The Five Tier Model for Teaching English Academic Writing in EFL Contexts

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Abstract
Academic writing in English is at the heart of teaching and learning in English foreign language (EFL) contexts. However, despite the need to target and isolate the problems associated with writing academic English in EFL contexts, recent research has focused mostly on the psycholinguistic dimension of academic writing in English. The aim of this paper is to redirect interest in English academic writing and situate it back within linguistic enquiry. The study focuses on targeting and isolating the problems associated with English academic writing at the transitional stage from public high school to university.In contemporary research,educators are raising concerns on the level of proficiency in English academic writing, attained by the end of secondary schooling, specifically in the public education context. A case study, conducted on 470 final year secondary students in public schooling in Lebanon, reflected persistent phonemic orthographic errors, grammatical errors, structural and organizational errors, notwithstanding the fact that the participating students were instructed according to the official EFL programme. Errors were interpreted from contemporary linguistic perspectives and a five tier model was proposed for teaching English academic writing in EFL contexts.

Key words: English academic writing, English as a foreign language, the cognitive code approach, interlingual errors, rhetorical differences

Introduction

Academic writing in English is at the heart of teaching and learning in English foreign language (EFL) contexts. However, despite the need to target and isolate the problems associated with writing academic English in EFL contexts, recent research has focused mostly on the psycholinguistic dimension of academic writing in English (Bratko, Chamorro-Premuzic&Saks 2006;Gilles and Bailleux 2001;Di Fabio&Busonia 2007) and particularly anxiety, motivation and personality traits, at the expense of the linguistic dimension (Conrad 2006; Furnham& Chamorro-Premuzic 2004;Furnham, Chamorrow – Premuzic, & Mc. Dougall 2003;Propart 2009).

In contemporary research,educators are raising concerns on the level of proficiency in English academic writing, attained by the end of secondary schooling, specifically in the public education context (Al Murshidi 2014;Abdulkareem 2013;Al Fadda 2012;Alsamdani, 2010;Tahaineh 2010). However, Pillai (2014), Bjork and Raisanen (1997) and Badger and White (2000) proposethat academic writing is one of the most difficult areas that students in the secondary cycle experience. According to recent research (Dehkordi&Allami 2012, Crosby 2009; Shafie, Maesin, Osman, Nayan&Mansor 2010), notwithstanding the various teaching strategies, persistent errors continue to feature in the academic writing of students, specifically those whose primary language is not English.

From researchers' perspective, in attempting to trace the causes of the problem, Bacha (2012) proposesthat the school curricula are loaded with literature courses, the language and linguistic component is weak and may be limited in some cases to two courses in communication skills and a course in writing. From another perspective, the authors of English for Academic Study and English for Academic Purposes, published by Garnet Education and targeting Arab learners, maintain that the cultural contrast between the Arabic-speaking and the English-speaking communities affects the rhetorical organization of texts as manifested by the ways in which cohesive devices are used (Phillips 2017). While the Arabic-speaking community is oralized, collectivist, high-contact, reader-responsible; the English-speaking community is literate, individualistic, low-contact, writer-responsible. English cohesion is text-based, specified, change-oriented, and non-additive; while Arabic cohesion is context-based, generalized, repetition-oriented, and additive. This distinction is perceived to affect the English academic writing frame for Arab students(Phillips 2017).

From the educators' perspective, despite the fact that high school students in the final secondary year would have completed around 1450 hours in the English language by the time they complete their secondary education, students continue to experience problems in writing academic English. In the public education sector the problem is multiplied. In April 2015, Mr Elias Abu Saab, the Lebanese Minister of Education and Higher Education acknowledged the myriad of challenges and gaps that exist in the public school system.Tutors complain that public high schools have larger class sizes, hence fewer opportunities for small group teaching and little time to comment on students' written work (Abu Ghararah&Hamzah 1998). In addition, tutors disapprove of the ever-increasing range of writing demands made on students, which, in addition to the wider participation of students from diverse backgrounds,make it difficult to attain curriculum objectives with large class sizes (Abdulkareem 2013).

