 30 | 9,00 | 2,1922 | 4,806 |
| French Holistic Score | 30 | 5,50 | 1,4444 | 2,086 |
| English Holistic Score | 30 | 8,00 | 1,9508 | 3,806 |

Table 5: Holistic Scores Variability Measurement

Looking into the range values, few observations in conjunction with the performance of our informants can be made. The high range values for the MSA and English scores approximate their respective means of 10,0667 and 9,2667 indicating that the mean was pulled down by below average extreme scores represented by the mode values (Table 4 above). This explains the positive skewness of the distribution and

tells us that many more informants scored below average, making the distribution variant. Put differently, the mean values would have been higher if it had not been for the below average extreme scores in both the MSA and English sets. However, the low range value of the French scores (5,50), compared to the other two, indicates that the informants approximated each other and performed relatively equally on the French writing task.

These observations on the variability of the scores can be confirmed by looking into standard deviation values. The relatively high standard deviation values of MSA and English scores, compared to the French value, confirm that the informants' performance on the MSA and English writing tasks spread out from the mean, indicating that their performance varied. As for the standard deviation value of the French scores, it remains indicative of the low variability recorded in the informants' performance on the French writing task. The variance values indicate the same.

Cross-lingual significance of differences of the holistic scores

To measure the statistical significance of the differences of the means of our interval holistic scores, a t-test for means within a typical repeated measures procedure is conducted to this effect. Although assumptions underlying a t-test are slightly violated, mainly the evident positive skewness of the English holistic scores depicted in Chart 1/c above, violation of normality in the t-test is deemed by statisticians like Horvath (1985) and Glass and Stanley (1970) as having "only trivial effects" and is "no cause for concern" (Horvath, 1985, p. 179, referring to Glass & Stanley) and thus the t-test is said to be 'robust' to violations of this kind. The null hypothesis thus posited is that the means of all three sets of scores are equal, under a .05 probability level. The t value should be equal or higher than a critical value of 2.045 with 29 degrees of freedom at this probability level to reject the null hypothesis. Table 6 presents the output for the t-test for the holistic scores.

| | | Paired Samples Test | | | | | |
|--------|--|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|------|
| | | Paired Differences | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | |
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | | | |
| Pair 1 | Arabic Holistic Score - English Holistic Score | ,8000 | 2,3474 | ,4286 | 1,867 | 29 | ,072 |
| Pair 2 | French Holistic Score - English Holistic Score | 1,2333 | 1,9859 | ,3626 | 3,402 | 29 | ,002 |

Table 6: T-test for the holistic scores

Of importance in Table 6 is the paired scores and their respective t values. Our null hypothesis that the means of MSA/English pair scores are equal is retained, since the t value for this pair (1.867) is lower than the critical t value (2.045) with 29 df at a .05 probability level. However, the null hypothesis is rejected for the French/English pair as the t value (3.402) exceeds the critical t value at this probability level, indicating that the informants' overall performance in French and English differed significantly. The informants'

overall performance in MSA and English can be said to relate to each other making it possible to infer a cross-linguistic effect at play.

To further probe the significance of the differences between the holistic scores and to claim a cross-linguistic effect, we conducted a correlation analysis. Computing Pearson's correlation coefficient for the holistic scores resulted in table 7 below. The results ascertain earlier claims made above about possible links that may bind our informants' overall performance in MSA and English. Correlation coefficient for MSA and English is found significant and the null hypothesis that the two variables are not related is rejected at the .05 probability level. Coefficient of determination indicate that 13,17 % of the variance of our informants' overall performance in English is accounted for by their overall performance in MSA. Though the amount of variance is small, it proved to be significant.

| Correlations | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| | Arabic Holistic Score | French Holistic Score | English Holistic Score |
| Arabic Holistic Score | 1,000 | ,346 | ,363* |
| French Holistic Score | -- | 1,000 | ,346 |
| English Holistic Score | -- | -- | 1,000 |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 7: Pearson's correlation coefficients of the holistic scores

Although the French/English correlation coefficient approximates the critical value of .349, it proved to be statistically not significant. However, similar claims to those made on the MSA/English pair may be entertained with some reserve. Coefficient of determination indicates that only 11 % of the variance of the informants' overall performance in English is accounted for by their overall performance in French. Claims about cross-linguistic influence may be made at this level. It seems that the informants' overall performances in MSA and French slightly affect their overall performance in English since statistics indicates so.

Looking back into the correlation coefficients, our informants' MSA and French writing performance showed significant patterns of correlation with English writing performance. Consequently, we saw it fit to conduct a simple and a multiple regression to further attest for these interactions.

