



AWEJ Volume 2, number 2, April 2011

pp. 230- 242

Problems of Multi-ability Academic English Writing Classes in Arab Countries

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Abstract

English language teachers and students of Arab countries strive to fulfill the academic demand of universities in academic English writing classes which call for detailed, organized, cohesive as well as structured academic papers. The purpose of the present paper is to highlight the common causes of the problems of academic English writing course in multi-ability classes. The study is based on one semester (sixteen week) period. Different teaching and evaluation methods are used to teach the diverse abilities in multi-level classes to achieve the set goals of the academic English writing course. The paper examined the final grades to investigate the difference in the performance of students coming from public and private school background and concluded with author's recommendations and experiences that would be useful to address the problems of multi-ability classes in Arab Context.

Key Words: Academic English Writing, Students of private school background, Students of public school background

Problems of Multi-ability Academic English Writing Classes in Arab Countries

Several studies have been done in the field of English academic writing to identify the common problems of students' writing skill. Writing is not only a mirror of one's thought but it contributes newness to established information (Weigle, 2002). Brooks and Grundy (1998) define writing as a tool to communicate ideas in a target language. Hyland (1998) defines writing as a tool to communicate ideas in a target language. Hyland (2003) considers writing as a visual print coherently knitted into structured language. An academic English writing course focuses on transition from simple essay writing to more complex and sophisticated exposition organized according to the rhetorical patterns requiring direct quotation and in-text citation. Cohesion is emphasized as its fuller development of ideas through various techniques of support. In general, academic English writing courses are designed to provide students with the composition and grammar skills necessary to advance to freshmen courses. Tarnopolsky (2005) advocated that academic writing is the most creative writing which needs critical thinking to develop ideas in the target language. Fujioka (2001) surveyed how Asian ESL students acquired academic writing skills. She found Asian students lack critical thinking rather than the lexical problems in writing. Another researcher Izzo (2001) also reported that Japanese students at university level lack organizational feature in their academic writing and these difficulties were due to their translating habit from Japanese to English language in their writing discourses (Hirose, 1998).

In Arab countries, several authors viewed weaknesses of Arabic discourse reflected in second language writing as a major cause for students' failure to reach the set goals of writing courses (Al Khuweileh & Al Shoumali, 2000; Al Hazmi & Schofield 2007; Fitze & Glasgow, 2009). El Sadig (2010) advocated that the old educational policies were the main factors for students' problems. It has been realized that students of ESL classes were unable to adopt a professional style of writing because essay writing from first draft to final draft is a stressful task for nonnative learners (Silva, 1992). These problems led several other authors to suggest that academic writing needs to be more focused on the organization part of the discourse (Hirayanagi, 1998; Takaji, 2001).

Cherednichenko (2003) believed a diverse composition of learners created practical problems for both teachers and learners. It is not an easy composition to deal with since most classes have students of two or more levels of ability and to cater to the needs of everyone is a challenge for teachers. Bauer and Shea (1999) viewed increased problems in multi-ability classes when both native speakers and beginners studied together. Diversity led to engagement and management problem on both ends. They further suggested different methods to solve the problems in multi-ability classes still many other aspects were left to be explored. The present study investigated the performance and the problems of Arab students from private and public school background attending academic English writing courses. The author identified several belligerent challenges for the successful deliverance of the program, such as, organizing teaching materials and resources, allocating peer work, students' attitude and difference in their level of understanding. The factors related to performance problem in multi-ability academic English writing classes are examined in this paper and suggestions, based on author's observation, are made to overcome these challenges.

Methodology

A total number of ninety students (Aged 17-20) consisting of two classes of male students (24 and 19 in each class) and two classes of female students (25 and 22 students in each class) taught one semester course of sixteen weeks and evaluated for their performance in the final exam. The majority of the students were from Kuwait who shared the same culture and tradition in addition to the students from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine.

The instructor set goals to be achieved in one semester course, which included tasks such as the ability to compose different rhetorical essays in class; to use knowledge of information literacy to analyze, paraphrase and quote directly from sources using in-text citations for a short research paper proposal; Write grammatically and mechanically correct sentences and use academic vocabulary aptly in written communications.