Teaching academic writing is at best delivered at high school level through the guided composition activity, where a set of guide-questions or words are provided (Bjork&Raisanen 1997). However the outcomes of such activities are texts that arepacked with disjointed and artificial sentences (Burke 2010).In a meeting with English coordinators of final secondary year at public schools (Al-Khatib 2017), concerns were voiced that despite the fact that the rules that govern writing have been instructed to students, studentsfinishing high school may continue to grapple with the academic conventions of writing at university level, as well as with the appropriate content and form.The endeavour of writing academic English remains an uncharted territory, specifically in the EFL context (Wenyu& Yang, 2008).

The aim of this present paper is to resituate enquiry into difficulties in English academic writing within linguistic research and contribute to targeting and isolating the problems associated with English academic writing at the transitional stage from public high school to university. The paper is based on a case study conducted with 470 final year secondary students in public high schools spread across Mount Lebanon and Beirut governorates in Lebanon.

Background to the study
In response to the increased numbers of non-traditional, refugee and working students that move to higher education in Lebanon, specifically from public schools, universities have begun to provide pedagogical models designed to foster students' awareness of the expected academic conventions and practices in higher education (Bacha 2012). Lebanon's education system is divided into five cycles at the school level. Pre-school education constitutes cycle 1 which starts at 3 or 4 years of age; basic education constitutes cycle 2 and encompasses grades 1-3 and cycle 3 encompasses grades 4-6; the intermediate level constitutes cycle 4 and encompasses grades 7-9; secondary education constitutes cycle 5 and encompasses grades 10-12. Secondary education is usually completed at the age of 18 with a Baccalaureate or a professional certificate; both providing access to higher education.

At the transition phase to higher education, students seem to struggle with the content and form of writing; the specialized language required, the specific genre format, ways of constructing the argument, grammar and punctuation. These seem to be at variance from what theyare accustomed to at school level (Amin&Alamin, 2012;Badger &White,2000).

To facilitate the transition from high school, some universities started offering courses dedicated to teaching academic writing, including mini-courses on specific aspects of academic and other types of writing (Bacha 2012). Similar concerns and solutions have been reflected world-wide with higher education institutions offering courses in "freshman composition" which attempt to bridge the gap between high school and higher education by targeting the presumed generic skills of academic writing (Chou, 2011;Yugianingrum, 2010;Murry&Moore,2006, Yasuda, 2004). First-year students are required to take remedial or basic writing courses, or more advanced writing courses, based on their attainment in the offered placement tests (Can, 2009).However, this move towards making explicit to students the requirements of different text types has highlighted the gap between English academic writing at university level and high school and underlined the fact that universal text types such as the essay or project report are not being sufficiently treated at the high school level.

Teaching writing at the formal writing class setting in high school often focused on presenting students with "models of good writing", and asking them to replicate these models (Al-Khatib, 2017). At best, the focus is on specific features of the written texts: spelling, text structure, vocabulary, style. Often little analysis occurs on the rhetorical aspects of the texts or the social contexts in which the texts functioned. The assumption is that students will pick up academic writing at some stage of their schooling, or through the process of imitating the modeled texts (Al-Kasawneh&Maher, 2010;Dahkordi&Allami, 2012;Ghabool, Edwina &Kashef, 2012).

Methodology

In a pilot study conducted in collaboration with Mount Lebanon and Beirut Governorates, the writing samples from 470 high school final year students in public schools were collected for analysis, with the aim of determining the extent to which students are able to write successfully and hence are prepared for the conventions of what constitutes "appropriate academic writing" in higher education.The samples were analysed based on the Common European Frame of Reference for Languages (CEFR) grid for writing tasks. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability. It describes three main levels of English ability: Basic user for CEFR levels A1 and A2, Independent User for CEFR levels B1 and B2, and Proficient user for CEFR levels C1 and C2.

