

Linguistic Aspects of the Narrative and Persuasive Written Productions of Arabic and Spanish Speakers:  
Focus on the Role of Explicit Knowledge of Grammar

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to investigate the written performance of ten foreign students - five native Arabic speakers and five native Spanish speakers - at the University of Pittsburgh, USA. The purpose was to better understand the role of grammar knowledge in the written productions of foreign students. The data were obtained from: a questionnaire, two writing tasks, focused and unfocused error correction tasks, and interviews. The questions that guided the analyses were (1) what is the relationship between students' knowledge of grammar and the accuracy of their written productions?; (2) what does the change in students' performance tell us about the depth of their knowledge and strategies in correcting grammar errors? and finally, (3) what factors affect L<sub>2</sub> learners' accurate performance in writing, apart from their level of morphosyntactic competence?

Results showed that assessing L<sub>2</sub> learners' performance in writing is not an easy task and, therefore, we need to consider it from more than one perspective. It should encompass both elements of fluency, represented in their ability to demonstrate facility in producing language; and accuracy, represented in their ability not to make errors. The subjects' performance in writing and correction tasks was not systematic or unitary. This suggests that L<sub>2</sub> learners' proficiency is not an absolute construct and, that the learner who performs highly in one task will not necessarily perform at the same high level in another task. Students' errors in writing appeared to be due to their incomplete knowledge of grammar, their focus on the meaning, and the complexity of writing as a multi-dimensional activity. Drawing students' attention to the location of errors appeared to positively affect their abilities to correct them.

Key words: Grammar Knowledge, Narrative, Persuasive Writing.

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Explicit Knowledge of Grammar L<sub>2</sub> Learners

Recent research in second language acquisition has been characterized by continuous efforts to construct theoretical models of learning and in so doing, to explain the function of explicit, formally acquired knowledge of the target language (Furey, 1987; Alanen, 1992; Basturkmen et al., 2004; Brown, 2009; Conley, 2008; Coppieters, 1987; De Keyser, 2003; Ellis, N., 2005; Ellis, R., 2006; Elsami and Fatahi, 2008; Hoey, 2007; Izumi, 2002; Jiang, 2007; Kimberly, 2009; Lanfer and Girsai, 2008; Larsen Freeman and Cameron, 2007; Loewen et al., 2009; Long and Robinson, 1998; Mangubhai, 2006; Poole, 2005; Reynolds, 2010; Rosenberg, 2009; Sharwood-Smith, 2004; Stigler and Hiebert, 2009; Truscott, 1996; Spada and Lightbown, 2008). In reviewing the literature on this issue, I will focus on three positions about the function of this knowledge: (1) the non-interface position, (2) the interface position, and (3) the variability position. Each of these positions is relevant to the issue of the relationship between conscious knowledge of grammar and the accuracy of foreign students' written production. It should be emphasized, however, that none of them would qualify as a theory in the strict sense of the word. Instead, each emphasizes certain concepts that are pertinent to the present study.

The non-interface position has been advanced most strongly by Krashen (1981, 1982, 1985, 1987). Krashen identifies two types of linguistic knowledge in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), acquisition and learning. He argues that acquired knowledge and learned knowledge are entirely separate and unrelated. In particular, he disputes the view that learned knowledge is converted into acquired knowledge. Krashen (1982: 83-84) puts it this way: "a very important point that...needs to be stated is that learning does not 'turn into' acquisition. The idea that we first learn a new rule, and eventually, through practice, acquire it is widespread and may seem to some people to be intuitively obvious... Language acquisition happens in one way, when the acquirer understands input containing a structure

that the acquirer is 'due' to acquire, a structure at his or her 'i + 1'". In his discussion of the 'non-interface' position, Ellis (1984, 1986) notices that it runs counter to the traditional assumption of language teaching and also to the intuitions of countless language teachers. That is, teachers distinguish skill-getting and skill-using (Rivers & Temperly, 1978) on the grounds that the former should come before the latter, particularly with adults. In fact, although Krashen does acknowledge that sometimes a rule can be learned before it is acquired, he argues that this does not establish that learning is a prerequisite of acquisition. In Krashen's view, having learned a rule does not preclude having to acquire it later on. Krashen (1982: 112) claims that: "the use of the conscious grammar is limited. Not everyone monitors. Those who do only Monitor some of the time and use the Monitor for only a sub-part of the grammar...the effect of self-correction on accuracy is modest. Second language performers can typically self-correct only a small percentage of their errors, even when deliberately focused on form...and even when we only consider the easiest aspects of grammar". According to Krashen's Monitor hypothesis, learning has only one function, and that is as a monitor or editor and that learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterances, after it has been produced by the acquired system. Krashen suggests that second-language performers can use conscious rules only when four conditions are met. Those conditions are necessary and not sufficient, that is, a performer may not fully utilize his conscious grammar even when all four conditions are met. These conditions are (1) sufficient time; (2) focus on form; (3) knowing the rule, and (4) the rule need to be simple.

The interface position has been argued from a weak and strong position. The weak interface position was proposed by Seliger (1979). Seliger suggests that different learners end up with different representations of the rules they have been taught and, in turn, these rules do not describe the internal knowledge that is called upon in natural communication. These rules, according to Seliger, act as "acquisition facilitators" by focusing the learners' attention on "critical attributes of the real language concept that must be induced. That is, conscious or pedagogical rules make the inductive hypothesis

testing process more efficient” (p.368). Seliger, however, does not propose that "learned" knowledge or pedagogical rules are converted into internalized knowledge. Seliger provides support for this weak interface position in a study of the metalinguistic awareness of twenty-nine monolingual English-speaking children, eleven bilingual children, and fifteen adult ESL learners. The subjects were asked to perform a language task which required the use of the indefinite article. After the task, the subjects were asked to explain their performance. Seliger found no relationship between his subjects' ability to state the rule and their performance. The problem with Seliger's study, however, is that he did not submit his data to statistical analysis and, therefore, his results should be treated with a great deal of caution (Furey, 1987). The strong interface position is advocated by Stevick (1980), Bialystok (1978, 1979), and Sharwood-Smith (1981), among others. Stevick (1980) develops a model of SLA called "Levertov Machine" which allows for a flow of knowledge from learning to acquisition and vice versa. Although Stevick sees acquisition as the product of communicative experience, he argues that there is a possibility that learning can become acquisition. Bialystok (1978: 72) also proposes a model to deal with the interaction of acquired and learned linguistic competence. Specifically, she postulates three hypothetical constructs. (1) Explicit Language Knowledge, which contains "all the conscious facts the learner has about the language and the criterion for admission to this category is the ability to articulate these facts". (2) Implicit Language Knowledge which refers to the intuitive information upon which the language learner operates in order to produce responses. (3) Other Knowledge which includes knowledge of the native language and of other languages, knowledge of the world. Bialystok's model constitutes a theoretical base for Sharwood-Smith's (1981) model which has been developed as a full interface model to account for the role of formal instruction in SLA. According to this model, the learner can produce L<sub>2</sub> output by using implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge, or both explicit and implicit knowledge. In this regard, Ellis (1986: 236) maintains that: "it follows from this model that performance that is planned entirely or partly on the basis of explicit knowledge which is lacking in automaticity can provide

feedback into implicit knowledge; if this happens often enough (i.e. through practice), the explicit knowledge can become fully automated as part of implicit knowledge". In another study, Bialystok (1979) applied her model to judgments of grammaticality and showed that one can make a judgment about grammaticality either on the basis of knowledge of rules or on the basis of intuition. Thus, the task of judging grammaticality is one that does not necessarily bias towards implicit or explicit knowledge.

The variability position emphasized the interrelationship between use and acquisition. That is, the kind of language use that the learner engages in determines the kind of knowledge that he acquires. One of the attempts to account for the learner's variable control of the L<sub>2</sub> system had been made by McLaughlin (1978: 318). In his attack on Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition, McLaughlin suggests another distinction which is "more empirically based and ties into a general theory of human information processing". This is the distinction between "controlled" and "automatic" processing. According to McLaughlin (1978: 318), "the advantage of this distinction is that it enables one to avoid disputes about "conscious" or "subconscious" experience, since the controlled-automatic distinction is based on behavioral acts, not on inner states of consciousness". Controlled processing requires active attention; so that only a limited number of features can be controlled at a time without interference occurring. Automatic processing takes place without active control or attention. According to McLaughlin, "automatic processes are learned following the earlier use of controlled processes" (p.319). For McLaughlin, therefore, SLA entails going from the controlled to the automatic mode of operation, and it is not necessary to presuppose two unconnected knowledge types such as the "acquired/learnt" distinction.

