

Palestinian Arab Students Writing Research Papers: Challenges and Remedies

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Abstract

This research investigates employing contrastive analysis (CA), text analysis (TA), error analysis (EA) and advanced technology for helping Palestinian Arab Muslim students in Israel to write their final projects, research articles (RAs). They face tremendous difficulties in writing their final research papers, especially providing a theoretical background because they lack adequate proficiency in English and the experience of writing research papers in their first language. In the context of this study, they should paraphrase, summarize, analyze and synthesize information from different sources, linking scholarly research to previous work in the same discipline and expressing their own voices in the text. Analyzing all of the required written assignments and the final version of their research papers shows that these students have improved their writing academic skills slightly. Results indicate the need for intensive practice to help these students acquire the necessary academic skills for writing research articles in English.

Keywords: contrastive analysis, error analysis, research papers, text analysis.

Introduction

In general, academic writing is challenging for non-native speakers since they have to master content, organization, purpose, audience, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics such as punctua-

tion and spelling [Ahmed 2010] to produce syntactically accurate, semantically acceptable and culturally appropriate texts. Research shows that the most common errors among Arab learners of English stem from first language interference, which include three categories: syntactic, semantic and cultural [AbiSamara 2003]. The syntactic category refers to grammatical errors and mechanics (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation). Arab college students of English not only transfer the stylistic features of Arabic as their first language [AbiSamara 2003] but also cultural modes of thinking [Ahmed 2010] that stem from the Arabic-Islamic culture, which promotes collectivism and unity of belief.

Many studies investigated problems that Arab learners of English encounter, including Palestinians and revealed difficulties on sentence, paragraph and text levels. For example, at the sentence level, they tend to write long sentences, repeat themselves and use presentation and elaboration to persuade the reader, using semantic and phonological parallelism [Monassar 2014].

Producing well-written, cohesive and clear paragraphs poses another challenge for Arab students. They find it difficult to provide good topic sentences, supporting details, using the appropriate cohesive devices, and including concluding sentences in English [Ahmed 2010].

Similarly, Arab EFL students face tremendous difficulties in creating high quality, logically developed, well written, and cohesively organized research papers and articles [Altikriti 2022]. Research results show that Arab students lack the necessary skills such as paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing information from different sources, and including their voice to relate it to the argument of researchers in their researched topic. They also tend to ignore the guidelines in terms of in-text citations and the reference list at the end of the paper [Chaleila and Garra-Alloush 2019].

Contrastive analysis, text analysis and error analysis are employed to help these students overcome the tremendous difficulties they encounter when writing research papers in English.

Contrastive analysis

Contrastive analysis is used to identify linguistic difficulties in acquiring another language, which are derived from the differences between the learner's native language and the target language [Lennon 2008]. Since research studies show that most Arab students' errors are due to mother-tongue interference, contrastive analysis is a relevant approach in this context, aiming to help them understand the differences and similarities of sentence structure in the two languages and L1 transfer.

Contrasting both languages is significant in teaching the target language since it benefits learners in understanding the differences between the basic grammars of the two languages and reminds them from time to time that they make mistakes because of the influence of their mother tongue, which works differently from the second language they are learning.

Text Analysis

Text analysis refers to analyzing the structure of the text in terms of paragraphs and sentences, highlighting the functions of cohesive devices for producing cohesive clear texts and aiming to reduce features of Arabic stylistics mainly repetition and elaboration. In addition, analyzing the structure of research articles aims to acquaint the students with the importance of using an unbiased language and developing arguments.

Error Analysis

Error analysis is defined as “the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful lan-

guage” [James 2013: 2]. It is used to study learners’ errors, indicating sources of errors and making inferences about the language learning process. It helps writing instructors and learners as well. The former can learn more about the complexity of the writing process of their learners, and the latter become consciously aware of their mistakes.