The texts were clerically marked by two graders. Grades were allocated according to CEFR grid, specifically the number of words, the rhetorical function, text purpose, register, domain, grammatical competence, lexical competence, discourse competence and content knowledge.
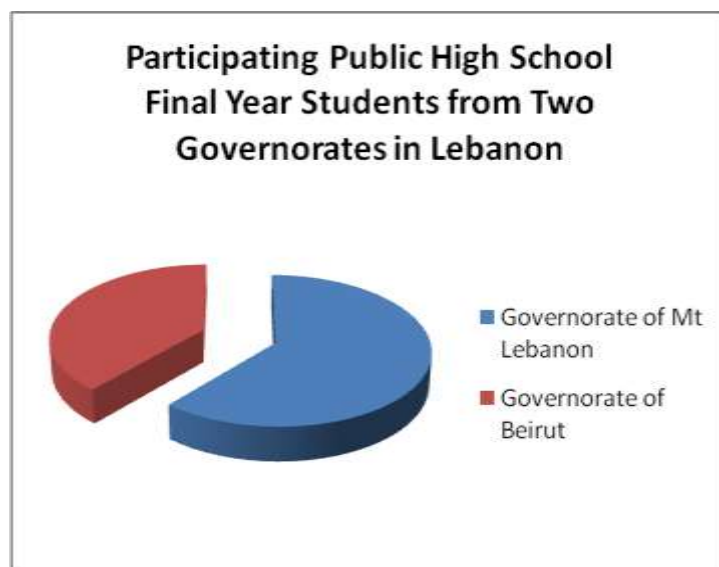

*Figure 1.*Participating Students per Governorate

Out of the 470 students assessed; 288 in Mount Lebanon and 182 in Beirut, a group of 24 students achieved an outstanding level C1; 206 students in Mount Lebanon and 108 students in Beirut achieved an intermediate level ranging between B2 (190 students) and B1 (124 students), a group of 70 students in Mount Lebanon and 62 in Beirut achieved A2-A1 level (see figure 2

below). The summary of students' attainment and CEFR level descriptors is presented in figure 3.
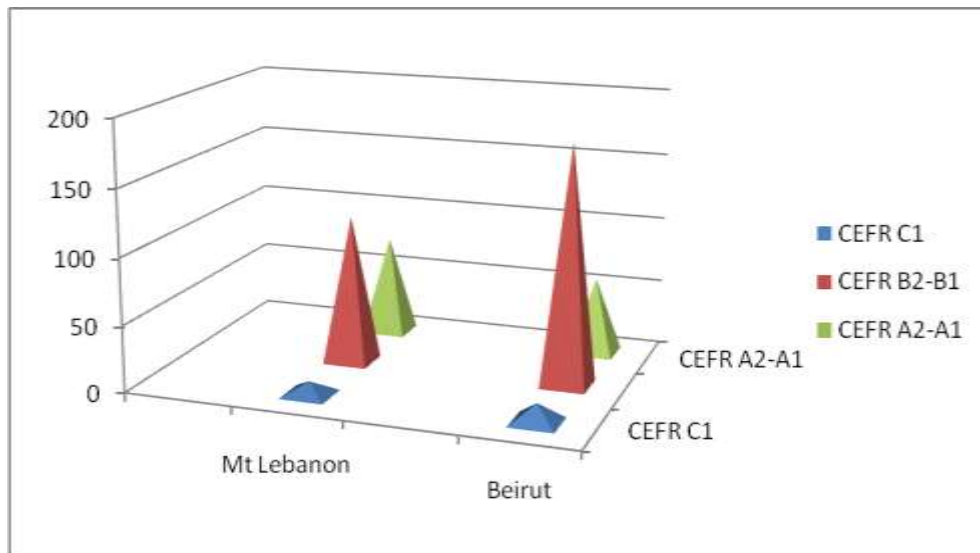

Figure2. **Students at CEFR Levels**

C2 - Mastery level = none

The capacity to deal with material which is academic or cognitively demanding, and to use language to good effect at a level of performance which may in certain respects be more advanced than that of an average native speaker.

C1 - Effective Operational = 24

The ability to communicate with the emphasis on how well it is done, in terms of appropriacy, sensitivity and the capacity to deal with unfamiliar topics.

B2 - Vantage = 190

The capacity to achieve most goals and express oneself on a range of topics.