Bialystok (1982) transforms her earlier distinction between "Explicit" and "Implicit" into the distinction between analyzed and unanalyzed knowledge, and adds to this the distinction between automatic and non-automatic to give a four-way matrix of kinds of second language performance. The analyzed factor, according to Bialystok (1984), refers to the extent to which the learner is able to

represent the structure of knowledge along with its content. The control factor refers to the relative ease of access that the learner has to different items of linguistic knowledge; it relates to automaticity. Bialystok concludes by stating that different tasks require different types of knowledge, and different kinds of learners can be identified according to which kind of knowledge they possess. According to McLaughlin et al. (1983), explicit abstract knowledge of linguistic structure can help adult learners process language by creating a shortcut in the learning process. It also saves them the trouble of creating false hypotheses.

In conclusion, these three positions have implications for interpreting the behavior of the subjects in the writing and error correction tasks. The non-interface position, for example, predicts that L<sub>2</sub> learners' linguistic knowledge is entirely separate and unrelated to their actual performance in the writing tasks. According to this position, one can argue that successful performance does not necessarily mean coherent and complete linguistic knowledge and vice versa. Consequently, it would be a mistake to judge L<sub>2</sub> learners' knowledge on the basis of their actual performance, since both knowledge and performance are unrelated. Although linguistic knowledge appears, in some situations, to be a factor in determining the type of performance, it cannot be concluded that it is a prerequisite to successful performance. Regarding error correction, the non-interface position predicts that linguistic knowledge can help L<sub>2</sub> learners to make changes in their linguistic output provided that there is sufficient time for the learners to focus on form and that they know the rules. In some cases, however, L<sub>2</sub> learners may not be able to use their linguistic competence even if those conditions are met. For example, Krashen and Pon (1975) found that their subject 'P', who had learned rules like the third person singular '-S', was unable to use them in casual conversation. On the other hand, the interface position, in its weak form, would predict that linguistic knowledge can be of some value to L<sub>2</sub> learners writing in a target language. It is not, however, an absolute guarantee for successful performance. In its strong form, the interface position would predict that L<sub>2</sub> learners' linguistic knowledge interacts with their communicative experiences and, as a result,

both competence and performance can be mutually enhanced. That is, students' linguistic competence can be improved during the composing process and their written production will become better. Regarding error correction, the interface position would predict that L<sub>2</sub> learners' linguistic knowledge will help them to correct their errors. In addition, their linguistic knowledge will be further developed as a result of engaging in error correction activity. Finally, the variability position maintains that L<sub>2</sub> learners' performance varies according to the kind of language use that they engage in and the kind of knowledge that they acquire. That is, different kinds of knowledge are used in different types of language performance.

### The Present Study

#### *The Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to understand better the role of grammar knowledge and general linguistic competence in the written productions of advanced foreign students. This study was undertaken to answer the following questions: (1) What is the relationship between students' knowledge of grammar and the accuracy of their written productions? (2) Does poor performance in writing narrative/persuasive texts imply poor performance in error correction tasks? Also, does successful performance in writing narrative texts imply successful performance in writing persuasive texts? (3) What does the change in students' performance tell us about the depth of their knowledge and strategies in solving or correcting grammar errors?, and (4) What factors affect second language learners' accurate performance in writing, apart from their level of morphosyntactic competence?

#### *Hypotheses*

The general hypothesis of this study was that although the subjects in both groups have, supposedly, reached a high degree of competence in English as a target language, their overall performance in the tasks used in this study will display various degrees of competence in English. That is by comparing the performance of the five subjects in each language group, and that of each group's

members against each other, we expect to see various degrees of performance. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the overall competence of second language learners is not systematic all the way (Bialystok, 1982). This implies that (1) a good student in solving grammar problems is not necessarily good at writing, (2) a good student in one form of writing is not necessarily good at other forms, (3) successful performance, either in writing or grammar tasks does not necessarily guarantee successful, accurate verbal explanations on students' part (Seliger, 1979), (4) poor performance in writing, at least at the sentential level, is mainly due to a deficiency in students' knowledge of grammar (El-daly, 1990).

### *Subjects*

The subjects of this study were ten foreign students at the University of Pittsburgh, USA. They belonged to two different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The first was from the Arabic language group and the Middle Eastern culture. The second was from the Spanish linguistic group and South American culture. The ten subjects were engaged in advanced graduate studies in various majors at the University of Pittsburgh. They can, therefore, be considered "advanced" language learners, and their overall competence in English is rather high. All foreign students must pass a series of achievement tests before they are officially accepted to the university. An example of these tests is the TOEFL examination (Test of English as a Foreign Language). They also have to pass an aptitude test before they can pursue their graduate studies. This test is known as 'GRE' (Graduate Record Examination). Accordingly, taking into account the university administrative procedures of accepting foreign students into the university and those of accepting them into graduate studies, one can claim that the subjects in both language groups are "advanced" or "experienced" (See Appendix: 4)

### *Instruments*

The instruments of this study were (1) questionnaire, (2) writing tasks (narration and persuasion), (3) error correction tasks, and (4) interviews.

A questionnaire was administered to elicit information from each subject. The questionnaire (See Appendix 1) consisted of two parts; each containing eight questions. The first part aimed at eliciting background information from each subject about his/her name, country, sex, age, linguistic repertoire and the extent of his/her exposure to the English language, either in his/her home country or in an English speaking environment. The second part of the questionnaire aimed at eliciting information about subjects' awareness of the nature of tasks they were asked to perform. Since they performed on two types of language tasks, namely writing and grammar tasks, the questions were focused on their knowledge of these two tasks. Second, the subjects in each language group were asked to write two essays; one narrative and the second persuasive. The members of each language group were supposed to meet in one group session to receive instructions, and then to do the writing tasks. However, since it was impossible to get the members of each group to approve of a specific meeting time, I had to meet with each subject at his/her convenience. In the first meeting each subject in each language group was asked to write a narrative text on the topic stated in (Appendix 2). Instructions were given to each subject before s/he wrote. I gave these instructions orally at the beginning of this meeting. At the end of this session, each subject was reminded of the next meeting. Once again, every subject had the chance to choose the time and place of the meeting. That is, the exact day and time of the meeting was specified after consultation with each subject. At the second meeting, each subject was asked to write persuasive text on the topic stated in (Appendix 3). Instructions were given to each subject, exactly the same as explained before in the narrative task. At the end of this meeting, each subject was reminded of the third meeting which was scheduled after consultation with each subject. Third, the subjects' morphosyntactic errors in both essays were identified and constituted the basis of two tasks: (1) an unfocused correction task, and (2) a focused correction task. In the unfocused correction task, a number of sentences was provided; each containing one or more errors from the individual's essay. Each subject was told that there were errors in the sentence and was asked to correct them. In the focused correction task the same sentences from the

subjects' essay were presented. This time, the student's attention was drawn to the specific errors (i.e., they were underlined). Each subject was asked to correct these errors. Error correction tasks required only one meeting for each subject in both language groups. In the first half of this meeting, each subject was asked to work, first, on the unfocused and second, on the focused correction tasks that were based on each student's morphosyntactic errors in the narrative essay. In the second half each subject was asked to work, first, on the unfocused and second, on the focused correction tasks that were based on each student's morphosyntactic errors in the persuasive essay. The point of these tasks was to see whether each student's errors, as they appeared in his/her composition writing, were caused by a real deficiency in subjects' knowledge of grammar, or whether his knowledge was too vague or fragmentary to be successfully transferred to other tasks. Fourth, after the subjects in both language groups wrote both texts and performed the two error correction tasks, they were interviewed individually. The interview with each subject focused on his/her performance in the error correction tasks (unfocused correction tasks, and the focused correction tasks). The purpose here was to uncover the reasons for the changes from one task to another. Each subject was asked to explain why changes were made, and was probed to clarify as often as necessary. No feedback on the correctness of the changes was given before the end of the interview. Students' explanations were tape-recorded.

The mechanism of conducting the interviews is based on Gass' (1983) claim that one of the ways to understand the mechanisms of L<sub>2</sub> learners' performance is to ask them (learners). Specifically, Gass suggests that for second language learners the ability to think and talk about language might involve abstract analyses of a number of different types. It might include, for example, (1) analyses of their own language, (2) a comparison between their native language and the target language, (3) a comparison between their native language and other languages previously learned, or even (4) a comparison between the target language and other languages previously learned (p.277). With this understanding in mind, the

interview was considered as an opportunity for each subject to retrospect and talk about his performance and/or his/her knowledge. This interview was inductively-oriented.

### *Data Analysis*

It is worth mentioning that while analyzing the data, I found out that both Arabic subject (1) and Spanish subject (4) did not make any grammar errors in the two writing tasks and, accordingly, they did not contribute to the error correction analysis used in this study. This means that the data used in this study were based on the performances of eight subjects only.

The morphosyntactic errors in each student's narrative and persuasive essays constituted the basis of two tasks: (1) an unfocused correction task, and (2) a focused correction task. Subjects' performance in both unfocused and focused correction tasks was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Both types of data analyses were successfully used in my previous research on the relationship between conscious knowledge of grammar and the accuracy of the written production of beginning foreign students enrolled in the intensive English program at the University of Pittsburgh. The quantitative analysis of the morphosyntactic errors was conducted as follows. First, each student's errors in each essay, unfocused correction and focused correction tasks were counted. Each subject's errors in the unfocused correction task were counted on the basis of whether they were remaining errors (REM) previously made in the essay and never corrected or new errors (NEW). Second, the frequency distributions and descriptive statistics for the subjects' errors in both essays, unfocused correction tasks and focused correction tasks, were made (See Table 8). The qualitative part was an analysis of each subject's conception of the grammatical rules that were violated in order to explain any discrepancies between students' performance on the tasks. This analysis was based entirely on the individual's explanations, and aimed at accounting for the differences between the results of the two tasks.

