

**Investigating Academic Literacy Challenges on  
Undergraduate Programmes: A Focus on Arabic-Speaking  
Students in New Zealand**

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**Investigating Academic Literacy Challenges on  
Undergraduate Programmes: A Focus on Arabic-Speaking  
Students in New Zealand**

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

**Attestation of authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed Ahmed Kamal Junina

Date 29/08/2019

## **Dedication**

This PhD thesis is dedicated to:

The memory of my dear father, **Kamal S. Junina** (1944 – 2013), who was eagerly awaiting my graduation with a PhD, but he did not live to see it,

and to

my dear mother, **Itaf F. Junina**, who continues to overwhelm me with her unconditional love, kindness and support every single day.

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## **Ethics Approval**

Conduct of the research reported in this thesis was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) in two phases, Reference Number 17/19, on 27/02/2017 for conducting the focus groups and on 25/05/2017 for the questionnaire and interviews (Appendix D & Appendix I).

## **Abstract**

The challenges facing non-native English-speaking students (NNESSs) in their attempts to adapt to the conventions of academic writing at tertiary level in English-medium institutions have been canvassed in scholarly research. Nonetheless, there does not appear to be a great deal of research that investigates the experiences of Arabic-speaking students with English academic writing across the disciplines in New Zealand.

The main aim of the present study, therefore, is to explore the challenges Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in New Zealand encounter with English academic writing. In addition, the study aims at identifying some practical ways through which Arabic-speaking students could be better prepared for the demands of studying and writing in English.

This study is informed by the academic literacies model as the theoretical framework which provides the basis for an examination of the contextual influences on the English academic literacy development of the Arabic-speaking students of the sample, such as their cultural and educational backgrounds and identities. The study adopts a constructivist-interpretive research paradigm. A mixed methods research design was utilised in this study, whereby three data collection methods were employed: focus groups, an online questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews, which gave rise to the identification of emergent themes. The data from the quantitative instrument were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

The study identified key factors that seem to influence Arabic-speaking undergraduate students' ability to achieve proficiency in English academic writing. These factors include students' past language learning experiences, some linguistic differences

between students' first language (L1) and English, institutional factors, and factors that are related to specific disciplines. Students' narratives demonstrated that English tuition at public schools in the Arabic-speaking world does not seem to adequately prepare students for the demands of studying and writing in English. In addition, linguistic differences between Arabic and English seem to contribute to the challenges that Arabic-speaking undergraduate students encounter in English academic writing. The findings indicate that many students believe that the writing required to pass the International Language Testing System (IELTS) test is irrelevant at tertiary level. In contrast, the writing content in pathway courses in New Zealand was perceived by several students as more relevant to the writing they were asked to do for university courses. Furthermore, the study found that students at the undergraduate level felt that it is difficult for them to gauge what discipline lecturers require as far as academic writing is concerned.

The study makes an original empirical contribution to research that investigates academic writing by providing an authentic account of the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter in English academic writing and suggesting a model of three stages that include practical steps to better prepare these students for the demands of English academic writing. Therefore, it is hoped that the analysis could offer an empirical point of departure for teaching academic writing to Arabic-speaking students at tertiary level both in Arabic-speaking and English-speaking countries.

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### **List of abbreviations**

<b>EAP</b>	English for Academic Purposes
<b>EFL</b>	English as a Foreign Language
<b>ELF</b>	English as a Lingua Franca
<b>EMI</b>	English as the Medium of Instruction
<b>EMUs</b>	English-Medium Universities
<b>ESL</b>	English as a Second Language
<b>ESOL</b>	English for Speakers of Other Languages
<b>ESP</b>	English for Specific Purposes
<b>FG</b>	Focus group
<b>FL</b>	Foreign Language
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>IELTS</b>	International English Language Testing System
<b>INT</b>	Interview
<b>L1</b>	First Language
<b>L2</b>	Second Language
<b>MSA</b>	Modern Standard Arabic
<b>NESSs</b>	Native English-Speaking Students
<b>NESTs</b>	Native English-Speaking Teachers
<b>NLS</b>	New Literacy Studies
<b>NNESSs</b>	Non-native English-Speaking Students
<b>NNESTs</b>	Non-native English-Speaking Teachers
<b>SL</b>	Second Language
<b>SLC</b>	Student Learning Centre
<b>TLA</b>	Tertiary Learning Advisor
<b>TOEFL</b>	Test of English as a Foreign Language
<b>WAC</b>	Writing Across the Curriculum

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

This study is about academic writing as a social practice. Academic writing is interpreted in a broader way because writing does not just happen in a little box, but rather it happens in a context. Therefore, this study is interested in writing in a broader context, which includes the prior learning experiences of Arabic-speaking students who study at tertiary institutions in New Zealand and the different disciplinary writing requirements. The study is also interested in finding out how writing requirements affect what Arabic-speaking students write and how they go about learning academic writing.