B1 - Threshold = 124

The ability to express oneself in a limited way in familiar situations and to deal in a general way with nonroutine information.

A2 - Waystage = 74

An ability to deal with simple, straightforward information and begin to express oneself in familiar contexts.

A1- Breakthrough = 58

A basic ability to communicate and exchange information in a simple way.

Figure 3. **Students' Attainment and CEFR Level Descriptors**

Findings and discussions

The corrected samples featured persistent phonemic orthographic errors, grammatical errors, in addition to structural and organizational errors. In spelling, the identified errors reflected difficulties in dealing with silent letters, vowels having different sounds and different letters having one sound.

As English is a semi-phonetic language, non-native learners attempting to write in the foreign language face very irregular spellingscompared to the Arabic spelling. In phonemic orthographic category, silent letters accounted for 15% of the errors, consonant doubling errors accounted for 10% of errors, syllabic representation errors accounted for 20% of errors, letter mis-ordering accounted for 20%, homophone errors accounted for 20% and compound letter representation errors accounted for 15%.
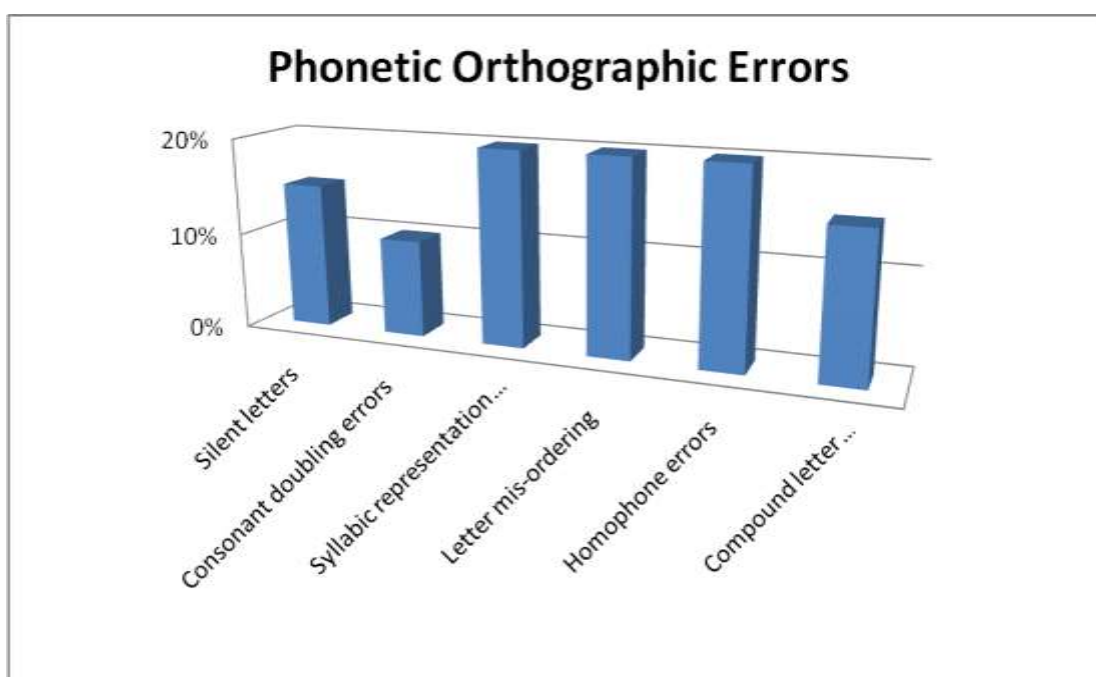

Figure 4. **Percentages of Phonetic Orthographic Errors**

The most persistent types of errors in grammar concerned verb tense, subject-verb agreement, word choice, preposition,singular and plural forms, and word order. However, errors in tenses accounted for 25% of general grammar errors. There were errors in tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion in the perfect tenses.

The writing samples reflected instances of using double tenses, analogous to the Arabic verb phrase that has *Kana* and present tense verbs. In addition there was confusion in using the perfect forms, especially the present perfect, which has no counterpart in Arabic.