### *Results*

The major purpose of this section is to present and discuss the subjects' performance in the narrative and persuasive essays and their correction tasks (unfocused/ focused). One way of seeing this part of the enterprise is that students in the initial production had the opportunity to display facility in language, vocabulary, to construct and communicate ideas, and to make errors. As the probes continued, the students had the opportunity to correct their errors in successive layers. What are at issue, here, are the changes in successful language use across three types of tasks. The following discussion consists of two sections: (1) analysis of error correction from unfocused to focused tasks, and (2) students' explanations of their errors in the narrative and persuasive essays, and their overall performance in the correction tasks.

#### *Error Correction Analysis*

In order to get a real understanding of the subjects' performance, we need to consider (1) the number of errors in the light of how many words that each subject produced in each essay, (2) the number of errors that were made in the essay and corrected in both correction tasks and, (3) the percentage of the corrected errors against those errors that were made in the written essays. We also need to consider the number of those errors that were not corrected in the correction tasks. Table (2) presents the performance of both Arabic and Spanish subjects in the narrative and persuasive essays and their correction tasks. The reader is reminded that the Arabic subject (1) and the Spanish subject (4) are excluded from the study because they did not make any grammar errors in their essays.

Table (2) shows some characteristics of the students' performance in both writing and correction tasks. First, the total number of words produced in the narrative essays ranges from 300 (Arabic subject 4) to 773 (Spanish subject 1), and the number of errors ranges from 3 (Arabic subject 3) to 22 (Spanish subject 5). As seen in table (2), in and across the two language groups, students' written productions were not quantitatively correlated to the number of their errors. That is, it is not necessarily the case that the more an individual writes, the more errors that he/she will make. Examining the data reported in Table

(2) shows that some subjects were able to produce many words without making any grammar errors, such as Arabic subject (1) and Spanish subject (4). Other subjects were able to produce a large number of words with the least number of errors, such as Arabic subject (3). The ratio of the number of the words that Arabic subject (3) produced to the number of his errors in the narrative essay is 158:1. That is, he made one error in each 158 words, which is the highest ratio among the eight subjects. Other subjects produced the least number of words, but made the highest number of errors such as Spanish subject (5). The point, here, is that judging students' performance only on the basis of their words and errors, although important, might lead to a misleading conclusion. We might conclude, for example, that the Arabic subject (5), who produced more words and made less errors than Arabic subject (2), is linguistically better. In this regard, it can be suggested that looking at the ratio of the number of words produced to the number of errors made can be a successful measure for students' ability.

Second, the total number of words produced in the persuasive essays ranges from 106 (Arabic subject 4) to 503 (Arabic subject 3), and the number of errors ranges from 2 (Arabic subject 4) to 11 (Arabic subject 5, and Spanish subject 5). As was the case in the narrative writing, Table (2) shows that, in and across the two language groups, it is not necessarily the case that the more an individual writes, the more errors that he/she will make. For example, each of the Arabic subjects (2) and (3) made 6 errors in their persuasive essays; however, subject (3) produced 503 words while subject (2) produced only 207 words, and while the difference between Spanish subjects (2) and (3) in terms of the number of errors is only one error, the difference in the number of words produced is 136 words. It is not clear; however, to what extent we can be secure about making judgements just by relying on the number of words produced and the number of errors made. In addition, we need to consider the ratio of the number of words to that of the errors. For example, the ratio of the Arabic subject (2)'s number of words to that of the errors is 35:1, while that of the Arabic subject (3) is 84:1. And the ratio of the Spanish subject (2)'s number of words and that of his errors is 62:1, while that of the Spanish subject (3) is 38:1. The preceding

discussion shows that language teachers need to carefully choose their approaches for evaluating and testing their students' linguistic ability. Relying only on the number of words that students produce, or the number of errors they make may not give us a valid picture about students' competence.

Third, we need, also, to examine the students' performance in the correction tasks. This is based on the premise that some learners may have the necessary knowledge, but because of time pressure, on one hand, and their primary interest in generating ideas, they make errors. In the correction tasks, their erroneous sentences were presented, and students were asked to correct them. Such tasks can provide us with a clear picture about students' knowledge of grammar. In this regard, Bialystok (1981) argued that tasks such as correction of errors reflect explicit analyzed knowledge. For example, it has been previously argued that relying only on the number of words produced and the number of errors made can lead us to mistakenly conclude that Arabic subject (5) is linguistically better than Arabic subject (2), and Spanish subject (3) is linguistically better than Spanish subject (2). Examining these subjects' performance in the correction tasks puts things into perspective. In the unfocused correction task of the narrative essay, Arabic subject (2) corrected 66.7% of his errors, while Arabic subject (5) corrected only 21.4% of his errors. In the focused correction task, Arabic (2) corrected 83.3% of his errors, while Arabic (5) corrected only 28.6 of his errors. Similarly, in the unfocused correction task, Spanish subject (2) corrected 37.5% of his errors, while Spanish (3) corrected only 16.7% of her errors. In the focused correction task, Spanish subject (2) corrected 68.6% of his errors, while Spanish subject (3) corrected 66.7% of her errors. I conclude that Arabic subject (2) is generally equipped with better linguistic knowledge than subject (5); a conclusion which is contrary to what we might mistakenly conclude by relying only on the number of words produced and the number of errors made. Similarly, I conclude that Spanish subject (2) is linguistically better than Spanish subject (3).

Fourth, the subjects' overall performance in writing and correction tasks is not systematic all the way. This finding has been previously reported by Bialystok (1982). That is, students' performance

differed from one writing task to another, and from one correction task to another. For the sake of clarification, let me provide an example of the Arab subjects' performance in the persuasive essay and its correction tasks. In the unfocused correction task, subject (3), who produced the highest number of words and made a small number of errors in comparison to the other subjects, scored the lowest percentage of corrected errors (16.7%). Another interesting case of the variability in students' performance was found between Arabic subjects (2) and (3), and Spanish subjects (2) and (3). For example, Arabic subject (2) produced 524 words, while subject (3) produced 473 words in the narrative essays. However, both subjects performed alike in the unfocused correction task (66.7%). And subject (3) performed better (100%) than subject (2) in the focused correction task (83.3%). In the persuasive essay, subject (3) produced more words than subject (2). In the unfocused correction, however, subject (2) performed better (33.3%) than subject (3) who corrected only (16.7%). In the focused correction, both subjects performed alike (83.3%).

Fifth, in the unfocused correction tasks many students demonstrated some successful performance in correcting their errors. The highest percentage of corrected errors (66.7%) was achieved by the Arabic subjects (2) and (3), and the lowest percentage (16.7%) was achieved by Spanish subject (3). However, the highest percentage of corrected errors in the unfocused correction of the persuasive essay was achieved by Spanish subject (2) who corrected 71.4% of his errors, and the least percentage (16.7%) was achieved by Arabic subject (2), who scored the highest percentage of corrected errors in the unfocused task of the narrative essay. In the focused correction task, all subjects demonstrated a higher level of performance than that in the unfocused correction task. It must be emphasized, however, that the subjects benefited, to different degrees, from drawing their attention to their errors, partially as in the unfocused correction task, and fully as in the focused correction task.

Table (3) is provided to present a more detailed illustration of the performance of the subjects' performance in the correction tasks of the narrative and persuasive essays. Each subject's errors in the

