مجلة جامعة دمشق للآداب والعلوم الإنسانية

اسم المقال: التغلب على المعوقات الرئيسية التي تحد من قدرة طلبة الجامعة العربية المفتوحة على اكتساب مهاراتهم وتطويرها في الكتابة: "دراسة مؤسسية"
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Surmounting Major Difficulties Facing AOU Students in Acquiring and Upgrading their Writing Skills: Institutional Study

Najib Al-Shehabi & Yusuf Shudooh*

Abstract

This paper probes issues related to the learning of advanced English writing skills by Arab Open University (AOU) students majoring in English Language and Literature at AOU's Kuwait Branch. A questionnaire answered by 93 students comprised the corpus of the study. The questionnaire (**Appendix I**) is divided into three parts which reflect students' experience in learning writing before and after joining the AOU. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how students' academic writing skills developed, and how these skills can be bolstered. The data were analyzed, tabulated and interpreted to mark, *inter alia*, the learning difficulties which persisted in the development of the target students' writing skills.

The researchers' findings are expected to aid tutors and syllabus designers in their quest to have more research-supported knowledge of the areas that need to be addressed and to recognize the most adequate teaching strategies that ought to be implemented in order to upgrade students' writing capabilities.

The researchers reached the following **conclusions**:

- There is a genuine relationship between home literacy and school literacy.
- The reading opportunities through the dynamic role of class, school libraries and the internet support the subjects' writing.
- More in-class writing is genuinely needed.
- There is a need for a writing support center (WSC).
- There is a need to teach grammar in context rather than dealing with it as an abstract subject.
- Each writing class should not exceed 15 students.
- Students in writing classes should be grouped based on their English language proficiency.

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التغلب على المعوقات الرئيسية التي تحدُّ من قدرة طلبة الجامعة العربية المفتوحة على اكتساب مهاراتهم وتطويرها في الكتابة: "دراسة مؤسسية"

أ. د. نجيب الشهابي و د. يوسف شدوح*

الملخص

يستقصي هذا البحث مسائل تتعلق باكتساب مهارات الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية، وكيفية تطويرها لدى طلبة تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة العربية المفتوحة – فرع الكويت . بني هذا البحث على استبانة أجاب عنها 93 طالباً وطالبة . قسمت الاستبانة إلى ثلاثة أجزاء تعكس خبرات الطلبة في تعلم فنون الكتابة قبل الالتحاق بالجامعة وبعده . رمى البحث إلى تبيان كيف نمت هذه المهارات وإمكانية تطويرها، وقد قام الباحثان بجمع البيانات وتحليلها وتصنيفها؛ وذلك من أجل حصر أهم الصعوبات المتأصلة التي تواجه تطور قدرات الكتابة لدى عينة البحث .

يتطلع الباحثان إلى أن تسهم هذه الدراسة في مساعدة المدرس وواضع المنهاج على الاعتماد على دراسة بحثية رصينة في أثناء العمل في ميدان التدريس ووضع المناهج . كما ترمي هذه الدراسة إلى تعرّف أنجع الاستراتيجيات والأساليب المتطورة التي ينبغي تبنيها من أجل تطوير المهارات الكتابية لدى الطلبة .

توصل الباحثان إلى الاستنتاجات الآتية:

- هنالك علاقة حقيقية بين اكتساب الكتابة في المنزل وفي المدرسة.
- تعزز فرص القراءة، من خلال الدور الديناميكي للصف والمكتبات المدرسية والإنترنت، قدرة الطلبة على الكتابة.
- هناك حاجة ملحّة لمزيد من الكتابة داخل الصفوف المدرسية.
- هناك حاجة إلى مركز دعم للكتابة.
- هناك حاجة لتدريس النحو في سياقه، وليس كموضوع منفرد.
- يجب ألا يتجاوز عدد الطلبة في الصف الواحد 15 طالباً/طالبةً.

* الجامعة العربية المفتوحة - فرع الكويت.

Introduction

One of the most difficult problems encountered by learners of a foreign language is learning its writing skills. Like all foreign language acquisition problems, learning to write presents major difficulties to learners, especially those seeking a university degree majoring in English.

In a book entitled *The Mayfield Handbook of Technical Scientific Writing,* Leslie C. Perelman *et al* (1997) list many problems divided into such areas as "Article and Noun Problems, Verb Problems, Word Form, Word Order and Sentence Structure, Word Choice, Punctuation and Mechanics, Sentence and Paragraph Coherence, Organization and Stylistic Approach, and Documentation and Use of Source Language." In each of these major areas, the authors cite between 8 to 14 problems. This indicates the large scale of problems encountered in learning how to write in a foreign language.

