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| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Writing in English and Writing in Standard Arabic in Higher Education: A Correlational Study

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| **ABSTRACT**

Writing as a mental and cognitive process entails bringing into light students' written products. Writing in higher education is considered one of the most important skills that students should develop. In this regard, this study investigates the correlation between writing in Standard Arabic and writing in English among university students in Morocco. To verify this link, two tests were used as research instruments. Students were asked to write a paragraph in Standard Arabic and another in English. The participants were 33 male and female university students. To analyse the scores that students obtained in the two tests, a Pearson Product Moment correlation was used as a statistical procedure. The results indicate that there is a significant correlation between writing in Standard Arabic and writing in English. The students who performed well in Standard Arabic also did well in writing in English. It has also been found that there is a 21.20% relationship between the two variables under examination. The findings of this study support the Chomskyan Universal Grammar perspective. It also supports the notion of positive transfer. The results of this study have different implications for language teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

English, nowadays, has become a lingua franca. Therefore, learning this language has become a pre-requisite. There are different skills that university students should develop while they are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Those skills are either receptive or productive. The receptive skills include listening and reading, whereas the productive skills encompass speaking and writing. However, it is noticed that most tests, if not all, that students sit for at university are written exams, so their success or failure at Moroccan universities is directly related to their achievements in those written exams. Brown (2000) states that "without some ability to express yourself in writing, you don't pass the course" (p. 339). In other words, if students want to succeed or get a degree, they must write well. It has also been noticed that most university professors try to motivate students to write effectively. However, helping students to write well is not an easy task since teaching somebody how to write is like teaching him/ her how to think. Zinsser (1998) says that "writing is thinking on paper" and "writing and learning and thinking are the same process" (p. 245). In fact, even if students manage to show a good mastery of the mechanics of writing such as capitalization, punctuation, and

sentence structure, as well as good mastery of grammar in terms of tenses, passive voice, conditionals and so on and so forth, their writings are still not good. This might be due to the development of their thinking skills. More importantly, writing is considered as a difficult skill for university students in Morocco due to the negative transfer from Arabic to English. To argue for this point, Kharma and Hajjaj as cited in Al-Zoubi and Abu-Eid (2014) argue that "some of the errors committed by Arab students learning English as a foreign language are due to Arabic interference" (p.4). Thus, the present study investigates whether there is a link between writing in Standard Arabic (SA) and writing in English among third year university studying in semester six at Ibn Tofail University (ITU). In other words, this paper will examine whether students who write well in Standard Arabic write well in English. In this study, writing in Standard Arabic (SA) is the independent variable, and writing in English is the dependent variable. This classification of the two variables is fairly arbitrary because we are not looking for the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. Rather, we are searching whether there is a correlation between the two variables under investigation (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991). To examine if there is a relationship between the two variables or not, a correlation study will be conducted. The participants were selected from ITU. The data was collected in the second semester of the academic year 2018-2019.

1.1 Research questions and hypothesis
The current study sets out to answer the following research questions:
1. Is there any correlation between writing in Standard Arabic and writing in English among semester six students at Ibn Tofail University? In other words, do students who write well in Standard Arabic write well in English?
2. Is there any significant statistical difference in students' performance in the written tests of English and Arabic?

The current study investigates whether there is a correlation between writing in SA and writing in English among semester six students at ITU with the objective to confirm or disconfirm the following hypothesis:

There is a relationship between writing in Standard Arabic and writing in English among third-year students studying in semester six at Ibn Tofail University.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Defining Writing
Writing is a means of communication which is used to express our feelings, thoughts, attitudes and views concerning certain issues. As it is reported by Miller as cited in Richards & Renandya (2003) "even though the writing production is an expression of one's individuality and personality, it is important to remember that writing is also a social endeavor, a way of communicating with people" (p.25). Similarly, Akkaya and kirmiz as cited in Gholaminejad, Moinzadeh, Youhanaee & Ghobadirad (2013), state that "writing is the expression of feelings, thoughts, desires and plans in black and white" (p.1138). Also, writing is viewed as one of the most difficult skills that students encounter while they are learning a foreign language. In fact, writing is considered as a difficult skill to be learned not only for those who want to learn a SL or a FL but also to native speakers. In this regard, Dernoun (2015) claims that:

> The writer has to keep in mind: content, organization, grammar, syntax, mechanics, word choice, audience, purpose and the writing process. The combination of all these components makes writing a difficult skill. Writing is a very complex skill that demands both physical and mental activity from the part of the writer. (p. 7)

Writing is perceived by students as one of the most complex and problematic skills since it requires doing different tasks at the same time such as concentrating, thinking, organizing, and combining words to phrases, phrases to sentences, sentences to paragraphs and paragraphs to essays. In addition to this, writing is viewed as a synonym of the term composing. In connection with the previous mentioned idea, Flower and Hayes (1981) state that "writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing" (p. 336). Finally, Jarmilo and Medina (as cited in Rico, 2013, p. 57) define writing "as an important form of expression used to persuade or convince other people as well as to share ideas and feelings". That is, writing is used to express our ideas in order to inform, persuade, communicate with others and share our feelings. To sum up, writing has got different definitions. Each writer defines writing from his/ her own perspective.