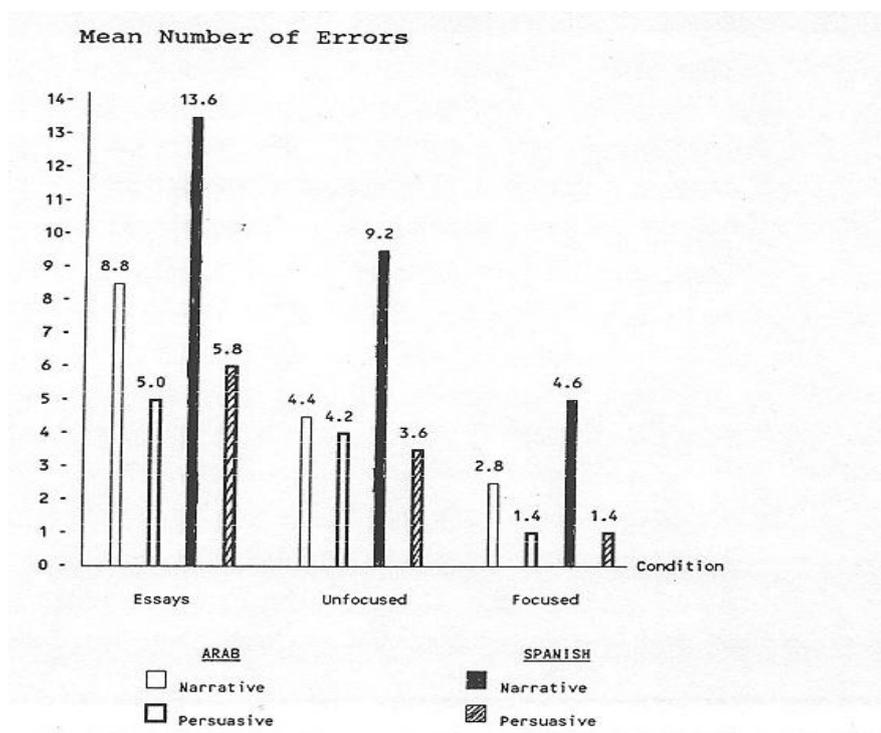
unfocused correction task were counted on the basis of whether they were remaining errors (REM) previously made in the essay and never corrected or new errors (NEW). The purpose is to see to what extent the subjects' performance changed according to the task they were performing. The premise, here, is that L<sub>2</sub> learners' strategies in correcting or solving grammar problems are knowledge-driven; that is, these strategies are quite related to, and a reflection of learners' depth of knowledge, whether it is complete, perfect and organized or shaky and fragmentary. Regardless of the fact that these subjects made errors in their written productions, which, by itself, tells us something about the status of their knowledge, the strategies that these subjects used to correct their errors may add a great deal to our understanding of their metalinguistic awareness. These strategies can be inferred from the nature of the errors that the subject made, whether they are remaining or new errors. If they are remaining errors, this means that the subjects probably lacked the necessary knowledge since the errors were brought to their attention. If these errors are new, we need to know how and why such errors were made. Table (3) presents the number of errors made by the subjects in both narrative and persuasive essays and their correction tasks.

The results, reported in Table (3) provide us with some characteristics of the subjects' performance in error correction tasks. First, many errors did not get corrected in the unfocused correction tasks. The Arabic subjects failed to correct 45.5% of the errors they previously made in the narrative essay, and 60.0% of those previously made in the persuasive essay. Similarly, the Spanish subjects failed to correct 51.5% and 51.7% of their errors previously made in the narrative and persuasive essays, respectively. And 90.9% of the errors of the Arabic subjects in the unfocused correction task of the narrative essay were previously made in the essay and never corrected, and 71.4% of their errors in the unfocused correction task of persuasive essays were remaining and never corrected. Likewise, 76.1% and 83.3% of the Spanish subjects' errors in the unfocused correction tasks were previously made in the narrative and persuasive essays, respectively, and never corrected. Second, even when the

errors were identified (as in the focused correction tasks), the subjects often failed to correct them. The Arabic subjects failed to correct 29.5% and 28% of the errors that were previously made in the narrative and persuasive essays, although they were underlined for them. Relatedly, 92.9% of the Arabic subjects' errors in the focused correction task of the narrative essay were remaining errors and never corrected. And all their errors in the focused correction task of the persuasive essay were remaining and never corrected. Similarly, the Spanish subjects failed to correct 30.9% and 20.7% of their errors that were previously made in the narrative and persuasive, respectively. Relatedly, 91.3% and 85.7% of their errors in the focused correction tasks were remaining errors and previously made in the narrative and persuasive essays, respectively, and never corrected. Third, new errors were introduced even when the subjects were paying attention. That is, in their attempts to correct their errors, the subjects tended to come up with new sentences instead of correcting their erroneous structures. As Table (3) shows, the new errors constituted 9.1% and 7.1% of the total number of errors made by the Arabic subjects in the unfocused and focused correction tasks of the narrative essay, respectively; and 28.6% of their errors in the unfocused correction task of the persuasive essay. Likewise, the new errors constituted 23.9% and 8.7% of the total number of errors made by the Spanish subjects in the unfocused and focused correction tasks of the narrative essay, respectively; and 16.7% and 14.3% of their errors in the two correction tasks of the persuasive essay.

Before closing this section, it is worth mentioning that, although the Arabic group performed better than the Spanish group in the correction tasks of the narrative essay, they performed at the same level as the Spanish subjects in the correction tasks of the persuasive essay. Figure (1) below, shows that the Spanish subjects' performance in the unfocused correction task surpassed that of the Arabic subjects. And both language groups performed alike in the focused correction task of the persuasive essay.

Figure (1)



*Plot of mean number of errors made by the subjects in the narrative/persuasive essays and their correction tasks.* The next step is to examine the types of errors and their frequencies in the written production and both correction tasks. The purpose is to see whether or not these L<sub>2</sub> learners suffer from a real deficiency in their knowledge of grammar. We also need to know the most troublesome areas of English grammar, so that language teachers can pay more attention to these areas in their classroom instruction. Consequently, table (4) illustrates the types of errors made by the subjects in the narrative essay and the frequency of each of these errors.

Table (4) shows that while the Arabic subjects have problems with various areas in English grammar, they seem to have particular difficulty in choosing the appropriate tenses. The errors in tenses represent 40.9% of the total errors made in the Arabic subjects' narrative essays, followed by prepositions (13.6%) and subject-verb agreement errors (11.4%). However, we should notice that the high percentage

of tenses errors is due to the high number of errors that subjects (5) and (4) made in tenses. This probably implies that L<sub>2</sub> learners differ in terms of what can be considered as simple or complex, easy or difficult rules of grammar. Moreover, table (4) shows that the errors made by each language group were in thirteen categories, and although each group made errors in categories different from those of the other group, both groups made errors in seven similar categories. These are (1) tenses, (2) subject-verb agreement, (3) prepositions, (4) nouns, (5) pronouns, (6) missing direct object and (7) articles. For the Spanish subjects, verb morphology seemed to be the most serious problem (33.8%). Whereas prepositions appeared to be the second troublesome area of grammar for the Arabic group (13.6%), nouns constituted the second difficult category of errors for the Spanish subjects (14.7%). Prepositions were the third difficult area for the Spanish subjects (11.8%), as well as tenses (11.8%). What is most worth mentioning, here, is that verbs appear to be the most difficult area for the Spanish subjects as a group. This situation is different from that of the Arabic group, in which subjects (4) and (5) contributed most of the errors in tenses, whereas in the Spanish group, the four subjects made errors in verbs. This situation may imply that, verbs could really be a serious problem that requires much attention. To be sure, let us see what types of errors the subjects made in the unfocused and focused correction tasks.

By comparing tables (4) and (5), we see that, five categories of the Arabic subjects' errors are eliminated in table (5) because the subjects corrected them in the unfocused correction task. These categories are (1) subject-verb agreement, (2) verb to do, (3) nouns, (4) missing the direct object and (5) infinitive-gerund distinction. Generally speaking, also, the number of errors decreased to exactly half of the errors previously made in the essay by the Arabic subjects. Tense errors still account for the highest percentage in this task (54.5%), which is higher than that in the essay (40.9%). The only reason for this high percentage is subject (5) who made nine errors in tenses, while the total number of the groups' errors in tenses is 12. As was the situation in the essay, prepositions still constituted the second high percentage (13.6%), the same percentage reported in Table (4). As was the case with the Arabic subjects, the Spanish

subjects also managed to reduce the number of their errors, and four categories of errors were eliminated as the table shows. These categories of errors are (1) indirect questions, (2) adverbs, (3) pronouns and (4) comparative forms. Those who made errors in these four categories managed to correct them in this task. It is clear that, as was the case in the narrative essay, verbs (28.3%), nouns (26.1%), tenses (13.04%) and prepositions (13.04%) appeared to be the most difficult areas of grammar, in which the Spanish subjects made the most errors. And, as previously mentioned, these areas are considered to be problematic since almost all Spanish subjects made errors in verbs, nouns, tenses and prepositions. Regarding the focused correction task, Table (5) also shows the decrease not only in the number of the Arabic subjects' errors, but also in the categories of errors. However, tenses seem to be a serious problem, particularly for the Arabic subject (5) who made nine errors in tenses. In addition, the Spanish subjects demonstrated some improvements in the areas of verbs and tenses; however, their errors in the areas of prepositions and nouns scored the highest percentages (26.1% and 17.4%, respectively). This, however, does not change the fact that the most troublesome areas of grammar for the Spanish speakers are (1) verbs, (2) tenses, (3) prepositions and (4) nouns.

The next step is to examine the types of errors and their frequencies in the persuasive essay and the correction tasks. Table (6) illustrates the types of errors made by the subjects in the persuasive essay and the frequency of each of these errors. It shows that although the Arabic subjects have problems with seven areas in English grammar, they seem to share difficulty in choosing the appropriate prepositions. The errors in prepositions represent 28% of the total errors made in the Arabic subjects' persuasive essay, followed by verbs (24%). However, we should notice that the high number of percentage of preposition errors is due to the high number of errors that subject (5) made in prepositions. Recall that tenses represent the highest percentage of the errors made in the Arabic groups' narrative essays followed by prepositions and subject-verb agreement errors. In the persuasive essay, tense errors represent the fourth highest percentage (8.0%), as well as subject-verb agreement (8.0%). The third highest percentage of

errors in the persuasive essay was in articles (12.0%) and nouns (12.0%). With the above in mind, it seems that tenses, prepositions, verbs, articles and subject-verb agreement constitute problematic areas for the Arabic subjects.