This paper sets to investigate and suggest solutions for some substantial English writing problems encountered by advanced university students specializing in English language and literature (ELL) at the Arab Open University. The study fathoms the recurrent writing obstacles that face the population of the study who were registered in

two level-3 (graduation) courses (E301A & E301B), entitled "The Art of English: Everyday Creativity" and "The Art of English: Literary Creativity", respectively. According to the AOU system, E301A and E301B are 8-credit-hour courses; each taught over a single semester (16 weeks).

Significance of the Study

The researchers' first-hand teaching experience[1] in the English Department at AOU, drew their attention to serious weaknesses in the students' writing skills and a lot of transference from their L1 in their writing tasks.

[1] 16 years for the first researcher and 12 years for the second.

Rationale

The idea of investigating writing problems faced by the aforementioned advanced students stemmed from the need to achieve the following **objectives**:

- enhance their writing competence in general;
- pinpoint the obstacles which hamper such enhancement.
- suggest solutions that surmount these obstacles.
- make them qualified to write high-quality TMAs[2], as well as prepare them to write well-organized error-free essays in tests and exams.
- find out the elements that hamper their progress towards excellence in writing.

The need to conduct this study emanated from the fact that a lot of parameters affect the AOU-Kuwait Branch ELL students' writing capabilities. Some of the parameters are, but not limited to, educational, familial, national, cultural, economic and age-specific. Students are basically divided into two main categories as follows:

A. The more privileged students are the following:

1. Students who had studied in pre-university British or American schools in Kuwait or in another Arab country. Others who studied in schools, mainly private, that place more emphasis on the English language.
2. Students who had studied in Britain, in the USA, or in any other English-speaking country because their parents had lived or studied in these countries.

These two groups constitute a good percentage (around 20%) of ELL students at AOU. Many of them come from well-to-do Kuwaiti families, while others belong to non-Kuwaiti families whose financial circumstances allowed them to have good English tutoring for their children in non-English speaking countries.

[2] TMAs are Tutor Marked Assignments of around 1500 words required for all specialization courses at AOU.

B. The less fortunate are the following:

1. Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti students who did not have a chance to attend schools that lend extra or incomparable emphasis to English language. They include:

1.1 Students who for one reason or another failed in a previous attempt to have university education.

1.2 Working males and females.

1.3 Parents (men and women) with families to look after.

It is worth mentioning that the AOU has no age ceiling imposed on admitting its students.

Participants

Because the study aimed at investigating writing problems and strategies among EFL AOU students, a questionnaire was administered to 93 students registered in the above-mentioned 3rd level courses. These courses were chosen because students who register in them ought to have passed the writing course (EL 117) as well as other 1st and 2nd level language and literature courses.

At the start of the questionnaire, the students were asked to give their age, the type of high school they graduated from and the country where this school was located. At the end of the questionnaire they were asked to give any pertinent comments. The researchers also interviewed some students to listen to their comments and opinions.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative/quantitative study, which focused on the writing experiences of the 93 students who completed the questionnaire. In their handbook of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) describe qualitative studies as involving "… an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural

settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." Creswell (1994, pp. 1-2) defined Qualitative research as "An inquiry process of understanding, a social or human, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting."

The present study also aims at tracing the writing difficulties that faced the participants before and after being enrolled in the AOU and the skills that are needed to improve their writing capabilities.

The participants were chosen because they are in a senior stage of their studies. Moreover, all 93 students comprising the sample have had two compulsory English language courses of integrated skills, namely: EL111 "English Communication Skills I" and EL112 "English Communication Skills II".

The native language of the absolute majority of the participants is Arabic, but all of them have had English for at least 9 years through their school education. Some of them are graduates of local bilingual schools, and a few of them grew up in English-speaking countries where they had a chance to live in a typical English-speaking environment.

Like all English Department students, all subjects have completed the following set of courses before being enrolled in the senior level course E301:

a) One level 1 course (117): 'Writing'.
b) One level 1 course (121) 'Short Story and Essay Writing'.
c) One level 1 course (120) 'English Phonetics and Linguistics'.
d) One level-1 course (A150): 'Voices and Texts'.
e) Two level-2 courses (U214A) and (U214B): 'Worlds of English (I and II)'.

Sample size

Patton (1990, p. 184) stated that "There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample sizes depend on what you want to know, the purpose

of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources."

The student population was diverse with respect to gender, ethnicity, and culture. This helped in gaining an in-depth understanding of participants' writing experiences before and after being enrolled at the AOU.

Data Results & Analysis

The data analysis of this study is meant to be natural, spontaneous, and not pre-determined. This makes the analysis more compatible with the Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) approach. For further information, see the e-Handbook of Statistical Methods:

http://www.itl.nist.gov/div898/handbook/.