Upon the successful completion of the goals, students were assessed for their ability to use pre-writing, drafting, revising, and peer-editing techniques to write a multi-paragraph cause and effect essay and persuasive essay at a proficiency level equivalent to Level 4 on the Test of Written English (TWE); Write a thesis statement; Organize an essay according to a standard rhetorical pattern; Write a well-developed introduction and conclusion; Use resources to support their thesis; Conduct a database search, attribute, quote, paraphrase, cite, and document information and sources according to APA conventions for a research paper proposal with an accuracy of 60% and recognize, spell, and use assigned words correctly from Avril Coxhead's Academic Word List.

Teaching and Assessment Techniques

First week. The document of goals and objectives with expected outcomes and a list of required support materials for the course were distributed to the students. Visual technique was used to show the power point slides to make the instructions clear. The importance of

academic writing was discussed in depth with examples and explanations. The class rules were set for smooth transition of teaching and learning.

Second week. A topic of students' choice was taken up for a diagnostic test to assess the competency level of students. They were allowed to use laptops to write their manuscripts. The process technique, a paradigm of exploring writer's critical thinking to communicate, was used for brainstorming, writing rough draft and final draft. Later, teacher's feedback was used as a tool to determine the concerns of the students.

Third week. Each class was divided into groups. Peer review sheets were distributed with a sample essay to all students. Textual method was used. They were asked to write their essay on the given pattern of the sample text, revise and edit. Then they evaluate their peer papers and submit their peer review sheets with papers. At this time of the study, the author found that students were not ready to accept the feedback of their classmates comparing to the teacher's feedback.

Fourth and fifth week. Targeted writing rubric was shown to make them understand how they were going to be graded. An essay was given to test their understanding of cause and effect rhetoric. Process technique was applied to do brainstorming, writing their first draft, and after feedback, their final draft. All the four groups somewhat faced similar challenges in developing and organizing ideas in an academic pattern. Female students in the class voiced their complaints such as 'The topic is boring', 'not being able to concentrate, minds not working', 'not familiar with the word thesis statement' etc. while male students expressed concerns such as, 'why paragraphs', 'why restrictive organization' etc.; however, at the end, some manuscripts of both male and female groups were found correctly structured and well organized except the usage of words and weak thesis statements while some manuscripts were full of lexical and organizational errors and illogical development.

Sixth and seventh week. Peer review sheets were given to students to write their feedback for their peers' work in which no interest was shown because of the preference in teacher's feedback. So, three papers (below average, average, and excellent) were selected and compared to highlight weaknesses and strength of the papers without showing the writers' ID. The visual method proved useful to motivate them to edit and resubmit their papers.

Eighth and ninth week: Midterm assessment revealed that some of the students' papers were excellent; whereas, some papers displayed lexical, organizational, and logical weaknesses. Class discussion disclosed that those who come from private schools had better ability of writing in English than those of public school background. It established that both male and female classes have multi-level students.

Tenth and eleventh week. A lot of focus was given on information literacy to searching databases for authentic sources, organizing information, paraphrasing and summarizing, using quotation and documenting references. Those who came from private schools were asked to play a lead role in groups to guide their peers. At this time of study, the students who came from private school background got an acceptance from their peers to lead. In further support, online quizzes were given to teach the APA style of documentation. However, it was found that integrating of information and in text citation was the main problem indicators to all.

Twelfth and thirteenth week. A new rhetoric was taught and students were asked to write a research paper proposal. As advocated by Van Blerkom(1997), time management is a dominant motivational factor of completing any research assignment. It was observed that the same was applicable to the students who came from a private school background. These students were quick in finishing their given tasks within the timeframe because their prior knowledge of language proved to be a motivational tool to them. On the contrary, the

students from public school background were not motivated because of their lexical weaknesses and their inability to grasp and understand the language. These hindrances were detrimental to the time management and caused delay in their paper submission.

Fourteenth and fifteenth week. At the end of the course, a graded quiz was also designed to test their level of understanding. The results showed the consistency of difference in groups' achievements. Nevertheless, private school students are exemplary in comparison to the students from public schools who were far from achieving the desired level of set goals.

Sixteenth week. Review of students' portfolios was done. They were assessed for essay writing in their final exam. The semester was ended and students' were examined for their academic writing skills.