2.2 Process of Writing
The majority of students at university start writing directly when they are given a task without taking into consideration the process of writing. In this regard, Tribble (1997) claims that "learners who move on into composing immediately are likely to produce badly when writing" (p. 55). This implies that writing is a process. It means that when students want to write about a certain topic, they must follow some steps. Those steps can help students to write more effectively and make their writings more organized. Those stages can also assist them to avoid confusion and stress while they are writing. In addition to what has been said earlier, those steps can aid students to gain some time especially while they are sitting for an exam. Many scholars (e.g., Blanchard & Root, 2000; Krashen as cited in Harmer, 2007; Richards & Renandia, 2003; Tribble, 1997) agree that the process of writing must include mainly four steps which are planning (pre-writing), drafting (writing), revising (redrafting) and editing.

2.2.1 Planning

Students in this stage must write freely without taking into account that they may make mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, capitalization and sentence structure. In other words, students just brainstorm what they have in their minds. It means that students must generate as many ideas as possible in this stage. In this regard, Oshima and Hogue (1998) argue that the purpose of the pre-writing stage is "to generate many ideas as possible and to write them down without worrying about appropriateness, grammar, spelling, logic, or organization. Remember, the more you free write, the more ideas you will have" (p. 6).

2.2.2 Drafting

Students while writing their first draft must organize what they wrote in the previous stage. Students in this stage can also cross out the ideas which are irrelevant. Most writers, if not all, point out that students in this stage must focus on content rather than form. According to Oshima and Hogue (1998), "in the planning, you organize the ideas you generated by brainstorming into an outline" (p.8).

2.2.3 Revising

"Good writers tend to concentrate on getting the content right first and leave details like correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar until later" (Hedge, 1988, p.23). This implies that students have to reread their works before submitting them, and they should focus more on content rather than grammatical elements.

2.2.4 Editing

The last stage of the process of writing is what is referred to as editing. The focus in this stage will be on correcting grammatical elements such as spelling mistakes, tenses, fragments and so on and so forth. As a matter of fact, the majority of students at Moroccan universities neglect this stage especially in exams. Once they have finished their writings, they submit their papers without making any editing. This can lead them to get low marks. To summarize the writing process; Figure 1 and Figure 2 can be used.
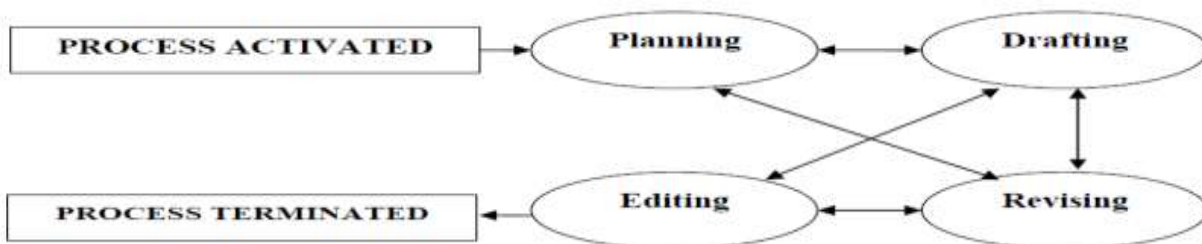

Figure 1 Krashen's Process Writing Model (source: Richards & Renandya, 2003, p. 315)

Figure 2 Krashen's Process Writing Model (source: Richards & Renandya, 2003, p. 315)

2.3 The Importance of Writing

The majority of professors, if not all, at Moroccan universities, test students through writing. This means that the students' success is related to their performance in the written test. This shows the importance of mastering writing as a skill if students want to achieve good grades and good mastery of English. Writing is a means of communication. Without mastering this skill, you cannot

convey your message to others. Communication is not only an oral activity but also a written one. Therefore, developing one's writing system is no longer a choice, but it is a pre-requisite.