Before we get to the actual analysis, we would like to point out that the researchers looked at four parameters as follows:

1) All schools that the subjects attended,

2) Government schools

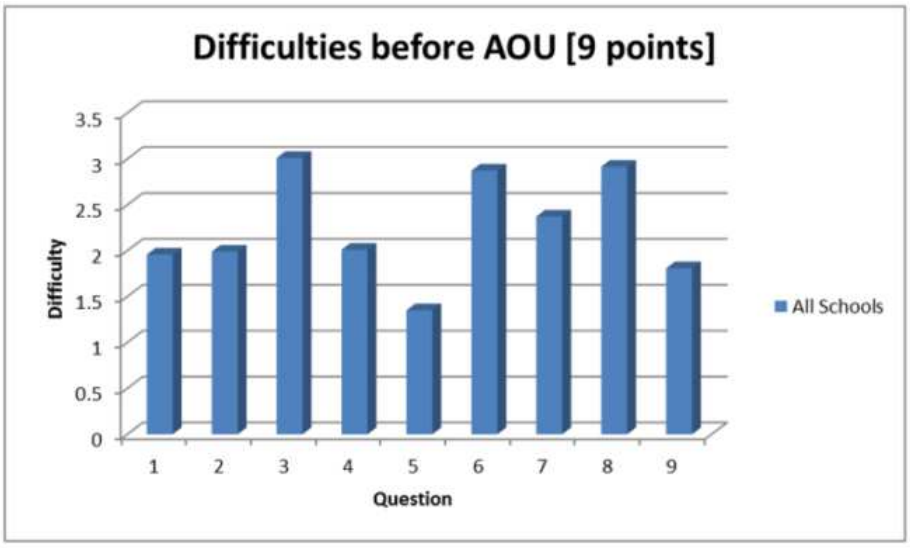
3) Private Arabic schools

4) Private bilingual schools.

At first glance, the bar graph that shows the results of the first inquiry, namely:

"The difficulties that affected the subjects' English writing skills before joining the Arab Open University". The most difficulties should be given 4.

indicates that students in all school categories face similar problems related to items number 3 (teaching style), 6 (few writing exercises), 7 (many other school subjects) and 8 (no support). The scores in these items are [3.01; 2.87; 2.37 and 2.91] respectively as indicated by the bar graph below:



This means that the most serious problems for the students in all 3 categories can be summarized as follows:

1] problems related to the teaching style (No 3 in the graph).

2] problems related to shortage of writing exercises (No 6 in the graph).

3] problems related to being overloaded by other school subjects (No 7 in the graph) and

4] problems related to the absence of in-school support or help (No 8 in the graph).

The second degree problems that face our subjects are related to graph items 1(the schools I studied in); 2 (the English language books); 4 (my home environment) and 9 (I had other responsibilities). The scores in these items are [1.96; 1.99; 2.01 and 1.81] respectively. These problems can be classified as follows:

1] problems related to the type of schools where students received their education. 2] problems related to the type of English language books that the students studied. 3] problems related to the unsuitability of their home environment and 4] problems related to being engaged in numerous non-academic responsibilities.

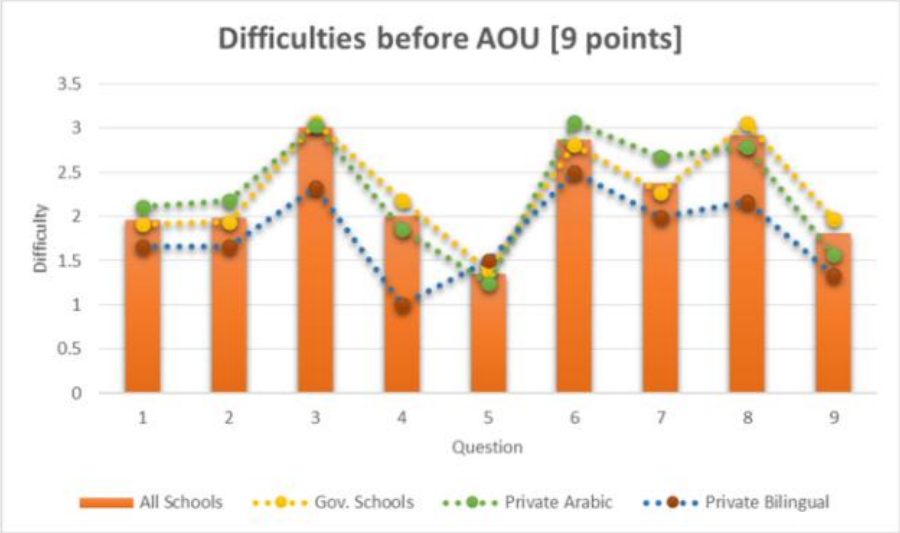
The least significant problem is related to whether or not the subjects like learning English language as indicated by item 5 (I do not like English), where the score is relatively low; it is just [1.35]. Students in all 3 categories show high interest in learning English. Listening to some of the subjects' personal opinions about learning English indicates that they are excited about learning this language. They point out that learning English is instrumental; it can advance their personal as well as their vocational status. They believe that by being efficient writers, they can achieve scholarly standards of presentation and of writing accurately, clearly and effectively.