Section 1.1 below presents the background of the issues explored in this study. The motivation behind conducting this research project is discussed in Section 1.2. A statement of the problem follows in Section 1.3, and the purpose and the research questions that guide this study are discussed in Sections 1.4 and 1.5 respectively. The methodology adopted in this study is outlined in Section 1.6. Section 1.7 highlights the audience for this study. Section 1.8 presents the organisation of the thesis.

### **1.1 Background of the issue**

Dealing with academic discourse in the disciplines is a real challenge for all students, whether they are native English-speaking students (NESSs) or non-native English-speaking students (NNESSs) (Thesen & Van Pletzen, 2006). Previous research on academic literacy in tertiary education has pointed to a need to develop a theoretical and practical approach to teaching writing (Bailey, 2009; Wingate & Tribble, 2012), taking into consideration the complexities of academic writing and the varied experiences that students nowadays bring with them to English-medium universities. Altınmakas and Bayyurt (2019) argue that students join tertiary institutions bringing with them their “established identities, diverse sociocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, personal

histories, past learning and schooling experiences, individual learning strategies, and writing knowledge” (p. 89).

Several researchers (Clark & Ivanič, 2013; English, 1999; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998, 2000) shifted the focus from surface assumptions about academic writing to deeper aspects involved in that skill within institutional practices. These aspects include: 1) power relations, i.e. how writing is shaped by the institutional requirements and the hierarchy of relationships in academia; 2) epistemology, i.e. beliefs about what constitutes knowledge in writing practices; 3) and identity, i.e. existence of students’ self and agency in their written texts (Tran, 2014). The present study aims to contribute to this approach where the focus is not on the text, but on those who try to make meaning through the medium of text. This study adopts the academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 1998) as a theoretical framework to consider the contested nature of student writing at the tertiary level.

## **1.2 Motivation for this study**

My interest in this area can be attributed to my background as an English as a foreign language (EFL) lecturer in an Arabic-speaking country - Palestine. It is hoped this study will add to my professional understanding as well as that of other academics in the field. The study also aims at better addressing the writing needs of Arabic-speaking students in English-speaking countries.

My interest in exploring the difficulties facing Arabic-speaking students in English-speaking countries was aroused in 2010 when I was doing my Master’s degree at one of the United Kingdom (UK) universities. The academic experience I went through in the UK was very different from the one I had gone through during my undergraduate study in my home country. In the UK, I had to adapt socially, academically, and culturally to meet the demands of my degree in order to finish it successfully. One of the most

surprising experiences was the result I got on a final examination that included writing two lengthy essays. Prior to the final examination, I was given three questions, one of which would be the exam question. That was the first time I had ever experienced a ‘take-home’ exam. When I first got the potential questions, I went to the library and consulted several books and articles to back up the essays I would write as answers to the three questions. Even though I exerted much effort preparing for that test, I got the lowest mark among all the courses. When I received the feedback from my lecturer, I found most of the comments difficult to comprehend. My expectations and assumptions seemed to differ greatly from those of my lecturer. Only then did I begin to realise that academic writing is not a matter of simply structuring a good grammatical piece of writing, but rather it is a social practice that goes beyond the text itself. Academic writing appears to be a skill of negotiating knowledge through the text, taking into consideration the context. The experience I went through as a non-native English-speaking student (NNESS) stimulated my interest in academic writing at the tertiary level and influenced my view about academic writing as a social practice.

Upon my return from the UK to Palestine, I worked for several years teaching English at al-Aqsa University of Gaza, a Palestinian public university. During these years, I taught academic writing courses. Those years gave me a better understanding of the gap that exists between the education systems operating in the universities in the Arabic-speaking world and English-medium universities.

The justification for selecting Arabic-speaking students in English-medium institutions is the fact that the problems these students encounter in English academic writing are not well researched (Alkharusi, 2013; Zghyer, 2014), and New Zealand is becoming a popular study destination for this cohort of students. For these reasons, there is a need

for more scholarly research on the challenges these students face in academic writing when studying in an English-speaking country, particularly in the New Zealand context.