Table (6) also shows that both Arabic and Spanish subjects made errors in six similar categories. These are (1) prepositions, (2) verbs, (3) articles, (4) subject-verb agreement, (5) tenses, and (6) nouns. The Spanish subjects, however, made errors in two more categories: demonstrative pronouns and until-clauses. Overall, the Spanish subjects made 4 more errors in the persuasive essay than the Arabic subjects. While prepositions, verbs, nouns and articles represent the highest numbers of errors made by the Arabic subjects in the persuasive essay, prepositions, tenses, verbs and nouns represent the highest percentages of errors made by the Spanish subjects. These categories of errors were also observed in the Spanish subjects' narrative essays, which may suggest that these areas of English grammar could really be a serious problem that requires much attention. To be sure, let us see what types of errors the subjects made in the unfocused and focused correction tasks.

Table (7) shows that only one category of errors is eliminated in the unfocused correction task because the Arabic subjects (4) and (5) managed to correct their errors in subject-verb agreement. Table (7) also shows that prepositions (33.3%), verbs (23.8%), nouns (14.3%) and articles (14.3%) represent the highest percentages of errors made in the unfocused correction task, as was the situation in the persuasive essay. Likewise, the Spanish subjects also managed to reduce the number of their errors, and three categories of errors were eliminated in the unfocused correction task. These categories are (1) demonstrative pronouns, (2) subject-verb agreement, and (3) until-clauses. Those who made errors in these three categories managed to correct them in the unfocused correction task. However, prepositions (33.3%), tenses (22.2%), nouns (22.2%) and word order (11.1%) still constitute the most troublesome areas of grammar, in which the Spanish subjects made the most errors.

In the focused correction task, both Arabic and Spanish subjects managed to reduce the number of their errors to seven. For the Arabic subjects, prepositions (28.6) and nouns (28.6%) are still problematic. For the Spanish subjects, tenses (28.6%) constituted the most problematic area of grammar. All other categories of errors scored similar percentages (14.3%). Comparing the performances of the subjects in the correction tasks indicates that there is no consistent pattern. That is, although the Arabic subjects performed better than the Spanish subjects in the unfocused correction of the narrative essay, they performed less in the same task of the persuasive essay. Also, both groups performed at a close level in the focused correction task of the narrative essay. And the Spanish group performed better than the Arabic group in the focused correction of the persuasive essay. Also, in the unfocused correction task of the persuasive essay Arabic subjects made 6 new errors of a total of 21 errors they made in this task. In the focused correction task, they made no new errors; that is, all the 7 errors they made in this task were remaining errors and never corrected. The Spanish subjects made 3 new errors of a total of 18 errors they made in the unfocused correction task. In the focused correction task, 1 error was new, and the other 6 errors were remaining and never corrected. This means that the remaining errors constituted a higher percentage of the errors that the Arabic subjects made in the unfocused correction task, than that of the new errors. Belatedly, all the errors made in the focused correction task were remaining. This implies that the subjects tended to correct specific errors that appeared to them incorrect, but they failed to correct all errors. That is, they did not try to come up with new structures, as the subjects of my previous research preferred to do. But, because they apparently lacked certain grammar knowledge, their correction strategies were not totally successful.

In the following section students' explanations during the interview were analyzed with a view to determining the following aspects of students' performance: (1) the reasons for making errors in composition writing, and (2) students' strategies in correcting errors in the unfocused and focused

correction tasks. It must be emphasized that because this is not an analysis of the complete production mechanisms of the students, I have not carried out a protocol analysis in the sense that the term is usually used but rather have relied on the students own interpretations of why they made errors and how they corrected them.

### *Reasons for Students' Errors*

Based on students' explanations of their errors, the following reasons were repeatedly reported by the Arabic and Spanish subjects: (1) lack of focus on or proper attention to grammar accuracy, which resulted from high rate of speed during writing; (2) students' inability to do more than one thing simultaneously during writing; (3) following or adopting speaking or conversation norms during writing; (4) deficiency in students' knowledge of grammar; (5) students' perceptions of priority in writing, which affected their interest in grammar accuracy; (6) first language interference, particularly Spanish; (7) nature of the writing task itself and, finally, (8) lack of practice.

### Discussion

Discussion of what has been learned from this investigation will focus on seven major findings that are mainly concerned with the linguistic aspects of the subjects' performance in writing and error correction tasks.

### *Finding # (1): The Quantity of Students' Written Production and the Number of the Errors*

First, within and across the two language groups, students' written productions were not quantitatively correlated to the number of their errors. That is, it was not necessarily the case that the more an individual wrote, the more errors that he/she made. Second, some subjects were able to produce many words without making any grammar errors, such as Arabic subject (1) and Spanish subject (4). Other subjects were able to produce a fairly good number of words with the least number of errors, such as Arabic subject (3). Other subjects produced the least number of words but made the highest number of

errors such as Spanish subject (5). The above finding implies that assessing second language learners' performance in writing is not an easy task. Relying only on the number of words produced in composition writing may not be an accurate or valid measure of students' linguistic abilities. For example, it may not be reasonable to suggest that Arabic subject (2), who produced 524 words in his narrative essay, is linguistically better than Arabic subject (3) who produced 473 words. The number of words only tells us that subject (2) was able to write more than subject (3), but it does not tell us anything about how accurate his writing was. Moreover, the written productions of both subjects changed in the persuasive essays, but in favor of Arabic subject (3) who produced 503 words, while Arabic subject (2) produced 207 words only.

In addition, relying only on the number of errors made in composition writing may not be a valid measure for students' linguistic abilities. That is, making the least number of errors in composition writing does not necessarily mean that the student-writer is linguistically competent, or vice versa. The point, here, is that we need to consider students' performance from more than one perspective. In addition to the number of words produced and the number of errors made, we need to consider an additional measure. We need to examine the ratio of the number of words to that of the errors. Students' proficiency in writing should encompass both elements of fluency, represented in students' ability to demonstrate facility in producing language; (i.e. total number of words) and accuracy, represented in students' ability not to make errors. For example, the ratio of the Arabic subject (2)'s number of words to that of his errors is 35:1, while that of the Arabic subject (3) is 84:1. This means that subject (3) was a more proficient writer than subject (2).

#### *Finding # (2): The Nature of Students' Performance in Writing and Error Correction Tasks*

The data showed that the subjects' overall performance in writing and correction tasks was not systematic or unitary all the way (Scribner & Cole, 1981). That is, their performance differed from one writing task to another, and from one correction task to another. For example, the Spanish subjects

produced 1916 words in the narrative essay, made 68 errors with a ratio of 28:1. In the persuasive essays, they produced 1254 words, made 29 errors with a ratio of 43:1. Likewise, the Arabic subjects produced 1831 words in the narrative essays, made 44 errors with a ratio of 41:1. In the persuasive essays, they produced 1093 words, made 25 errors with a ratio of 43:1. In the unfocused correction task, the Arabic subjects corrected half of their errors, but only 28% of their errors in the persuasive essay. In the focused correction task of the narrative essay, the Arabic subjects corrected 68.2% of their errors, and 72% of their errors in the persuasive essays. Likewise, in the unfocused correction task of the narrative essay, the Spanish subjects corrected 32.4 of their errors, but 48.3% of their errors in the persuasive essay. In the focused correction task, they corrected 66.2% of their errors in the narrative essay but 79.3% of their errors in the persuasive essay.

The above data strongly support the variability position. Stated simply, the variability position maintains that L<sub>2</sub> learners' performance varies according to the kind of language use that they engage in and the kind of knowledge that they acquire. As shown above, the subjects of this study varied in terms of the quantity of their written productions in both writing tasks, and their corrections of errors. An interesting case of variability in students' performance was found between Arabic subjects (2) and (3), and Spanish subjects (2) and (3). For example, although Arabic subject (2) produced more words (524) than subject (3) who produced 473 words in the narrative essays, both subjects, however, performed alike in the unfocused correction task (66.7%). And subject (3) performed better (100%) than subject (2) in the focused correction task (83.3%). In the persuasive essay, subject (3) produced more words than subject (2). In the unfocused correction task, however, subject (2) performed better (33.3%) than subject (3) who corrected only 16.7%. In the focused correction, both subjects performed alike (83.3%). This suggests that L<sub>2</sub> learners' proficiency is not an absolute construct; rather, it relies on what kind of language task the learner is performing. To put it differently, we will be mistaken to expect the learner who performs highly in one task to, necessarily, perform at the same high level in another task. Instead, we need to keep

in mind that our students' performance is not unitary or systematic, and we should accept the variability in our students' performance. Tarone (1984) found the same evidence in speaking tasks, and that the variability in students' performance is similar to Tarone's notion of a 'capability continuum.' Specifically, Tarone maintained that one phenomenon which must be accounted for by any theory of second language acquisition is the phenomenon of systematic variability in the utterances produced by second language learners as they attempt to communicate in the target language. In this regard, Tarone used the axioms of Labov's (1969) observer's paradox as a foundation for her notion of capability continuum. I repeat the first two axioms, which are most relevant to the current discussion. (1) There are no single-style speakers. Every speaker shifts linguistic and phonetic variables as the situation and topic change. (2) It is possible to range the styles of a speaker along a continuous dimension defined by the amount of attention paid to speech.