In view of the results of the first inquiry of all three school categories, one can easily notice that the graph contours are coherent and comparable to a certain extent. More specifically, the results of the government and the private Arabic schools are more coherent and more analogous in items 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8. The scores of the students of these two school categories reflect lack of satisfaction of the schools they attended, the type of books they studied, the teaching style adopted by their schools, and the type of in-school support. Moreover, their attitude towards learning English is relatively low compared to the students coming from private bilingual schools.

Specializing in English for students coming from these types of schools seems to be more challenging than students coming from private bilingual schools. They seem to be in serious need of better chosen books, more rigorous teaching styles, and more effective in-school support than the ones

applied in their former schools. It also seems that their home literacies are not supportive. Parents should support their children at an early stage of their life to regularly and extensively read and write English. The researchers are unequivocally convinced that there is a genuine relationship between home literacy and school literacy. The other school subjects (item 7), to them, seem to be as demanding as English [scores 2.27 and 2.68]. The time and effort exerted on learning other subjects seems to influence the time allocated to learning English. This requires better time management skills proportionate with the challenges that the learners encounter. The inadequate writing exercises (item 6) seem to have an undesirable influence on their writing abilities and capabilities [scores 2.82 and 3.07]. This is multiplied by the lack of in-school support [scores 3.05 and 2.79]. Interviewing some of the subjects in these two categories of learners points out that the dominant teaching style of writing in their schools (item 3) is neither entirely nor totally focusing on the product-oriented approach, nor on the process approach; it is more oriented towards caring about the product rather than the process [scores 3.07 and 3.04]. Needless to mention the scarcity of using any internet-based computer software that can be applied to enhance the subjects' writing/composition.

It is noticeable that the performance of the private bilingual school subjects was more dynamic. In the same mode they seem to have handled their school books in a more productive manner than the other two categories. Likewise, their time management skills seem to have ruled out the negative influence of the non-academic responsibilities that they encountered. Opting for English as a major at AOU for them seems to be less challenging than the subjects of the other two categories. That is evidenced by the bar graph below.



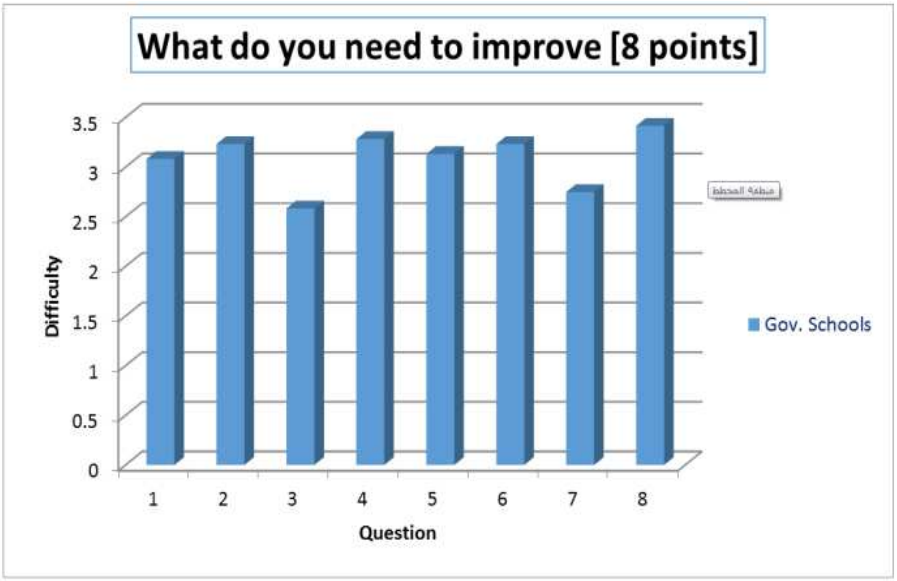
The bar graph shows that their scores in items 1, 2, 4 and 9 are below 2.0 [1.67, 167, 1.00, 1.33]. This indicates that these are not serious or first degree problems; rather, they are marginal and solvable.

The teaching style as a problem is relatively less serious for them [2.33] than the case with the other two categories who scored [3.04 and 3.06]. Their home environment looks remarkably more conducive for learning than the other two categories [1.00 vs 1.83 and 1.86]. Their home literacies seem higher than the other two categories. The interviewed subjects indicated that they practice more nonacademic free reading and writing exercises at home. They are the least influenced by other school subjects and nonacademic responsibilities. Moreover, they seem to receive more in-school support. The bar graph above shows how variables 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 9 compare.