Before undertaking a multiple regression analysis, a simple regression was conducted to test the significance of the causal relationship that binds individually each independent variable with the dependent variable. Then, a multiple regression is performed to see whether the two independent variables both weighted significantly on the dependent variable. Tables 8 and 9 below summarize the simple regression output made on the holistic scores obtained by our informants as estimations of their holistic business writing proficiency in MSA, French and English. The R square slots rounded to the lowest figure show that 11% and only 13% of the variance of the dependent variable is predicted from the regression, leaving a large amount unaccounted for. Testing the significance of the regression of English writing performance on the French performance, the *F* value (3,80087) is found to be lower than the critical *F*= 4.20 at the .05 probability level with 1/28 degrees of freedom, and as such the null hypothesis that the independent variable does not predict the dependent variable is retained.

Dependent variable.. ENGHSCO Method.. LINEAR
Listwise Deletion of Missing Data

Multiple R ,34572
R Square ,11952
Adjusted R Square ,08808
Standard Error 1,86294

Analysis of Variance:

| | DF | Sum of Squares | Mean Square |
|------------|---------|------------------|-------------|
| Regression | 1 | 13,191116 | 13,191116 |
| Residuals | 28 | 97,175551 | 3,470555 |
| F = | 3,80087 | Signif F = ,0613 | |

Table 8: Simple regression of English holistic scores on French holistic scores

As for the regression procedure conducted on the informants' complaint letter writing proficiency in English on the same performance in MSA, the output presented in Table 9 below points to a significant result. Although the amount of variance predicted from both regression plots (13% for MSA/English plot against 11% for French/English plot) and the amount of residuals (95,858168 for MSA/English against 97,175551 for French/English) relatively approximate each other, regression conducted on the informants' overall complaint letter writing proficiency in English and MSA is found to be significant. In deed, the F value (4,23791) is found to be higher than the critical $F= 4.20$ at the .05 probability level with 1/28 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis that the independent variable does not predict the dependent variable is rejected with confidence. Our informants' complaint letter writing proficiency can be said to influence their performance on the same task in English.

Now, it would be fruitful to report the multiple regression result to see whether informants' performances on the complaint letter writing task in MSA and French additively weight on their performance in English. The results are presented in Table 10 below.

Dependent variable.. ENGHSCO Method.. LINEAR
Listwise Deletion of Missing Data

Multiple R ,36257
R Square ,13146
Adjusted R Square ,10044
Standard Error 1,85027

Analysis of Variance:

| | DF | Sum of Squares | Mean Square |
|------------|---------|------------------|-------------|
| Regression | 1 | 14,508499 | 14,508499 |
| Residuals | 28 | 95,858168 | 3,423506 |
| F = | 4,23791 | Signif F = ,0489 | |

Table 9: Simple regression of English holistic scores on MSA holistic scores

The multiple regression output presented in Table 10 below proves that our informants' holistic performances in MSA and French additively predict their performance in English. In deed, 96 % of the variance of the dependent variable is predicted from the regression. the F value (382,028) largely exceeds the critical $F= 3.35$ at the .05 probability level with 2/27 degrees of freedom, and as such the null hypothesis that the independent variables do not predict the dependent variable is rejected with confidence. Special attention should be given to the amount of variability attributed to residual which stands marginal compared to the variability noted on the regression itself, indicating that it is the independent variables which inflicted this amount of variability on the dependent variable not a random error effect, and suggesting that predicting the dependent variable is accurate.

| Model Summary | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----|-----|-------------|---|
| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate | Change Statistics | | | | | |
| | | | | | R Change | Square F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig. Change | F |
| | ,982 | ,965 | ,962 | 1,8417 | ,965 | 382,028 | 2 | 27 | ,000 | |

Predictors: French Holistic Score, Arabic Holistic Score

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|------------|-------------|------|-------------|---------|------|
| Model | Sum Squares | ofdf | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Regression | 2591,529 | 2 | 1295,765 | 382,028 | ,000 |
| Residual | 94,971 | 27 | 3,392 | | |
| Total | 2686,500 | 30 | | | |

Predictors: French Holistic Score, Arabic Holistic Score

Table 10: Multiple regression of English holistic scores and MSA and French holistic scores

As a conclusion to this section, it seems that claims about cross-linguistic interdependence in our informants' complaint letter holistic performance in MSA, French and English are imminent as the above statistical evidence suggests. In fact, although evidence for additive interdependence is clear, interdependence between their performance in MSA and English remains an interesting finding to interpret within Cummins' 'interdependence' hypothesis. It seems that our informants' below average writing performance on this kind of business letters in MSA has an effect on writing the complaint letter in English, and on the basis of the significant MSA/English regression output we can say that their MSA writing performance exerts a major effect on their performances on this writing task.

Interpretation of the Results

While interpreting the findings of the present study, a number of credits must be leveraged in favour of Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis' as an explanatory proposition about development of proficiency/literacy in contexts where more than two languages co-exist and compete at more than the language policy level. The present study substantiates minimal evidence which retains findings reported mainly by Cummins (1987), Cummins and Swain (1986) and Cenoz and Genesee (1998). However, while these researchers report the advantages of multilinguals over monolinguals in developing their proficiency, this study points to areas where instances of cross-linguistic influence are assessed in multilinguals. In other words, while previous interdependence-based research schemes compared independent groups' performances on particular tasks and skills, by recasting the interdependence argument on the development

of business letter writing skill across MSA, French and English, this study used an intact group to find out whether it has developed instances of cross-linguistic influences.