*Finding # (3): Drawing Students' Attention to their Errors*

The subjects benefited, to different degrees, from drawing their attention to their errors, partially as in the unfocused correction task, and fully as in the focused correction task. All subjects, however, demonstrated a higher level of performance in the focused correction tasks than in the unfocused correction tasks. Moreover, comparing the performances of the subjects in the correction tasks indicated that there was no consistent pattern in students' performance. That is, although the Arabic subjects performed better than the Spanish subjects in the unfocused correction of the narrative essay, they performed less in the same task for the persuasive essay. Although both groups performed at a close level in the focused correction task of the narrative essay, the Spanish group performed better than the Arabic group in the focused correction of the persuasive essay. (See Broadbent, 1971; Bardovi-Harlig, 2006; Byrnes, 2000; Cohen, 2008; Ellis et al., 2001).

*Finding # (4): Three Pieces of Evidence of Students' Incomplete Knowledge of Grammar*

First, the data showed that many errors did not get corrected in the unfocused correction tasks. The Arabic subjects failed to correct 45.5% of the errors they previously made in the narrative essay, and 60% of those previously made in the persuasive essay. Similarly, the Spanish subjects failed to correct 51.5% and 51.7% of their errors previously made in the narrative and persuasive essays, respectively. Second, even when the errors were identified (as in the focused correction tasks), the subjects often failed to correct them. The Arabic subjects failed to correct 29.5% and 28% of the errors that were previously made in the narrative and persuasive essays, although they were underlined for them. Similarly, the Spanish subjects failed to correct 30.9% and 20.7% of their errors that were previously made in the narrative and persuasive essay, respectively. Third, new errors were introduced even when the subjects were paying attention. The new errors constituted 9.1% and 7.1% of the total number of errors made by the Arabic subjects in the unfocused and focused correction tasks of the narrative essay, respectively; and 28.6% of their errors in the unfocused correction task of the persuasive essay. Likewise, the new errors constituted 23.9% and 8.7% of the total number of errors made by the Spanish subjects in the unfocused and focused correction tasks of the narrative essay, respectively; and 16.7% and 14.3% of their errors in the two correction tasks of the persuasive essay.

The above findings provide evidence that students' morphosyntactic errors in composition writing were due, in part, to their incomplete knowledge of grammar. More interestingly, this study showed that some subjects made errors in their written essays although they knew the rules involved. This observation suggests that students' knowledge of grammar was fragmentary so that they could not transfer what they possessed of knowledge to such a complex task as writing. Another possible explanation is that the task demands can be a factor in determining students' success or failure in displaying their knowledge and using it successfully. Since writing is a complex process, some students cannot utilize their intellectual understanding of the grammar of the language effectively (See Achad, 2007; Wang, 2003).

The results of this study indicate that some adult learners are successful at learning grammar rules and, at the same time, able to use those rules productively and communicatively. The Arabic subject (1) and Spanish subject (4) were able to display their knowledge of grammar successfully in writing. They did not make any errors in either of the writing tasks. The other eight subjects however, made errors in their written texts, but were able to correct some of their errors in the correction tasks. In this regard, the subjects' performance seems compatible with the non-interface position which predicts that in error correction, linguistic knowledge can help L<sub>2</sub> learners to make changes in their linguistic output provided that there is sufficient time for the learners to focus on form and that they know the rules (See Knutson, 2006)..

*Finding # (5): Successful Corrections, but Incorrect Rationalizations*

Although some subjects were able to correct some of their errors, they failed to provide accurate rationalizations for their successful corrections. The data showed that some of the subjects' successful corrections were based on incorrect knowledge of grammar. This finding had been previously reported by Seliger (1979). Seliger suggests that different learners end up with different representations of the rules they have been taught and, in turn, these rules do not describe the internal knowledge that is called upon in natural communication. My suggestion, here, is that the absence of the relationship between the subjects' verbal explanations and their successful performance is mainly due to a deficiency in their conceptual knowledge of grammar, and to the nature of the task, as well. Relatedly, Arabic subject (4), for example, failed to correctly write the prepositions in the persuasive essay and, also, failed to correct it in the unfocused correction task. When the error was underlined for him in the focused correction task subject (4) was, in a sense, forced to make a correction and he successfully did so, but on the basis of incorrect conceptual knowledge of grammar, as evidenced from their explanations. This means that second language learners are sometimes able to reach correct answers, especially on highly focused tasks, but for the wrong reasons. Accordingly, the issue is not necessarily that learners end up with different

representations of the rules they have been taught, as Seliger suggested, but whether second language learners possess the necessary knowledge of grammar, and are able to activate the appropriate piece of this knowledge to meet the demands of the problem they are facing.

*Finding # (6): Students' Strategies in Correcting their Errors*

The study showed that the subjects relied on many strategies in correcting their errors. They relied on (1) their knowledge of grammar when accessible, (2) the sound of the structures being corrected, (3) the semantic aspects of the structures, and (4) avoiding correcting difficult structures and coming up with new sentences. When asked to correct their errors, the subjects with deficiency in conscious knowledge of grammar seem to rely on their "feelings" about structures of the target language, and the semantic hypotheses" they constructed about these structures. However, since these 'feelings' and 'hypotheses' were, at times, based on incorrect and incomplete knowledge of grammar, the subjects' corrections of errors were occasionally unsuccessful. In some instances, the subjects searched for various ways to express the meanings of their erroneous sentences in new forms, which were sometimes correct, and other times contained new errors. Based on the subjects' explanations, it can be argued that advanced language learners resort to various types of strategies to solve grammar problems. However, their success or failure is constrained by the depth and completeness of their knowledge as well as the nature of the task they are performing. Second language learners' strategies are, in essence, knowledge-driven. Consequently, in thinking about their performance as an object of study, the essence of the underlying knowledge that accounts for their performance must be examined. This examination of the learners' underlying knowledge will, in turn, uncover the basis for the strategies they use in solving language problems. It must be kept in mind that when I talk about knowledge, I do not only talk about the presence versus absence of knowledge, but also the depth, completeness and accuracy of such knowledge. For example, some subjects made errors in composition writing although they appeared

to know the rules involved. This observation suggests that students' knowledge of grammar was fragmentary so that they could not transfer what they possessed of knowledge to such a complex task as writing. Another possible explanation is that the task demands can be a factor in determining students' success or failure in displaying their knowledge and using it successfully (See Schmidt, 2001; Saeidi & Chang, 2003).

*Finding # (7): Complexity of Writing – Attention Theory*

The qualitative analysis of the data showed that there are many reasons for students' errors, in addition to students' incomplete knowledge of grammar. Two of the major reasons are (1) the complexity of writing in a second language; therefore, students were unable to do more than one thing simultaneously during writing, and (2) students' focus on the meaning and generating ideas rather than grammar accuracy. Based on the subjects' explanations during the interview, one can argue that writing in a second language is a multidimensional activity which requires L<sub>2</sub> learners to do more than one thing simultaneously. This argument seems to be compatible with the idea that from a cognitive point of view, we must consider the fact that the demands on short-term/working memory exceed capacity because students must not only plan, compose, revise, and reflect but must also access vocabulary, grammar rules, etc. In addition, this argument is also compatible with the principles of the attention theory (James, 1970) as well as El-daly's (1990) findings of his research on fifteen foreign students enrolled in the ELI at the University of Pittsburgh. This means that students' errors and their success in correcting some of them can be explained within the principles of attention theory. That is, some L<sub>2</sub> learners may appear to have the necessary knowledge of grammar; however, they are unable to display this knowledge in writing. This phenomenon was analyzed as an indication of the level and depth of students' knowledge. At the same time, we need to be open to other possible explanations. In this regard, I argue that the attention theory, as explained by cognitive psychologists, may provide us with a reasonable and plausible perspective of students' performance. Two important features within the phenomenon of attention have

been identified: (1) an individual can attend to only one thing at a time or think only one thought at a time. (2) Attention appears to be serial, in that we appear to attend to or perform first one thing, then another, and we find it very difficult to mix certain activities. That is, the focus of attention is only on one place at one time. Specifically, James (1970: 403) suggests that: “ [(attention] is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal efficiently with others”. In addition, Broadbent (1971) pointed out that our ability to attend to several sources of information simultaneously is severely restricted. Consequently, a human who must process information that exceeds his channel capacity will inevitably make errors:

**S.1003. ...because it is difficult sometimes to think of ideas and to think of grammar at the same time...that is the reason; in order to explain ideas very clearly, sometimes you make grammar mistakes.**

**S.145. I thought I put everything...sometimes when you think...sometimes you miss something....you don't write it even though you had it in your mind, and you will write it but sometimes you skip it.**

The above quotations suggest that students' errors are due, in part, to their inability to do two things at the same time: coming up with ideas and watching for grammar errors. Instead, they tried to think of ideas and put them on the paper, and then they may be able to check the accuracy of their structures. This suggests that attention must be devoted to each component of the writing activity. At the same time, however, we must accept the fact that beginning attempts at such multidimensional activity are often slow and error-prone. The study shows that the condition (essay, unfocused correction, unfocused correction) affected the number of errors made by the subjects in both language groups. That is, the subjects made the most errors in the essays, the fewest errors in the focused correction tasks, with the unfocused correction tasks in between.