More importantly, writing is viewed as a means to develop our creativity. This skill is not like listening and reading which are deemed to be as receptive skills. Writing is a productive skill through which people can develop their creativity. Additionally, Hedge (2005) demonstrates that "successful writing goes beyond producing clear and accurate sentences since learners must be aided to write and express their ideas in the most appropriate and creative way" (p. 95).

Last but not least, writing is one of the essential skills in our life. People through developing their writing skill can enhance their critical thinking. Many writers and scholars (e.g., Ghodbane, 2010; Hedge, 2000; Raimes, 1994) argue that there is a strong correlation between writing and thinking. This idea can be illustrated clearly by the following quote by Ghodbane (2010):

Writing is a cognitive activity because of the close relationship between thinking and writing. This means that one of the educational purposes of getting learners to write is to get them to think in order to express, order and communicate their ideas effectively. (p. 23).

2.4 Some Writing Problems

Writing is the most difficult skill to be mastered by students while they are learning a second or foreign language. Writing is considered as a complex skill because it involves different stages which are planning, drafting, revising and editing. Students' writings are very poor for different causes. Sid (2016) suggests some causes:

● Al-Khsawneh as cited in Sid (2016) indicates that the students identified that the teaching method and the environment are the main causes of their weaknesses in English. Their weak qualification in English is either related to the lack of student motivation, or the teacher's interest. Moreover, many learners use their mother tongue because of the isolated culture.

● English language learners have limited vocabulary. Therefore, students end up repeating the same words which hinder creativity. Students could not give voice to their thoughts because they lack the adequate stock of vocabulary.

● English language learners do not use invented spelling and their written texts are restricted to words which they know.

● The present tense is the only tense used in their writing.

● The students' writing is difficult to understand because of the ill-structured sentences in composition.

● Students are unwilling to share their work with other students and they do not get suitable feedback.

● When the learners read their writing aloud, they cannot distinguish whether what they read or write is right or wrong.

(kakul agha et.al, 2002, as cited in Sid 2016, p. 55)

Others think that students do not write well because they do not read much. They argue that there is a strong correlation between writing and reading. If you read on a regular basis, you will automatically produce good piece of writing. Stotsky (1983, p.636) states that:

Better writers tend to be better readers (of their own writing as well as of other reading material), that better writers tend to read more than poorer writers, and better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers.

What's more, students while they are writing can face different problems. These problems affect their writing performance. One of these problems is their L1. Many students, while writing in a foreign or second language try to translate from their L1 to the target language (TL). This process can lead them to negative transfer especially when there is a linguistic distance between the two systems. In our case, Moroccan students or Arabs in general may transfer from their L1 to the TL (English) while they want to write a paragraph or an essay. This transfer can contribute to produce ill-formed paragraphs or essays. For instance, the English language is considered as SVO language, whereas SA is viewed as VSO language. That is to say, in order to write a sentence in English, you have to start with a subject, then a verb and then a complement (optional), whereas in Standard Arabic, you have to begin the sentence with a verb, then a subject and then a complement (optional) as examples (1) and (2) from English and Standard Arabic illustrate:

(1)   I   eat   an apple   (English)
         S   V   O
(2)   Kataba   T-Tulaab-u   d-dars-a (SA)
           V   S   O
wrote.3MS   the-students-NOM   the-lesson-ACC
'The students wrote the lesson.'

This difference in word order can lead Arab students, especially to produce ill-formed sentences in terms of structure. Sometimes, even though some Arab students are aware of the difference that exists between the two languages in terms of word order, they still make some errors unconsciously in terms of sentence structure in the TL.

3. Methodology

This study seeks to investigate whether there is a correlation between the two variables under investigation. The research hypothesis of this study is stated as null hypothesis. So as to test this hypothesis and to examine whether there is a link between the two variables under study, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation is adopted. This statistical procedure enables us to conclude whether there is a link between the two variables under investigation or not. It also enables us to see how significant the correlation between the two variables is (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991). Creswell (2012) defines correlation as "a statistical test to determine the tendency or pattern for two (or more) variables or two sets of data to vary consistently" (p. 338).

3.1 Data collection procedure

The data was collected in the second semester of the academic year 2018-2019. Students were asked to write two paragraphs about two topics (one topic in SA and the other one in English). After they finished their writings, the data was collected and scored. The scores of students were analysed via Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

3.2 Research instruments

Two tests were used as research tools in order to verify whether there is a link between the two variables under examination. Each participant was asked to write two paragraphs about two topics. One paragraph was in English and the other one was in SA.

3.2.1 Arabic test

The Arabic test includes three different topics. Students were asked to choose one topic and write a paragraph about it. Students will sit for this test in one hour.