Moreover, references to the future aspect in English manifested various expanded forms, sequenced in disarray. Equally, errors in using tenses also related to misuses of a tense form after modals, use of nouns instead of infinitives, use of simple present instead of future, use of simple past instead of simple present, use of simple past instead of infinitive, use of simple past instead

of gerund after preposition, use of simple past instead of present perfect, use of simple past instead of future feature and instances of misuse in subject and verb agreement.

The second persistent error category pertained to the inappropriate omission or addition of an article and featuring in 20% of the faulty occurrences in the written tasks. Examples included the omission of indefinite and definite articles when ordering or ranking nouns and superlatives and when making generalizations about certain topics, or their addition when generalizing about countable and uncountable nouns in the texts.

Most of the writing samples featured run-on sentences and sentence fragments in addition to problems in word choice and punctuation. When students attempted to connect ideas,their writing reflectedconfusion in using coordination and subordination, owing to the fact that Arabic doesn't make a special distinction between them.

In word formation, morphologic derivations were erratically present in the written texts, sometimes erroneously, owing to the non-uniform English system of adding derivations to roots as compared to Arabic, which is more systematic in deriving words from roots according to preset patterns. However, it is noteworthy that some phrasal verbs and idioms were successfully applied in the texts, contrary to assumptions on their difficulty and cultural relatedness.

The examination of the written production of Arab learners of English revealed common errors that related to the sentence structure and mechanics. Mechanics wise, capitalization is mostly omitted and the English scripts produced by the participants relied mostly on the comma in punctuation at the expense of capitalization and other punctuation devices that are non-existent in Arabic.

In rhetoric, organizing a piece of writing into introduction, body, and conclusion was mostly missing. Correct paragraph divisions were maintained in less than 20% of the samples. Students failed to implement the rules governing English paragraph writing.

Paragraph development consisted of a concession of parallel structures, similar to the Arabic format. Regarding coherence, some samples had no clear thesis statements; others had thesis statements that were not developed properly in the body paragraphs.

As for cohesion, the manifested problems related to incorrect use of cataphoric and anaphoric reference, ellipsis, substitution, and other grammatical cohesive ties. The challenge that students face while writing is increased by the fact that the rhetorical conventions of the English texts such as the structure, organization and grammar differ from those in Arabic.

In addition, overgeneralization and exaggeration were transferred from Arabic rhetoric to English texts. Arab students resorted to exaggeration and tended to avoid simplicity in writing based on the misconception that equates simplicity with the spoken mode characteristics. The texts featured awkward structures, illogical narratives and difficult to follow accounts.

In the third place comes with equal proportions of 15% each; errors in morphology and wrong word formation as well as errors of omission, misuse, or addition in the plurals; errors in

using prepositions where a preposition was either omitted, added, or misused; and errors in using the relative pronouns.

The smallest error category accounting for 10% of error instances relates to the category of verbs. The verb system in each of English and Arabic is a complicated segment of the grammar. In English, each verb form is used to express different meanings, and sometimes the same meaning is expressed through a different form in Arabic. Examples included themisuse of verbs or omission of verb *to do*.
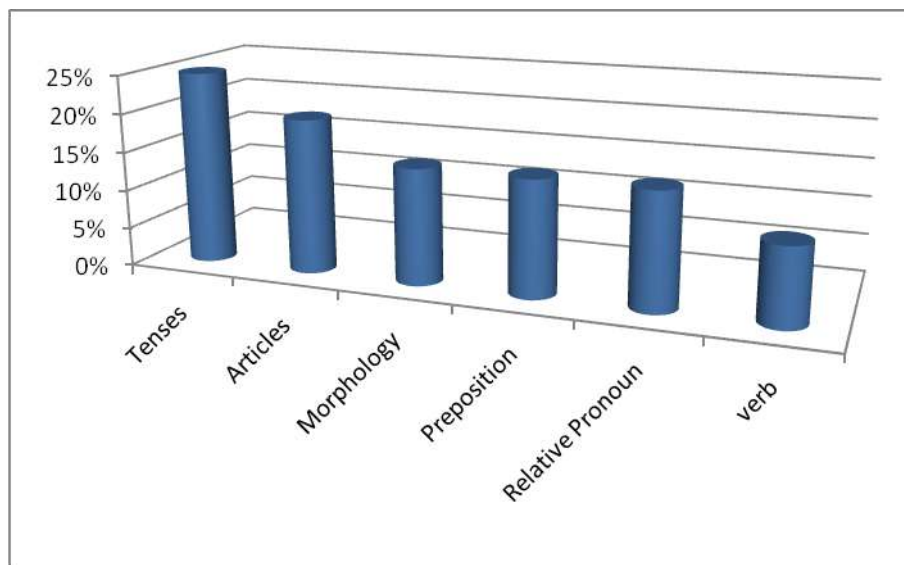