### Conclusion

The above discussion showed that students' written productions were not quantitatively correlated to the number of their errors. That is, it was not necessarily the case that the more an individual wrote, the more errors that he/she made. The above finding implies that assessing second language learners' performance in writing is not an easy task. Relying only on the number of words produced in composition writing may not be an accurate or valid measure of students' linguistic abilities. In addition, relying only on the number of errors made in composition writing may not be a valid measure for students' linguistic abilities. That is, making the least number of errors in composition writing does not necessarily mean that the student-writer is linguistically competent, or vice versa. The point, here, is that we need to consider students' performance from more than one perspective. In addition to the number of words produced and the number of errors made, we need to consider an additional measure. We need to examine the ratio of the number of words to that of the errors. Students' proficiency in writing should encompass both elements of fluency, represented in students' ability to demonstrate facility in producing language; (i.e. total number of words) and accuracy, represented in students' ability not to make errors.

The data showed that the subjects' overall performance in writing and correction tasks was not systematic or unitary all the way. That is, their performance differed from one writing task to another and from one correction task to another. The above data strongly support the variability position. Stated simply, the variability position maintains that L<sub>2</sub> learners' performance varies according to the kind of language use that they engage in and the kind of knowledge that they acquire. As shown above, the subjects of this study varied in terms of the quantity of their written productions in both writing tasks, and their corrections of errors. This suggests that L<sub>2</sub> learners' proficiency is not an absolute construct; rather, it relies on what kind of language task the learner is performing. To put it differently, we will be mistaken to expect the learner who performs highly in one task to, necessarily, perform at the same high level in

another task. Instead, we need to keep in mind that our students' performance is not unitary or systematic, and we should accept the variability in our students' performance.

This study showed that the subjects benefited, to different degrees, from drawing their attention to their errors, partially as in the unfocused correction task, and fully as in the focused correction task. All subjects, however, demonstrated a higher level of performance in the focused correction tasks than in the unfocused correction tasks. Moreover, comparing the performances of the subjects in the correction tasks indicated that there was no consistent pattern in students' performance. That is, although the Arabic subjects performed better than the Spanish subjects in the unfocused correction of the narrative essay, they performed less in the same task for the persuasive essay. Although both groups performed at a close level in the focused correction task of the narrative essay, the Spanish group performed better than the Arabic group in the focused correction of the persuasive essay.

This study showed that many errors did not get corrected in the unfocused correction tasks. When the errors were identified (as in the focused correction tasks), the subjects often failed to correct them. New errors were introduced even when the subjects were paying attention. The above findings provide evidence that students' morphosyntactic errors in composition writing were due, in part, to their incomplete knowledge of grammar. More interestingly, this study showed that some subjects made errors in their written essays although they knew the rules involved. This observation suggests that students' knowledge of grammar was fragmentary so that they could not transfer what they possessed of knowledge to such a complex task as writing. Another possible explanation is that the task demands can be a factor in determining students' success or failure in displaying their knowledge and using it successfully. Since writing is a complex process, some students cannot utilize their intellectual understanding of the grammar of the language effectively.

Although some subjects were able to correct some of their errors, they failed to provide accurate rationalizations for their successful corrections. The data showed that some of the subjects' successful

corrections were based on incorrect knowledge of grammar. My suggestion, here, is that the absence of the relationship between the subjects' verbal explanations and their successful performance is mainly due to a deficiency in their conceptual knowledge of grammar, and to the nature of the task, as well. Accordingly, the issue is not necessarily that learners end up with different representations of the rules they have been taught, as Seliger suggested, but whether second language learners possess the necessary knowledge of grammar, and are able to activate the appropriate piece of this knowledge to meet the demands of the problem they are facing.

However, their success or failure is constrained by the depth and completeness of their knowledge as well as the nature of the task they are performing. Second language learners' strategies are, in essence, knowledge-driven. Consequently, in thinking about their performance as an object of study, the essence of the underlying knowledge that accounts for their performance must be examined.

The qualitative analysis of the data showed that there are many reasons for students' errors, in addition to students' incomplete knowledge of grammar. Two of the major reasons are (1) the complexity of writing in a second language; therefore, students were unable to do more than one thing simultaneously during writing, and (2) students' focus on the meaning and generating ideas rather than grammar accuracy. Based on the subjects' explanations during the interview, one can argue that writing in a second language is a multidimensional activity which requires L<sub>2</sub> learners to do more than one thing simultaneously. This means that students' errors and their success in correcting some of them can be explained within the principles of attention theory. That is, some L<sub>2</sub> learners may appear to have the necessary knowledge of grammar; however, they are unable to display this knowledge in writing. The study shows that the condition (essay, unfocused correction, unfocused correction) affected the number of errors made by the subjects in both language groups. That is, the subjects made the most errors in the essays, the fewest errors in the focused correction tasks, with the unfocused correction tasks in between.

#### *Limitation Of The Study*

Due to the small number of the subjects of this study, more research on a larger population is needed. In addition, the subjects' performance may be affected by other factors other than explicit knowledge of grammar. Examples of such factors are (1) their mother tongue interference; (2) their years of English study and years of exposure to English in the U.S.A., and (3) their majors. Therefore, more research is needed to investigate the effect of such factors on L<sub>2</sub> learners' performance.

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## APPENDIX (1)

### **PART ONE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

1. Name:

Arab World English Journal  
ISSN: 2229-9327

[www.awej.org](http://www.awej.org)

2. Country:
3. Sex:                      Female: \_\_\_\_\_                      Male: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Birth Date:
5. How long did you study English in your country?
6. How long have you been in the U.S.A.?
7. Had you ever been in an English speaking environment before coming to the United States?
8. If your answer to Question (7) is `YES' - please, state how long? And where

**PART TWO:**

9. What did your previous English classes give most attention to? Please number in order of importance, #1 being the most important, #5 the least important.  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Listening                      \_\_\_\_\_ Reading                      \_\_\_\_\_ Writing  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Vocabulary                      \_\_\_\_\_ Grammar
10. In your home country, what did your teacher of English give attention to in teaching writing? Please, number in order of importance, #1 being the most important, #5 being the least important.  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Content                      \_\_\_\_\_ Organization                      \_\_\_\_\_ Vocabulary  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Language use                      \_\_\_\_\_ Grammar
11. Do you think learning to write in English is important? Please explain your answer.
12. Do you think learning English grammar affects your writing in English? Please, explain your answer.
13. Did you learn to write English compositions in the form of stories?  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No
14. If your answer to Question (13) is 'YES', where did you learn it?  
       \_\_\_\_\_ In the U.S.A.                      \_\_\_\_\_ Back Home
15. Did you learn to write English composition to convince someone else of your opinion?  
       \_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No
16. If your answer to Question (15) is 'YES', where did you learn it?

\_\_\_\_\_ In the U.S.A.

\_\_\_\_\_ Back Home

**APPENDIX (2)****WRITING TASK ONE: NARRATIVE ESSAY**

Think back to when you arrived in the United States for the first time. Write a story about a problem or experience you had. Be sure to clearly describe this problem where it happened, who was involved, how you felt at that time, and how you reacted.

**APPENDIX (3)****WRITING TASK TW: PERSUASIVE ESSAY**

Writing a letter to the financial agency that supports your education in the USA. In this letter, you are asking for an extension of six months so that you can finish your studies. Be sure to explain your position clearly in order to convince your 'sponsor' that you really deserve extra time.