3.2.2 English test

A written composition test was used as another research tool in this study. Students were asked to choose only one topic from three different topics and write about it an organized paragraph. Students sat for this test in one hour.

3.3 Reliability and Validity of the Research Instrument

Students sat for the two tests at the same time and under the same conditions in order to avoid any extraneous variables that may affect the findings of the study. Besides, two experienced teachers have corrected the students' writing paragraphs. After that, we added up the two scores and divided them by two. Last but not least, the researcher developed a detailed checklist for the teachers to use to correct and score students' writings. The checklist mainly focuses on the main elements and aspects of writing. The reason behind adopting this checklist was to make the evaluation of students less subjective using analytical scoring.

3.4 The Sample

The participants were selected from ITU in Kenitra. They constitute an intact group. They are third year university students studying in semester six. Most participants in this study have been studying English for more than 6 years. They studied one year in the middle school and three years in high school. After that, they have joined the university. Their ages are mainly between 21 and 23. The participants are male and female students. Those students who sat for the two tests are assumed to be at the same level of English proficiency.

3.5 Operational Definitions

Standard Arabic is the language we learn after we acquire our mother tongue (Moroccan Arabic or/ and Tamazight)4. It is deemed as an official language and the language of education. It is a language that is used in various spheres such as education, administration, mass media and so on and so forth.

English is considered as a foreign language in Morocco. There are some students who start learning this language until they reach middle schools especially those who are enrolled in public schools; however, those who are enrolled in private schools start learning this language at primary schools.

4. Results and Discussion

This paper explores the link between writing in SA and writing in English among semester six students at ITU. To verify whether there is a correlation between the two variables, two tests were used as research instruments. Then, the two tests were scored. Figure 3 represents students' scores in writing in SA and writing in English among semester six students at ITU.
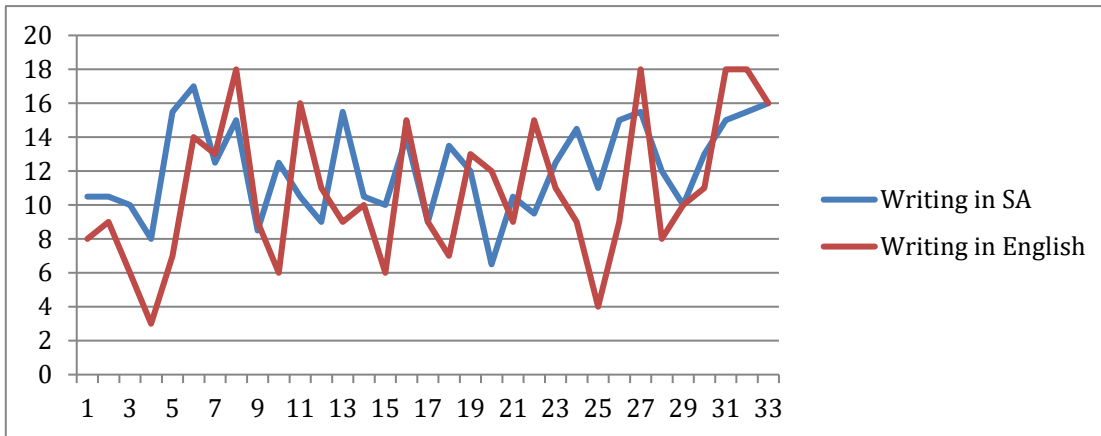
Figure 3 Students' Raw Scores in Writing in SA and Writing in English

From Figure 3, it is noticed that the majority of students, if not all, who have obtained good grades while writing in SA also do well while writing in English. This may suggest that there is a relationship between writing in SA and writing in English among semester six students at ITU. That is to say, students who can write well in SA can write well in English and vice versa. The chart above shows us that there is a correlation between writing in SA and writing in English. So, in order to know whether there is a significant statistical correlation between the two variables, a Pearson correlation test is used. In other words, is there any significant statistical difference in students' performance in the written tests of English and SA? The results of the correlation tests are displayed in Table 1. It has to be noted that SPSS was used to analyze students test scores.

Table 1 The Correlation between Writing in SA and Writing in English

R value obtained	Critical value needed	Df	N	P.05
0.433	0.3494	31	33	S.