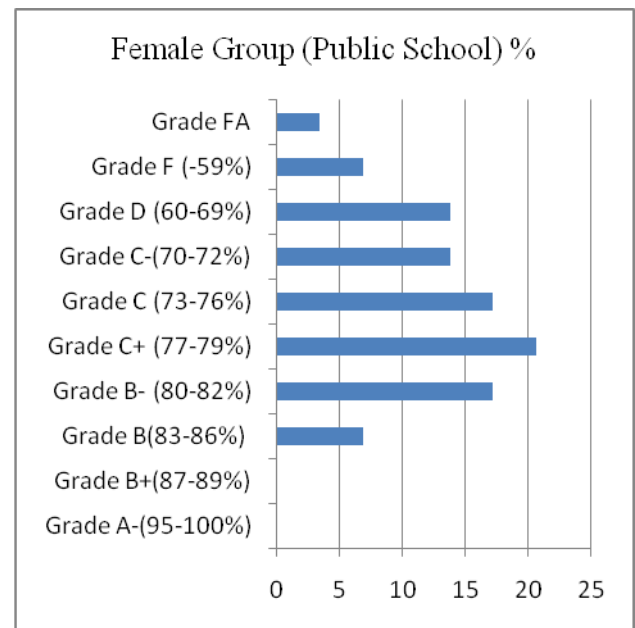
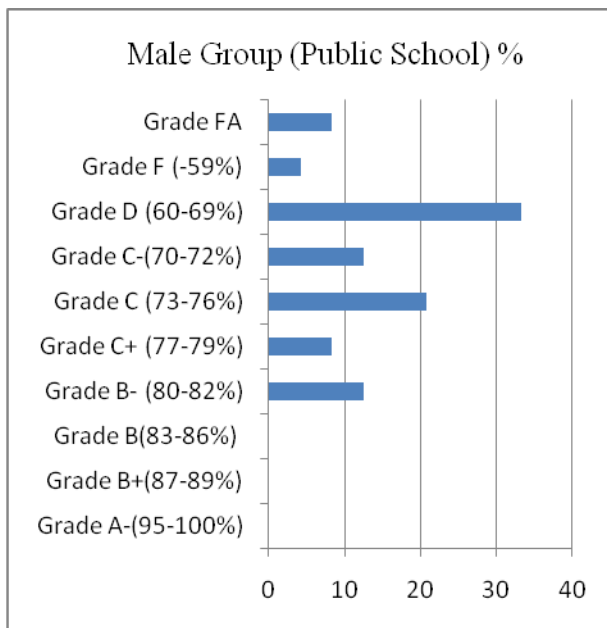
Results and Discussion

The grades of the students obtained in the academic English writing of different groups are shown in Fig.1 that shows students of male group (private group) obtained grades B-to grade A- (i.e. 80-100%), and female group (private group) grades C+ to A- (i.e.77-100%). None of the students of private school background were below grade C+ (i.e.77-79%). Any student from public school background (male and female groups) has not obtained grade A; their grades were B- (i.e.80-82%) and below.

The results of the students who came from private school background were somewhat equal and better in both male and female groups than the students of male and female groups who came from public school background. The reasons for the difference in performance were investigated and attempts were made to workout remedial measures.

Primarily, previous school education affected the performance of the students in multi-ability classes. The students of public school background had problems such as

difficulty in understanding and organizing their resources, lack of time management, lack of peer work and lack of target language and vocabulary. They were in fact passive learners; whereas, the students of private school background having prior knowledge of English language, were better understanding of language, using their lexical knowledge in writing, using information literacy in searching and integrating information in writing, working according to time-line and showing active participation.