Adopting advanced technology

Technology has been the trend in education in the twenty-first century. It is defined as “the appropriate mix and use of face-to-face instructional methods and various learning technologies to support planned learning and develop subsequent learning outcomes” [Lim and Morris 2009: 283]. It shifts the focus from teacher-centered to more learner-centered classrooms.

Instruction

Classroom instruction plays an important role in dealing with errors. Therefore, EFL instructors are responsible for adopting, modifying, or developing remedial materials and techniques to minimize the learners’ errors by engaging them in doing exercises to improve their writing abilities.

Writing goes through several developmental processes and requires special attention to learning and teaching from early stages. Hence, instruction is carried out gradually to help Palestinian Arab EFL students overcome the above-mentioned challenges, diagnose and identify their errors, adopting contrastive analysis, text analysis and error analysis. For example, contrastive analysis takes place in the first session by presenting texts in Arabic and English. Students work in small groups to indicate the structure of both texts, pinpointing similarities and differences. Highlighting the differences in terms of the structure of

research articles and the use of unbiased language and argument development follows.

Text analysis includes paragraph structure and development, emphasizing the function of the topic sentence, supporting details and the conclusion, aiming to reduce repetition and elaboration. To facilitate the task, worksheets that include some specific questions about the texts in terms of sentence structure and paragraph development are provided. Then, practice includes comparing their drafts with analyzed samples.

Error analysis is employed frequently to study learners' errors and to make inferences about the language learning process. Therefore, it starts with collecting the students' mistakes from the first draft, categorizing them and posting the file in Moodle to work on them in class, including those that stem from first cultural interference that obstruct meaning. Later on, the learners are asked to underline all of the sentences in the samples of writing given to them that include subordinators such as *when*, *although*, *as soon as*, etc. In other incidents, they are reminded to use the comma in complex sentences, separating the two clauses if the sentence starts with a subordinate.

Literature review shows that Arab EFL students struggle to create cohesive texts. Therefore, error analysis sheets include an additional category, cohesive devices (CD), to remind them of the functions of the CDs categories like addition (in addition, moreover and furthermore) and contrasting (however, in contrast, while and whereas). To acquaint the learners with the importance of CDs, they work in pairs or small groups using Padlet to analyze texts downloaded from Moodle.

Following the standard academic conventions when writing their research articles is extremely challenging because they lack the necessary language proficiency and academic skills. Paraphrasing, summarizing, analyzing and synthesizing infor-

mation from other sources pose another difficulty. They tend to rely on only one or two sources for developing arguments, facing difficulties in synthesizing information from different sources and including their voices. Besides plagiarism and patchwriting, students do not follow integral and non-integral citation rules consistently. They may include the author's full name and delete the year of publication, the page number of the direct quote, or the quotation marks. Therefore, text analysis is employed to acquaint these students with the rules of citation.

Modeling paraphrasing sentences is the first step. Then, the students sit in small groups to paraphrase sentences and paragraphs. Similarly, modeling summarizing takes place in class. Engaging students in summarizing other paragraphs follows. At a later stage, they practice summarizing two paragraphs in class by working in pairs and sharing their summaries with other pairs. They are given time to revise their summaries, following the feedback from other pairs. The final stage is sharing their summaries using Padlet.

Learners follow the same path for synthesizing, which starts with giving many examples before requiring the students to synthesize information from different sources. Choosing at least three sources that discuss the same issue is the first step. It starts with highlighting the targeted information in one article and finding similar information in the second article. At this stage, they combine the common pieces of information from the two sources and continue to do the same with the third source. After combining similar issues and information, training includes highlighting differences in authors' arguments using another color to help learners include opposing ideas for developing their arguments and to add their voices, using the right verbs and expressions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite practicing intensively in class and employing CA, TA, and EA, students do not make significant progress in writing RAs as they are required. They should improve their language proficiency before taking such a course. In addition, instruction should be extended to two semesters and should be carried out gradually, providing many opportunities for practice.

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