As reported above, the analysis of variance and correlation analysis plotted as significant our informants' holistic performance. Regression analysis plotted significance for the informants' holistic performance in MSA and English ($F= 4,23791$; $df = 1, 28$; $p < .05$), with MSA a more predicting independent variable ($F= 6,50500$; $df = 1, 28$; $p < .05$) than French as the second independent variable ($F= 4,74074$; $df = 1, 28$; $p < .05$). Of relevance for discussing the applicability of Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis' are the results obtained on our informants' holistic performance across MSA and English. The results may indicate that our informants' holistic performance on the complaint letter in MSA approximates their holistic performance in English in such a way that interdependence claims may be entertained. Such a finding is almost consistent with Swain et al's study (1990), with Cummins proposition that there is a form of interdependence between learners' language of literacy and subsequent to-be-learned languages and with assumptions proposed by proponents of Error Analysis (James, 1998).

Although the statistical evidence points towards Cummins' explanatory framework, and assuming that this evidence misses Cummins' explanatory hypothesis, a number of explanatory frames may be entertained to attest to this evidence. Cummins' statement that exposure to L2 only is not enough condition for achieving proficiency in L2 is a legitimate frame to assess the significance of this finding, knowing that our informants have been exposed to French in primary and High school and to academic business English for at least four years. Consequently, the distinction between 'input' and 'in take' (Corder, 1974; Krashen, 1985) may serve as an analytical tool to assess the acceptability of this evidence in the context of the present study.

Indeed, a number of insights should be collected in relation to the nature and quality of the input BST business students receive to enhance their business letter writing skills in English. What type of input? and how is this input exploited in classroom? What type of materials represents this input? Does this input have learning effects? Is such an input comprehensible and sufficient enough? Mostly, are teachers aware of the importance of enhancing students' business letter writing skills? These and other questions on the cognitive, attitudinal and motivational aspects related to the learning of English, French and MSA should be closely investigated in the context of BST, as we believe that answers to these questions may allow for better assessment of the significance of statistical evidence.

Likewise, other frames that should be studied in conjunction with the findings under discussion are the concepts of bilingual and bilingualism. While bilinguals and bilingualism have been subject of investigation by a number of specialists, sociolinguists and psycholinguists advanced the concept by addressing a broad variety of issues, mainly those related to language and language learning /acquisition (Cummins & Swain, 1986; Hamers & Blanc, 1989; Romaine, 1989). Broad and narrow definitions have been proposed to distinguish between full and partial bilinguals and taxonomic descriptions have been devised to distinguish between coordinate and compound bilingual systems. Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis' seems to imply a form of optimum bilingualism, where an L1 literacy-related variety is fully represented along with subsequent to-be-learned languages. With regard to this study, the absence of an MSA (language of literacy) teaching and the evidence on its lack of mastery by the informants seem to undermine statements about the existence of an MSA-French optimum bilingualism so far, and according to Cummins' norms one might be tempted to say that a form of 'immature bilingualism' prevails. Accordingly, when viewed from Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis', this state of affairs gives support to the findings under discussion. Our informants' linguistic knowledge of MSA may hide a latent TA/EA- French bilingualism which fails Cummins' hypothesis L1 literacy-related variety requirements and reports to what Cenoz and Genesee (1998) termed a 'subtractive' form of bilingualism and inevitably a form of subtractive multilingualism in our informants, thus reproducing the other extreme of Cummins 'interdependence hypothesis'. Using a similar cross-linguistic research design and surveying the stylistic and rhetoric errors of Jordanian Arab

students writing in English, Doushaq (1986) supports Cummins' 'interdependence hypothesis' and ultimately provides grounds for our claims about the findings under discussion. Doushaq reports that much of his informants' English writing deficiency positively correlates with their writing proficiency in Arabic and "that weakness in the writing skills in the foreign language can be partially attributed to the learners' poor mastery of the writing skills of their native language" (p.30). In sum, suffice we have enough evidence to make claims about our informants' interrelated performances across MSA and English, and state that the informants' MSA proficiency affects the level of the informants' holistic performance more than their French proficiency.

Conclusion

This study helped to prove on a quantitative basis that ESP writing can be approached from a cross-linguistic perspective. This study meant to merge common ESP practice in Tunisia within a broad language learning theoretical understanding that nurtures the teaching of English as a second/third language. Without being oblivious to the merits and usefulness of needs analysis to ESP practice, we believe that advancing the field reports to addressing issues beyond this institutional level by focusing more on the ESP learner's internal and external experiences. Within this understanding, ESP is a learning and a teaching field which is not different, at least in scope, from ESL/EFL learning and teaching practices and which is liable to evolve through mainstream SLA language learning theories. Indeed, much of its advancement can be sought in bringing answers from mainstream language learning disciplines and theoretical approaches and thus giving a multidisciplinary approach to its specific purpose.

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