* **P ≤.05, significant**

Table 1 shows that there is a significant correlation between writing in SA and writing in English among semester six students at ITU. This can be justified by the R value obtained which is 0.433. If we compare the critical value needed which is 0.3494 at level of probability.05 and with a degree of freedom of 31 and the R value obtained which is 0.433, we can notice that the R value obtained exceeds the R value needed. This enables us to conclude that there is a significant correlation between the two variables under investigation. This also means that the research hypothesis of this study is rejected with confidence at level of probability .05 and with a degree of freedom of 31. According to Hatch and Lazaraton (1991), when the null hypothesis is disconfirmed, we can calculate the strength of association (r^2). To put it differently, it is possible to measure how significant is this correlation. Applying variance overlap in this case, it can be found that r^2= 0.21199. This means that there is 21.20% of correlation between writing in SA and writing in English.

From the results shown in table 1 we conclude the following:
- ✓ The correlation coefficients for the two tests' results reveal the significant relationship between Standard Arabic and English writing. This significant correlation between writing in SA and writing in English allows us to reject the null hypothesis.
- ✓ There is a positive correlation between writing in Standard Arabic and writing in English among semester six students at ITU. The correlation is said to be positive when the r obtained exceeds 0.
- ✓ There is 21.20% of relationship between writing in SA and writing in English.

It is true that there are linguistic differences between SA and English in terms of structure and the writing system. However, it is found that there is a significant correlation between them. This relationship can be explained by the view of Chomsky. The Chomskyan theory suggests that there are some linguistic shared aspects by all human languages. That is, those linguistics aspects are universal among all languages. This informs us that there are some linguistic properties which are shared between SA and English (future research should be done in this regard to determine the similarities and differences that exist between the two languages in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax), whereas there are some linguistic differences that may exist among languages. Those differences that exist among languages are referred to as parametric variation or parameters. This fact can be illustrated clearly by Cook (1987) as cited in Jmila (2015):

> While the principles of UG lay down the absolute requirements that a human language has to meet, the parameters of UG account for the syntactic variation between languages. English does not just instantiate UG principles; it also has particular setting for all the UG parameters. (p. 206)

The findings of this study support the Chomskyan perspective. Dweik and Abu Al Hommos (2007) state that "the Chomskyan perspective views L1 as the critical basis for learning the new linguistic system rather than as interfering effect" (p. 8). Other studies such as Koda (1988) suggest that various linguistic elements are transferred in both the oral and written forms for L2 linguistic production. For instance, elements transferred are morphosyntactic elements, communicative strategies, and pragmatics.

This positive correlation that was found in this study can also be justified by transfer. In other words, while some students want to write in English or in any target language, they think in Arabic or in their mother tongue and translate to English in this case maybe because they are more proficient in Arabic. The positive correlation that was found between SA writing system and English writing system may suggest that there is a transfer between the two languages. That is to say, students who are good writers in Arabic transfer their knowledge to English. Thus, this study advocates the notion of transfer from the mastered language to the less proficient one. To put it simply, students who are more proficient in one language (Arabic) can transfer their knowledge to the less proficient one (English).

4.1 Some Recommendations and Implications

It is found that there is a 21.20% of correlation between writing in SA and writing in English. That is, it is important to note that good knowledge in SA writing can help students to write well in English. This means that this study supports the notion of L1 transfer. It is recommended that future research should investigate the similarities and differences that exist between the two languages in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax. What's more, it is recommended to examine the nature of relationship between writing in SA and English among other levels of students and from different contexts. It is also recommended that it would be better to identify and examine other variables that may affect such correlation such as gender, age, cultural and educational background. If we reduplicate the study in other Moroccan setting and we find more or less the same findings to the current, we can safely generalize our findings to the whole Moroccan context.

4.2 Some Limitations

- ❖ This study is limited to semester six students at ITU. It means that the sample is not representative to all EFL Moroccan Learners. Therefore, the findings of this paper cannot be generalized.
- ❖ Since the focus of this study is on investigating the correlation between the two variables, it does not analyze or explore the similarities and differences that may be observed in students' writings.
- ❖ Tests were used as research instruments to collect the data in this research paper. We believe that it would have been better to have used other research tools such as questionnaires and interviews.

5. Conclusion

The present study has sought to explore whether there is a correlation between writing in SA and writing in English among semester six students at ITU. This study has also investigated whether there is a significant relationship between the two variables under study. To examine whether there is a link between the independent variable and the dependent one and to test the statistical significance of such correlation, a Pearson correlation is used as a statistical procedure. This statistical test enables us to determine the significance of the correlation between the two variables under study. As a data collection method, two tests were used. Students were asked to write two paragraphs (one in Standard Arabic and the other one in English). The two tests were scored. Those scores were analyzed using SPSS. It is found that there is a significant correlation between writing in SA and writing in English among semester six students at ITU. This implies that students who write well in SA transfer their knowledge while writing in English.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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