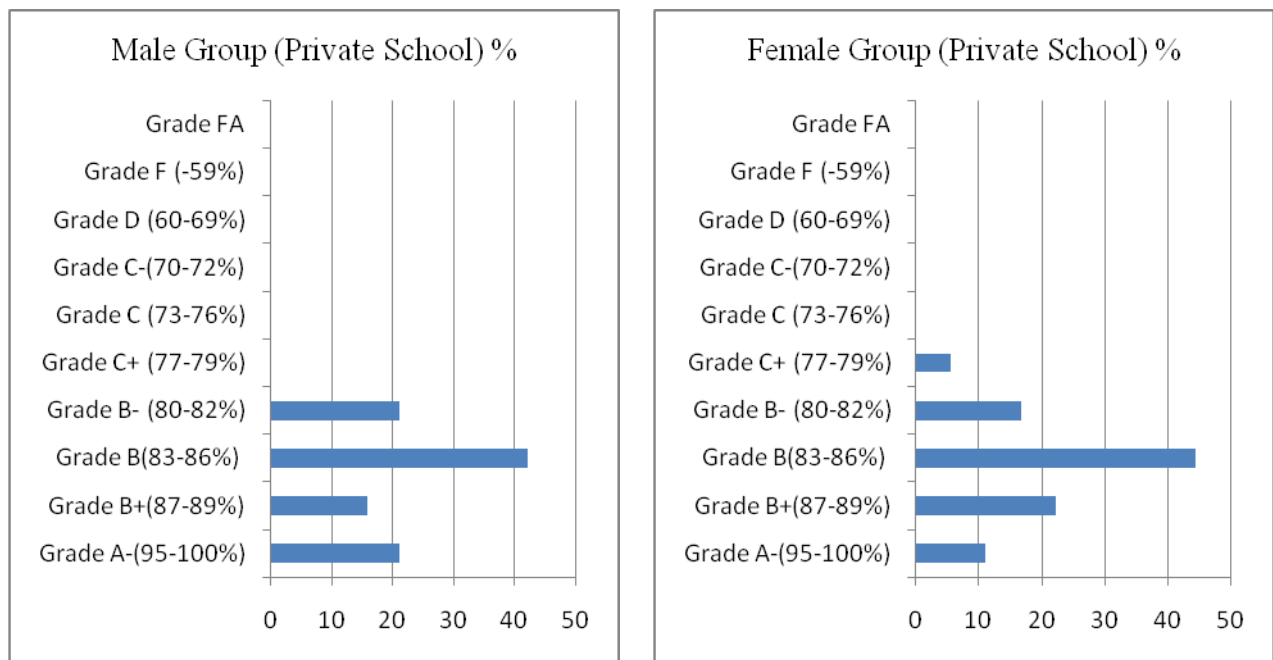


Figure 1: Comparison of the grades obtained in English academic writing classes by male and female students from public and private school background.

However, in the beginning of the course, both groups had lack of knowledge to the demands of academic discourses. The students from public school background struggled hard to cope with the demands of academic writing and comprehend partially because of language problems till the end of the course; whereas, students from private school background easily adapted.

Another contributory factor in the performance was the difference in reading habits of the two groups of students. Students from public school background avoided reading books, magazines, and newspapers in English because of inherent difficulties, but the students from private school background enjoyed reading magazines and news items of their interests. Reading skills enhanced their understanding and enriched their papers with new vocabulary and ideas and helped them to achieve the set goals of the course and perform better.

The study highlighted that the imbalance in the level of understanding of the students in the multi-ability classes lowered the confidence of students from public school background. They became passive learners and mere crammer. Since, they felt less motivated and more worried and showed tardiness to assigned goals, lack of logical development and organization of ideas, lack of peer acceptance, and inability to address lexical weaknesses. On the contrary, students from the private school background showed diligence, respect of time line, quick learning capacity for development and organization of essays because of comfort level in language.

Generally, researches show that it is not possible to have uniform ability students in a class. All classes have mix-ability to one degree or another posing a challenge to the teachers. The author; therefore, suggests the following steps to minimize the problems of multi-ability English academic writing classes in Arab countries. First and foremost, redesigning of the course is needed to balance the multi-ability class. Recently, El Sadig (2010) also suggested incorporation of the new courses in the syllabus to ease the Arab learners' writing problems. Also, the composition of class regarding students' prior schooling if made available to teachers before the execution of program will be supportive in planning and organizing their teaching resources. In addition to that, visual methods are required to be used to explain target goals of the course as Dolati and Richards (2011) advocated the importance of visual learning aids in the English language classroom. Mercer & Mercer (1998) underscored the significance of proper teaching material and tools in a mixed ability classes to cater to the diverse requirements of students. Most importantly, writing topics based on students' culture and traditions are to be chosen to motivate them to write creatively on the subjects of their interests so that students do not find themselves in a socio cultural vacuum (El Sadig, 2010). This requires availability of relevant reading materials to the

students. Fujioka (2001) emphasized the value of extensive reading in the quality of academic writing. Additionally, regular seminars and educational programs would be helpful in improving and changing students' deep rooted cultural attitude to learning new language.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the Arab students' problems in multi-ability academic writing classes based on the author's teaching and assessment of one semester academic writing course. The study concludes that the difference of the language insight of the students coming from different school background leads to problems in teaching and learning not only in the Arab countries, but in all those countries, where two stream of educational system exist and school levels dictate the basic foundation and learning abilities of students and overall exposure to educational tools. Since the growth of private schools is the hallmark of the growing demand of English language and meeting the requirement of growing population, new strategies are to be explored to assess the expectations and abilities of Arab students having public and private school background in order to formulate the qualitative and quantitative value of academic English writing program.

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