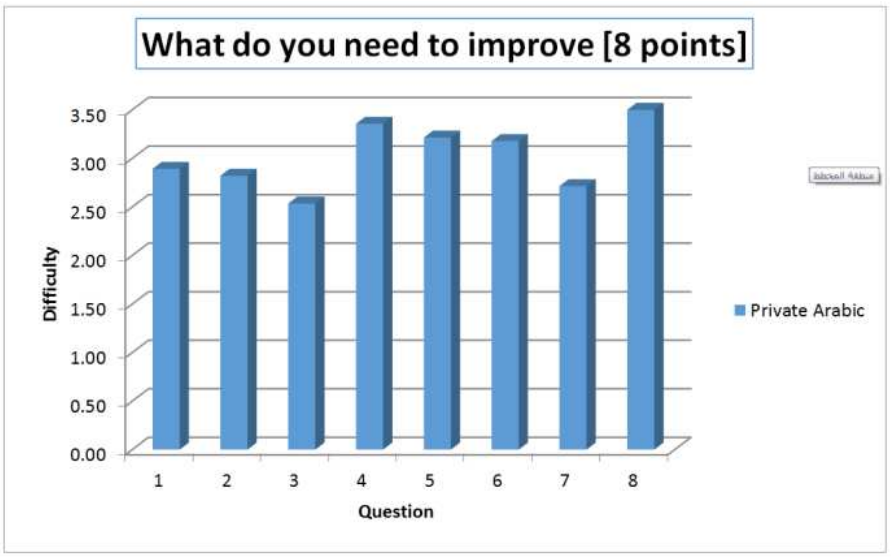
The results of the second question, namely:

2) "What do you need now to improve your English writing skills? Please rank your answers". The most needed should be given 4.

have indicated that students of government schools gave high importance (between 3 and 3.4 out of 4) to all items except two items: 3 (learn how to avoid spelling mistakes) and 7 (more listening and speaking) which scored 2.5 and 2.7, respectively. This result shows a general feeling by the students who came from government schools that their writing skill needed considerable enhancement.

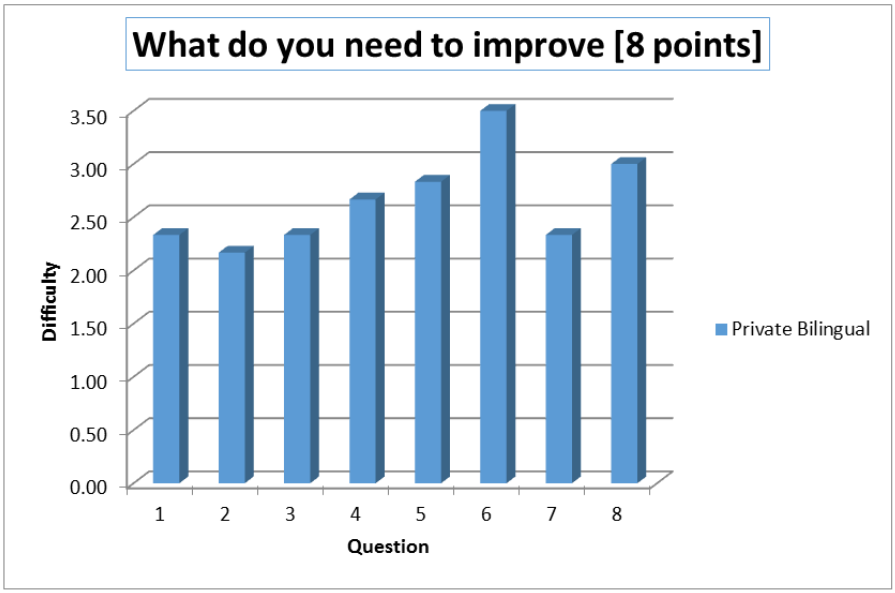


A similar result was shown by students who came from private Arabic schools with a few minor differences.