Figure 5. **Grammar Errors and Percentages**

The Need for a Multi-tiered Model for Teaching English Academic Writing
According to Kharma and Hajjaj (1997), there exist major linguistic and organizational differences between English and Arabic, which may impact writing in English for Arab students. As for Leki and Carson (1994), writing is not a skill that is naturally acquired but rather learned through formal educational settings, or handed down as a cultural heritage.

In the EFL context, the task of preparing students is entrusted to formal educational institutions since the cultural heritage is not a contributing factor. On the contrary, according to Gordon (2008), students bring with them a set of conventions that are at odds with those of the academic world they are entering at university level as well as the writing conventions of the target language. The cultural differences between the two language communities may account for part of the errors committed in academic writing in the foreign language.

Kern, (2000) relates the difficulties of writing in a second language to culture specific schemata, or mental representations. Mastering how to write a certain genre in Arabic does not necessarily indicate possessing the same capacity in English. For Arab EFL learners to become proficient writers of English, their Arabic writing style needs to be replaced by that of English. However, learners in the EFL context are not acquainted enough with the culture, rhetoric, and the linguistic structures of English, as they have limited exposure to the foreign language.
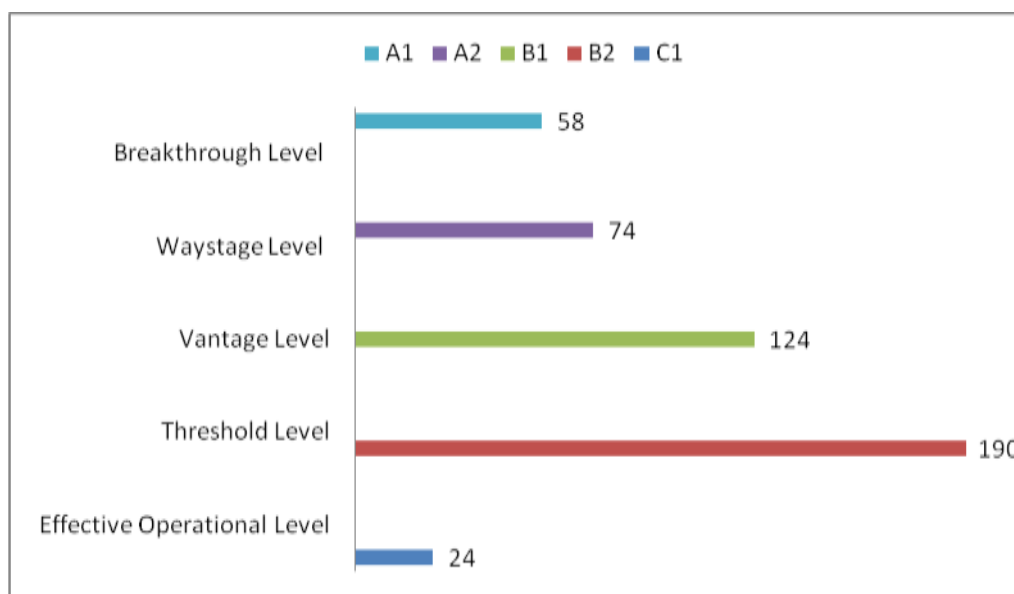
***Figure 6.* CEFR Levels and Student Attainment in English Academic Writing**

From another perspective, the extent to which the native language differs from the target language, which is English in this study, is often assumed to result in the observed error patterns. Dulay, Burnt, &Krashen (1982) refer to the phenomenon as first language(L1)transfer or 'inter lingual errors'.