At this point it is worth noting that I adopt the term ‘Arabic-speaking’ students in my study and not the term ‘Arab students’ because not all the students who speak Arabic as their first language (L1) identify as Arabs. Some of those who speak Arabic come from the Middle East and they identify as Middle Eastern. Therefore, I have opted for the former term to include every participant who speaks Arabic as their L1.

I have chosen to explore the writing skill for three reasons:

- 1) it continues to be the basic tool for evaluation in education (Hyland, 2013; Tran, 2014)
- 2) it represents a major challenge for NNESSs including Arabic-speaking students (Al-Mansour, 2015; Fernsten & Reda, 2011; Tang, 2012)
- 3) it is one of the most important skills graduates need for employment (Canton, Govan, & Zahn, 2018)

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

A fixed homogeneous student body with the same social, educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds is no longer the norm in the academic context because of the widening participation policy in higher education (Lillis & Turner, 2001). The number of international students enrolled in tertiary programmes worldwide has “exploded” over the past two decades, reaching 2 million in 1999, more than 4 million in 2013 and 5 million in 2016 (OECD, 2018, p. 224).

Such diversity among students brings a rich array of languages and cultures to universities. A diverse group of students means differences in their identities and the way they understand meaning-making across the subjects (Hyland, 2009). The diversity

of languages students speak and the diversity of language practices they bring into their new environment transform the institutions into “sites of intercultural communication” (Turner, 2011, p. 23). However, this diversity of student population may create a gap between lecturers and students which ultimately creates stress in the academic environment, particularly at the undergraduate level of a university (Duderstadt, 2000). At the same time, changes to university funding means that academics have to teach larger classes and devote less time for students individually and more time for administrative duties due to the unprecedented increase in student numbers (Ivanič & Lea, 2006). This creates a real challenge for universities (Wright & Rabo, 2010).

With unprecedented numbers of students attending English-medium tertiary institutions (Robinson, 2018) there has been ongoing debate in research about the numerous challenges that NNESSs face in adapting to life and study in an English-medium context (Andrade, 2006). One discourse that has dominated such research is the “English problem” (Haugh, 2016, p. 728). The recurrent claim is that NNESSs do not have sufficient English language skills, which hinders them from actively participating in academic studies (Haugh, 2016; Tran, 2014). In particular, students seem to experience problems in writing.

The literature suggests that one reason for problems in student writing might be the gap between lecturers’ expectations and students’ understanding of what writing involves (Cohen, 1993; Stierer, 1998). Lea (2008) argues that the existence of the “fundamental” gap between students and lecturers’ understanding of the requirements of academic writing offers evidence “at the level of epistemology, authority and contestation over knowledge, rather than at the level of technical skill, surface linguistic competence and cultural assimilation” (Lea, 2008, p. 231). Therefore, of importance is to investigate the understanding of students and teachers about their own literacy practices to be able to



understand the nature of learning, without making judgments in advance about which practices are more effective than the others (Lea & Street, 1998).

#### **1.4 Purpose of the study**

One of the main purposes of this study has been to move away from a study-skills deficit model of student writing and to consider the complexity underlying writing practices at the tertiary level in New Zealand. Therefore, this study aims to:

- Consider the socio-cultural background of Arabic-speaking undergraduate students and how it influences their expectations of and assumptions about English academic writing
- Consider the previous scholastic experiences of the participants and see whether these experiences prepared them for studying and writing in English
- Identify the academic writing challenges Arabic-speaking students face at the tertiary level in New Zealand
- Suggest possible practical ways to better prepare Arabic-speaking undergraduate students for the demands of academic writing at the tertiary level

#### **1.5 Research questions**

To achieve the objectives of this study and to attempt to fill the gap found in the scholarly research on the academic literacy of Arabic-speaking students, one main research question will guide this research project.

- How can Arabic-speaking students embarking on undergraduate studies at New Zealand tertiary institutions be better prepared for the demands of English academic writing?

Three sub-questions will be used to investigate the topic in further detail:

1. What are Arabic-speaking students' expectations of and assumptions about academic writing?
2. How have students' past scholastic experiences prepared them for studying and writing in English?
3. To what extent are the disciplinary and institutional expectations of academic writing challenging for Arabic-speaking students?