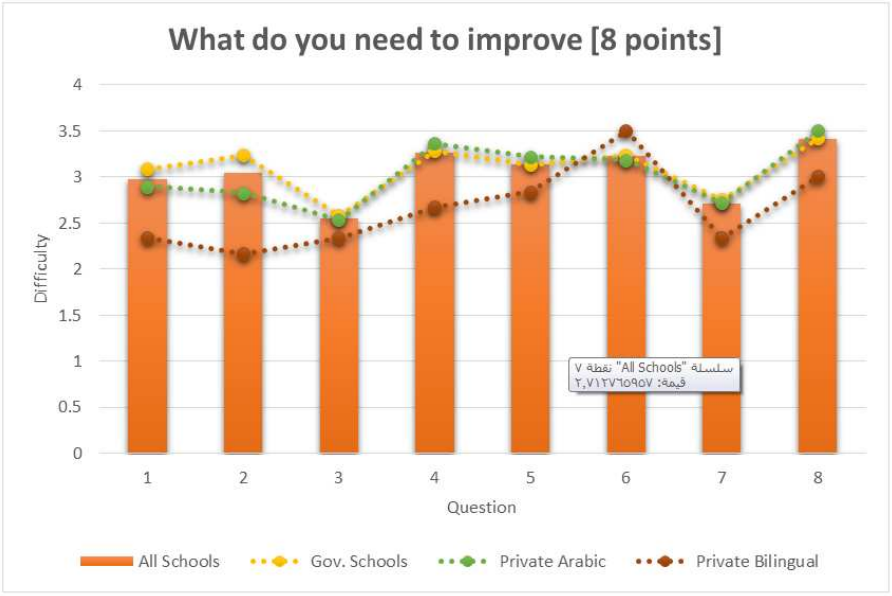


However, the students who came from private bilingual schools were more confident than other student categories in items 1 (how to write good sentences); 2 (how to make paragraphs); 7 (more listening & speaking); and 8 (more vocabulary).

However, private bilingual school students needed more reading (item 6) than other students.



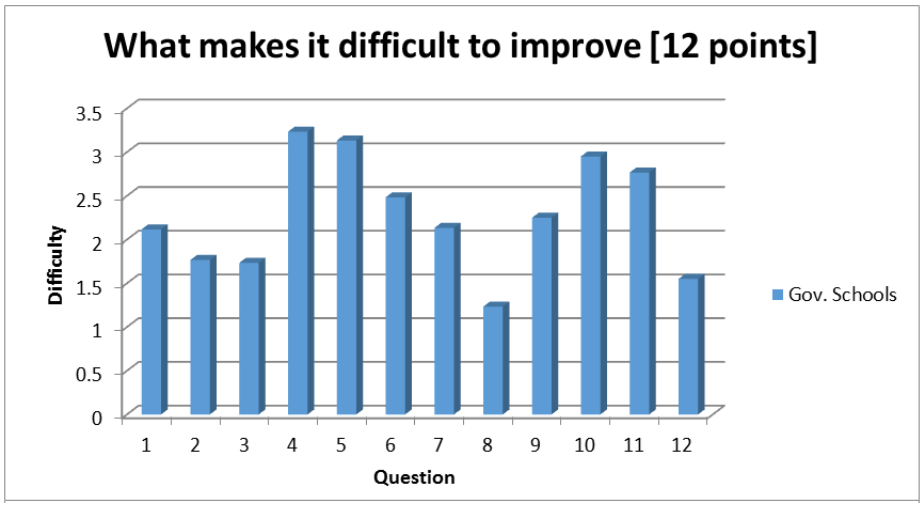
Nevertheless, the graphs have shown that all scores were above 2. This result points to the fact that upgrading AOU students' writing skills ought to take into account their entry level of English writing competence, especially in the case of graduates of government and private Arabic schools. They need considerable attention to bring their competence up to the required exit level of English majors. The following bar graph shows how the results of the three types of school graduates compare:

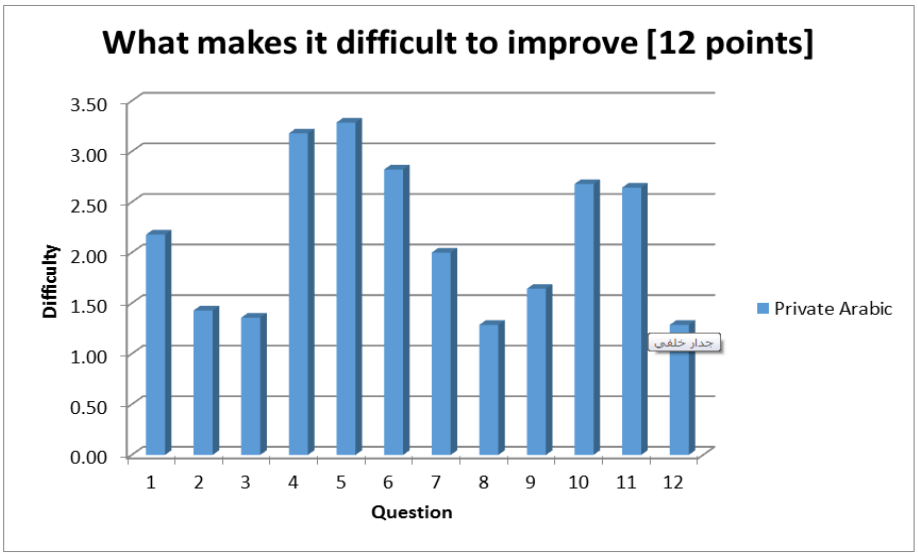


As for the third question, namely:

3) "What issues make it difficult to improve your writing skills at AOU?" Please rank your answers. The most serious should be given 4.