**APPENDIX (4)**

**Table (1)**  
**The distribution of the subjects of this study**

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of language study</b>	<b>Years of Exposure to English in U.S./England</b>	<b>Specialization</b>
<b>Arabic</b>					
1	Syria	30	10 years	5years	Linguistics
2	Saudi Arabia	28	6 years	5 years	Physical education
3	Saudi Arabia	34	4 years	4 years	Instruction/ learning
4	Egypt	44	10 years	3 years	Instruction/ learning
5	Kuwait	33	12 years	4 years	Public administration
<b>Spanish</b>					
1	Honduras	27	1 years	5.5 years	Social linguistic
2	El Salvador	27	2 years	1 years	Computer Science
3	Paraguay	39	2 years	2 years	Economic Development
4	Chile	38	25 years	6 years	Spanish Linguistic
5	Honduras	37	2 month	2 years	History

**Table (2)**  
**Arabic and Spanish Subjects' performance in the narrative and persuasive essay and their correction tasks**

Tasks	Arabic Subjects					Spanish Subjects				
	2	3	4	5	Total	1	2	3	5	Total
<b>Narrative</b>										
# of words	524	473	300	534	1831	773	398	428	317	1916
# of errors	18	3	9	14	44	18	16	12	22	68
Ratio	29:1	158:1	33:1	38:1	41:1	43:1	25:1	36:1	14:1	28:1
<b>Unfocused</b>										
#of corrected Errors	12	2	5	3	22	9	6	2	5	22
Percentage	66.7	66.7	55.6	21.4	50.0	50.0	37.5	16.7	22.7	32.4
<b>Focused</b>										
#of corrected Errors	15	3	8	4	30	15	11	8	11	45
Percentage	83.3	100.0	88.9	28.6	68.2	83.3	68.8	66.7	50.0	66.2
<b>Persuasive</b>										
# of words	207	503	106	277	1093	258	436	300	260	1254
# of errors	6	6	2	11	25	3	7	8	11	29
Ratio	35:1	84:1	53:1	25:1	43:1	86:1	62:1	38:1	24:1	43:1
<b>Unfocused</b>										
#of corrected Errors	2	1	1	3	7	2	5	3	4	14
Percentage	33.3	16.7	50.0	27.3	28.0	66.7	71.4	37.5	36.4	48.3
<b>Focused</b>										
#of corrected Errors	5	5	2	6	18	3	6	7	7	23
Percentage	83.3	83.3	100.0	54.5	72.0	100.0	85.7	87.5	63.6	79.3

**Table (3)**  
**Number of the subjects' errors in the narrative and persuasive essays and**  
**their correction tasks**

Tasks	Arabic Subjects						Spanish Subjects					
	2	3	4	5	Total	%	1	2	3	5	Total	%
<b>Narrative</b> # of errors	18	3	9	14	44		18	16	12	22	68	
<b>Unfocused</b> Remaining	6	1	3	10	20	90.9	6	8	9	12	35	76.1
New	0	0	1	1	2	9.1	3	2	1	5	11	23.9
Total	6	1	4	11	22		9	10	10	17	46	
<b>Focused</b> Remaining	3	0	1	9	13	92.9	2	5	4	10	21	91.3
New	0	0	0	1	1	7.1	1	0	0	1	2	8.7
Total	.3	0	1	10	14		3	5	4	11	23	
<b>Persuasive</b> # of errors	6	6	2	11	25		3	7	8	11	29	
<b>Unfocused</b> Remaining	4	5	1	5	15	71.4	1	2	5	7	15	83.3
New	0	3	0	3	6	28.6	1	0	1	1	3	16.7
Total	4	8	1	8	21		2	2	6	8	18	
<b>Focused</b> Remaining	1	1	0	5	7	100.0	0	1	1	4	6	85.7
New	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	1	1	14.3
Total	1	1	0	5	7		0	1	1	5	7	

**Table (4)**  
**Types and frequencies of errors made by the subjects in the narrative essay**

Subjects	Arabic						Spanish					
	2	3	4	5	Total	%	1	2	3	5	Total	%
# of errors	18	3	9	14	44		18	16	12	22	68	
<b>Types</b>												
Preposition	4			2	6	<b>13.6</b>	1	3	2	2	8	11.8
Sub-verb Agreement	3	1		1	5	11.4	2			1	3	4.4
Verb' to do'	1				1	2.3				2	2	2.9
Copula	2				2	4.5					8	11.8
Article	2				2	4.5				1	3	4.4
Tenses	2		6	10	18	<b>40.9</b>	4	1		8	10	<b>14.7</b>
Pronouns	2			1	3	6.8		2				
Noun morphology	1				1	2.3		1				
So...that vs. too.....to		1			1	2.3						
Missing D.O.	1	1			2	4.5				1	1	1.5
Many/Much			1		1	2.3						
Inf. Vs. Gerund			1		1	2.3						
Plural 's'			1		1	2.3						
Verb Morphology							7	7		4	23	<b>33.8</b>
Adverbs							1			1	2	2.9
Adjectives								1		2	3	4.4
Ind. Questions							2				2	2.9
Word Order							1	1			2	2.9
Comparative Form										1	1	1.5

Table (5)

**Types and frequencies of errors made by the subjects in the correction tasks (Unfocused/Focused)**

Subjects	Arabic						Spanish					
	2	3	4	5	Tota 1	%	1	2	3	5	Tota 1	%
Unfocused # of Errors	6	1	4	1 1	<b>22</b>		9	1 0	1 0	17	<b>46</b>	
<b>Types</b>												
Preposition	1			2	3	<b>13.6</b>	1	2	1	2	6	<b>13.4</b>
Articles	1			0	1	4.5				2	2	4.3
Copula	1			0	1	4.5						
Pronouns	2				2	9.1						
Tenses	1		2	9	12	<b>54.5</b>		3	3		6	<b>13.4</b>
So...that		1			1	4.5						
Many/Much			1		1	4.5						
Plural 's'			1		1	4.5						
Verbs							4	4		5	13	<b>28.3</b>
S-V Agreement							2				2	4.3
Nouns							1		5	6	12	<b>26.1</b>
Word Order								1			1	2.2
Missing Obj.								1			1	2.2
Adjectives										3	3	
Focused of Errors	3		1	1 0	14		3	5	4	11	23	
<b>Types</b>												
Preposition	2			1	3	<b>21.4</b>		3	2	1	6	<b>26.1</b>
Articles	1				1	7.1				3	3	13.0
Plural 's'			1		1	7.1						
Tenses	2			9	9	<b>64.3</b>		1	1		2	8.7
Verbs											2	8.7
S-V Agreement											2	8.7
Word Order								1	1		2	8.7
Nouns										2	2	8.7
Adjectives										4	4	17.4

**Table (6)**  
**Types and frequencies of errors made by the subjects in the persuasive essay**

Subjects	Arabic						Spanish					
	2	3	4	5	Total	%	1	2	3	5	Total	%
Number of Errors	6	6	2	1	<b>25</b>			7	8	11	<b>26</b>	
<b>Types</b>												
Preposition	1		1	5	7	<b>28.0</b>	1	2	4	1	8	<b>27.6</b>
Verbs	4			2	6	<b>24.0</b>	1			3	4	<b>13.8</b>
Tenses	1			1	2	8.0		1	1	3	5	<b>17.2</b>
S-V Agreement	2		1	1	2	8.0		1	1	1	3	10.3
Nouns	1	2		1	3	<b>12.0</b>				3	3	10.3
Adjectives		1		1	2	8.0						
Articles		3			3	<b>12.0</b>	1	1			2	6.9
Until Clause								1			1	3.4
Demonst. Pronouns								1			1	3.4
Word Order									2		2	6.9

**Table (7)**  
**Types and frequencies of errors made by the subjects in the persuasive essay**

Subjects	Arabic						Spanish					
	2	3	4	5	Total	%	1	2	3	5	Total	%
<b>Unfocused # of Errors</b>	1	8	1	8	18		2	2	6	8	18	
<b>Types</b>												
Preposition	1	1	1	4	7	<b>33.3</b>	1	1	3	1	6	<b>33.3</b>
Verbs	3	1		1	5	<b>23.8</b>	1				1	5.6
Tenses				2	2	9.5		1	1	2	4	<b>22.2</b>
Nouns		3			3	<b>14.3</b>				4	4	<b>22.2</b>
Articles		2		1	3	<b>14.3</b>				1	1	5.6

						<b>3</b>						
Adjectives		1			1	4.8						
Word Order									2		2	11. 1
<b>Focused # of Errors</b>	1	1		5	7			1	1	5	7	
<b>Types</b>												
Preposition	1			1	2	<b>28. 6</b>				1	1	14. 3
Nouns		1		1	2	<b>28. 6</b>				1	1	14. 3
Tenses				1	1	14. 3		1	1		2	<b>28. 6</b>
Adjectives					1	14. 3				1	1	14. 3
S-V Agreement					1	14. 3				1	1	14. 3
Copula										1	1	14. 3
Article										1	1	14. 3

**Table (8):** Summary Table.

<b>LANGUAGE TASK</b>	<b>ARABIC GROUP</b>	<b>SPANISH GROUP</b>
Narrative Essay	44	68
Mean	8.8	13.6
Range	18.0	22.0
Unfocused	22	46
Mean	4.4	9.2
Range	11.0	17.0
Focused	14	23
Mean	2.8	4.6
Range	10.0	11.0
Persuasive Essay	25	29
Mean	5	5.8
Range	11	11
Unfocused	21	18
Mean	4.2	3.6
Range	8.0	8.0
Focused	7	7
Mean	1.4	1.4
Range	5.0	5.0