## **1.6 Methodology of the study**

This study is informed by the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). From a constructivist perspective, multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interaction with others (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2011). Diverse students are expected to bring with them multiplicities of expectations and realities about the importance of writing in English, based on their previous histories of learning English. In this study, I view reality as complex and multiple, and not as simple and single. The aim is to get insights into how the participants view the concept of academic writing in English, and how they develop their understanding of the writing process at tertiary level.

A triangulated approach has been adopted in this study to collect data by means of three methods – focus groups, an online questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews.

## **1.7 Audience for the study**

It is hoped that this study will offer findings and recommendations that will be of interest to:

- Academic staff who interact with Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand tertiary institutions. The findings and recommendations are expected to help staff better understand the needs of those students as far as academic writing is

concerned, and possibly guide their teaching and feedback practices. The present study aims at bridging the gap that exists between students and lecturers' perceptions of what constitutes acceptable academic writing in the disciplines.

- Student Learning Centres (SLCs) and Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) in New Zealand universities that work closely with students, including Arabic-speaking students. It is hoped the findings of this study will give SLCs and TLAs insight into the expectations and assumptions Arabic-speaking students have about English academic writing. TLAs may find the results of the study beneficial as these may help them provide informed consultation to Arabic-speaking students regarding the demands of academic writing across the disciplines, taking into consideration the students' previous learning experiences and some of the linguistic differences between Arabic and English.
- Lecturers on pathway and pre-sessional courses who deal with Arabic-speaking students and are expected to prepare students for the demands of the tertiary context, particularly the demands of academic writing. This study aims to help lecturers on these courses gain greater insight into the students' perception of the writing content of pathway courses.
- English teachers in Arabic-speaking countries. The study aims to trace the educational background of the students, which hopefully will lead to a better understanding of how students are taught to write in English in their own countries.
- The target group of this study, i.e. Arabic-speaking students, may have a better understanding of the requirements of academic writing across the disciplines in English-medium universities. Upon the completion of this research project, a summary of the findings will be shared with the students who have indicated their interest in reading these results.

- The researcher of this study. As an EFL/ESOL educator, the researcher will benefit from the findings of the study to better inform his teaching and research practices.

## **1.8 Organisation of the thesis**

This study begins with an introductory chapter followed by the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, which focuses on the underpinnings of the academic literacies model. The related previous studies on the academic writing challenges facing NNESSs, and Arabic-speaking students, are presented in a Literature Review in Chapter 3. The methodology of the study highlighting the methods used for data collection and procedures of data analysis is discussed in Chapter 4. Findings of the focus groups are presented in Chapter 5, while Chapter 6 offers the findings of the quantitative instrument, i.e. the questionnaire. Chapter 7 outlines the findings of the semi-structured interviews. Discussion of the findings follows in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 concludes the study by outlining the contribution of the research project to theory, methods, empirical research and practice. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are also presented in Chapter 9.

## **Chapter 2 Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the theoretical framework underpinning the present study. Since the study is concerned with academic literacy, this chapter explores various types of literacy. It starts with a background on literacy, including the traditional view of literacy and challenges to the literacy thesis. This chapter also presents the New Literacy Studies (NLS) that underpinned the academic literacies model. The chapter then discusses in detail the difference between the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and academic literacies, followed by a discussion on the academic literacies model. Academic writing at tertiary level and across the disciplines as well as academic writing support are discussed in this chapter. The chapter ends with an overview of the challenges facing NNESSs in English academic writing.

### **2.2 Background on literacy**

Barton (2007) shows that the term ‘literacy’ appeared for the first time in dictionaries that date back to 1924. Around four decades ago, Resnick and Resnick (1977) pointed out that literacy in its earliest form was nothing more than the ability to sign a name. The term was later attached to the ability to read and write which is now considered the minimum criterion for literacy (Bailey, 2009). Recently, Zheng, Yim, and Warschauer (2018) argued that the meaning of an individual being literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is “being reshaped” (p. 1) as the word no longer refers to reading and writing, but also to the knowledge and skills which are required for comprehending and communicating via new technologies. However, the term ‘literacy’ remains framed within a set of ideologies and relations (Baynham, 1995). Conceptualisations of literacy have varied over the years. The following sections present the traditional view of literacy and then

show how such a view was challenged by a social turn, which considered literacy as social practice.