its results indicate once more similarity between the answers of students of government and private Arabic schools as seen in the two bar graphs below:


What makes it difficult to improve [12 points]
Difficulty
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
Question
Gov. Schools


What makes it difficult to improve [12 points]
Difficulty
3.50
3.00
2.50
2.00
1.50
1.00
0.50
0.00
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
Question
Private Arabic
جدار خلفي

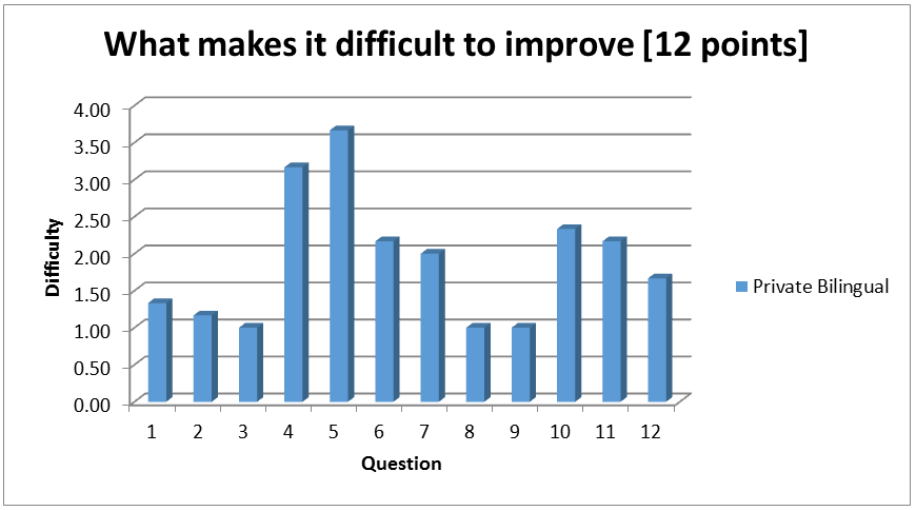
Although the patterns are similar, yet some differences are in [2] (too many students in my writing class) and [3] (not attending classes regularly) where in government schools the score is around 1.7 while in private Arabic schools it is around 1.3.

Nonetheless, questions [4] (Not enough writing tasks) and [5] (Not enough reading) rank highest in the graduates of the two schools (above 3).

Other high-ranking answers are [10] (absence of support or help: 2.9 in government schools and 2.6 in private Arabic schools) and [11] (the teaching style: 2.7 in Government schools and 2.6 in private Arabic schools).

All students scored very low on question [8] (I cannot afford buying a good computer): 1.6 in Government schools and the same score in private Arabic schools.

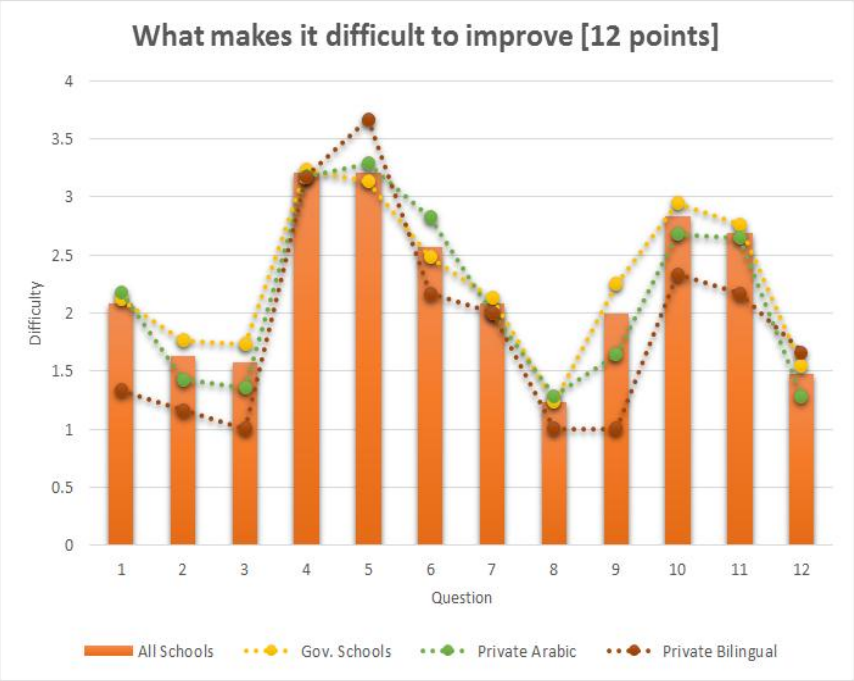
There is, however, a visible difference between the scores of the above two categories on the one hand, and the scores of the students coming from private bilingual schools as shown in the following bar chart:



The scores here share with the other categories a high score in [4] (not enough writing tasks: 3.6) and in [5] (not enough reading: 3.1).