The cognitive-code method on the other hand undertakes that a comprehensive analysis of the rules of language helps in building language competence. Each of the above perspectives has a different set of implications on teaching English academic writing.

The Five Tier Model for Teaching English Academic Writing in EFL Contexts
The persistent errors in the English academic writing samples of writing indicates that the EFL programmes in the context of the study were not able to address English academic writing sufficiently. In general, EFL programmes in the Arab world fail to give English academic writing sufficient targeting through diverse input, encouraging an analytic approach to genre exploration, differentiating academic lexis and inspiring learners to venture into writing with confidence(Abdulkareem, 2013; Al-Khasawneh, & Maher, 2010).Teaching English academic writing within this frame refers not just to words and sentences in isolation, but to the ways in which such words used in context and the social conventions governing their use.

The cognitive code method postulates that active mental processes are associated with language analysis of rich input. The explicit learning of the rules of the language in terms of grammar accuracy, spelling and punctuation should constitute the first level of targeting English academic writing. The second level should be associated with raising students' awareness about the communicative purpose or the rhetorical purpose of the text. A key aspect of teaching students English academic writing is to help students identify and apply the conventions within which they are expected to write such as the requirements of each text type and the specialized vocabulary and particular sentence structures needed, and then helping students to add these conventions to their linguistic and cultural repertories.

Therefore, to introduce students to these different aspects of language in use, in addition to presenting good models of English academic writing, tutors in the high school context need to

•   Identify the genres with which students need to become familiar in order to write successfully in higher education

•   Make these genres available to students in ways which enhance their learning and motivation in writing and participating in higher education

•Help learners identify the rhetorical differences between their two languages.

•   Find ways of building on students' existing knowledge of and uses of language.

Based on the above, a five tier model for teaching English academic writing is proposed where linguistic accuracy constitutes the basic level of the model. The communicative or rhetorical purpose of the writing comes at the second level. Genre awareness and implementation constitutes the third level. Identifying and distinguishing the rhetorical differences between English and the first language constitutes the fourth level. Finally, incorporating appropriate cultural references or cultural customization comes at the fifth level.

Incorporating the appropriate cultural items

Raising awareness on the rhetorical differences between the two languages

Raising awareness on the genre needed and its requirements

Communicative or rhetorical purpose of the writing

Linguistic accuracy (spelling, punctuation and grammatical accuracy)

*Figure 7.*The Five Tier Model in teaching English Academic Writing

Conclusion
The aim of the paper was to redirect interest in English academic writing and situate it back within linguistic enquiry. Psycholinguistic factors are peripheral complementarities to the indispensable linguistic processes that are at the core of teaching English academic writing.

The study has identified intrinsic difficulties associated with English academic writing at the transitional phase from high school to university in one EFL context. Notwithstanding the hours devoted to teaching EFL, only few students were able to achieve the Effective Operational Level C1 in the collected samples; 24 out of 470. The majority of the students participating in the study, 314 out of 470, attained Threshold B2 and Vantage B1 Levels, with abilities to express themselves in familiar situations. Moreover, about one third of the assessed students, 132 out of 470, managed to reach only the basic Waystage A2 and Breakthrough A1 Levels.

In mapping the identified difficulties, phonemic orthographic inaccuracies, grammatical mistakes, structural and organizational blunders, errors were correlated with interlingual errors,

culture specific schemata and rhetoric differences. The study concluded with proposing a five tier model for teaching English academic writing in EFL contexts.

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Hayat Al-Khatib holds PhD from the University of London. Her professional background includes teaching at the University of London (Institute of Education) and (Goldsmith College),external examiner for PhD candidates at European and Lebanese universities, critical reader for the Open University Master level courses, teaching at the Arab Open University since 2003 and Head of the English Department at Arab Open University in Lebanon since 2005 to date.

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