However, there are discernible differences between this category and the previous two categories in the answers to most other questions showing that graduates of private bilingual schools encounter fewer problems in learning writing skills.

The following bar graph shows how the results of the three types of school graduates compare:



Discussions:

In the 1950s, the focus of writing was on the grammatical quality of the written product - a case that applies to teaching EFL in government and private Arabic schools as indicated by some of the subjects' comments on the questionnaire. In the 1980s and 1990s, the emphasis was on everything a writer does as s/he sits to write and on how s/he arrives at his/her resulting product in progress. Drafting, writing journals, meaning making, peer collaboration, revision, context, the process of writing and the content before form replaced accuracy and patterned writing. (Chiang, Y. 1992)

El-Shafie (1991) conducted a qualitative study to describe how 12th grade Arab EFL writers who apply the process approach to devise their compositions. The results of his study showed that each student made recognizable and consistent progress in the quality and quantity of their writing. The researcher recommended using the process approach to EFL Arab students in order to develop better in writing.

Relying on prescribed strategies such as 'prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing' as prescriptions for "good writing" terminates any attempt of learners to explore their full potentials as creative writers. Expecting all students in the class to go through the same writing strategies as they write is like expecting all of them to have the same weight, height or color of hair (Andrews, 1993)

Learners should have the freedom to apply an eclectic approach; they may use some of these strategies, or all of them, or they may come up with other unpredictable writing strategies that are exclusively theirs. That is because writing is a combination of many activities, such as experimenting, planning, choosing, questioning, anticipating, organizing, reading, listening, revising, reviewing, editing, and so on (Donald Graves, 1994).

The interviews with the subjects of this study indicate that there is a shortage in practice of creative writing in or outside the classroom: no journals, diaries or writing portfolios. The interviewees also indicated that they did not receive adequate training on the effective writing strategies such as: pre-writing [discovery and brainstorming], revision, re-vision - to view

again, editing [polishing, paragraphing, choice of words, structures and grammar], publishing [displaying the work orally by reading it to others] and teacher-student conferences.

The researchers believe that, if not all, some of these strategies should be applied in the writing classes.

Journals and diaries allow learners to express their own thoughts, to speak their mind, to reflect on what was going around them, and to respond to the teacher's comments. Diary writing helps them to expand their thinking, to express their feelings and to negotiate their ideas more freely. Student-teacher conferences assist in identifying their writing errors and reading their writing more critically on their own. Such conferences are potential occasions to help learners to understand themselves as writers, who might grow as prospective independent writers. Peer-conferences help learning ways of adapting their own writing processes to others in the class.

The researchers believe that the content should be given priority over grammatical structure. They believe that, by analogy, writing is more like knitting, where knitting requires piles of material, cotton for example; these piles of material represent the ideas. Knitting these impromptu piles into fine-looking textiles is more like editing and refining the written pieces. This analogy entails that the ideas are the effective means of conveying the intended meaning; they should be lent special attention and precedency over grammar accuracy and other issues related to the mechanics of writing.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

Learners of a foreign or second language usually have different motivations and different capabilities for learning that language. Among many other reasons, some learn it for instrumental reasons such as getting a job, traveling, doing business, studying, or trying to survive in an English-speaking community.

Weakness in EFL learners' writing is not always because EFL students are slow learners, but because their cultural schemata are woven up differently. This results in a leakage or transfer from L1 into L2; thus, EFL teachers should be aware of and responsive to that imperfection.

The study reveals that other areas in the literacy development of non-native English learners need to be explored and furthered. These areas include, but are not limited to, the following:

1) Home literacy and literacy development: learners need to regularly and extensively read and write English early in their school life. The researchers are unequivocally convinced that there is a genuine relationship between home literacy and school literacy, which affects the literacy development of L2 learners.

2) It is noticeable that the reading opportunities through the dynamic role of class, school libraries and the internet support the subjects' writing development as evidenced in the answers of private bilingual students.

3) As for the teachers, going around, listening to students' ideas, helping, answering questions and responding to students' ideas is supportive.

- Students are in need of more in-class writing exercises which can be in the form of a journal.
- There should be a writing support center (WSC) where students refer to in case they need any help.
- School teachers should focus on the writers and the writing process as well as training them on the most efficient ways of using computer software.
- Teachers should post outstanding writing pieces done by students and/or let the students read them to the class.
- Grammar should be taught in context rather than dealing with it as an abstract subject. This entails more real-life exercises on the sentence, paragraph, and ultimately essay levels.
- Like many other scholars, the researchers believe that reading and writing are inseparable and go together; they develop a wide repertoire of lexical items.
- Each writing class should not exceed 15 students.
- The results of the questionnaire show that students in writing classes should be grouped based on their English language proficiency. More specifically, students coming from private bilingual schools should be in higher-level writing class

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