### **2.2.1 The literacy thesis**

Viewing literacy as the ability to read and write is the traditional view, which is based on the belief that literacy is a cognitive phenomenon that is related to the individual rather than society (Gee, 2015b). This view gained currency between the 1960s and 1980s, and advocates of that view believed that literacy was a single and universal skill (Gee, 1986; Street, 1984). Such a traditional view of literacy was termed the ‘literacy thesis’ (Halverson, 1992). According to the literacy thesis, acquisition of literacy was believed to result in higher-order thinking and improved cognitive abilities (Gee, 1986; Street, 1993).

Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* (1963), Levi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (1966) and Goody and Watt’s *The Consequences of Literacy* (1968) included the key propositions of the literacy thesis. For example, Goody and Watt (1968) claimed that some civilisations such as the Chinese, Egyptian, Hittite were a direct result of the invention of the alphabetic literacy system. The development and spread of literacy are seen by Goody (1977) as two fundamental factors in explaining how ways of thought and cultural organisation change over time. He links the development of writing with the spread of individualism, “the growth of bureaucracy, and the development of abstract thought” (Gee, 1986, p. 724). The literacy thesis adopted the assumptions of the Great Divide theory by claiming that writing is superior to speech. Such a perspective stems from the binary of civilised versus primitive (Goody & Watt, 1968), which is discussed in more detail below.

### 2.2.2 Literacy vs. orality

Goody and Watt (1968) based their argument about the division between cultures on two distinct ‘technologies of the intellect,’ i.e. orality versus literacy. They argued that literacy involved enquiry, scepticism, syllogism and logical procedures. In contrast, orality was claimed to be empathetic as communication in such societies occurs mostly face to face. Havelock (1963) argues that Homeric Greek culture was an oral one. His characterisation of that culture has been used as a foundation for the argument that literacy makes for a great divide between human cultures and the ways those humans think. Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* (1982) is based on Havelock and Goody’s influential pieces of work in viewing orality and literacy as a great divide that distinguishes between human cultures, modes of thought, and history. Ong (1982) argues “to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality” (p. 11). He refers to such cultures as having “residual orality” and gives example of Arabic and some other Mediterranean cultures.

In another work on the difference between literacy and orality Chafe (1982) argues that differences between the spoken and written have resulted in differences in the products. He believes that since writing is much slower than speech, writing is less disjointed and more syntactically joined than the spoken word. Therefore, he concludes that the written text is integrated and detached, while spoken utterances are fragmented and involved (Chafe, 1982).

In this context, Amanallah (2012) argues that orality focuses on repetition, clarity, and excessive exaggeration, and it avoids unfamiliarity. Oral argument tends to be phrased in ways that are easy to remember, while literate argument has no such restrictions as this kind of argument does not give much attention to memorisation. This reasoning is used to justify why orality does not produce complicated thought. Orality is based on

using hearing, whereby information and sayings are stored and then repeated whether with some addition or loss, and most of the time, with some deviation from the original meaning. According to proponents of the orality/literacy divide the ability to criticise, analyse and mediate is far more marked in those that are literate. Literacy makes it possible for the writer to touch upon issues without being concerned about the abilities of readers. Therefore, orality is restricted to apprenticeship, while literacy liberates thought. However, research by Gee (1986) and Street (2006) challenged this divide between orality and literacy. They based this challenge on the belief that both modes are in a continuum and too little attention was paid to the fact that these modes are often used together.

Since the current study is interested in the experiences of Arabic-speaking students, it is of importance to look at research on the divide between orality and literacy in the context of Arabic. Historically, oral modalities shape the Arabic language and the Arab culture (Islaih, 2012). The oral traditions of Arabic culture are also deeply rooted in pre-Islamic times. Oral tradition was important in the Middle East going back farther than the Arabic language and then continuing for thousands of years (Islaih, 2012).

Accordingly, the current study attempts to find out if orality affects Arabic-speaking students' academic written English when these students move to a context where literacy is dominant.

### **2.2.3 Challenges to the literacy thesis**

Criticism of the claims that literacy is “a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility” increased (Graff & Duffy, 2008, p. 41). Such claims were termed the ‘literacy myth’ as they lacked empirical evidence (Graff & Duffy, 2008). In the 1980s, approaches to literacy took a social turn away from the claims of the literacy thesis



towards a poststructuralist view (Norton & Toohey, 2011). One of the earliest studies on literacy was carried out by Scribner and Cole (1981) among the Vai, a community in Liberia that had its own literacy system. In their research, Scribner and Cole (1981) define a literacy practice as “a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge” (p. 236). Among the findings of their research was that the Vai who were literate in their own literacy system did not have higher cognitive abilities compared to those who were not literate.

Scribner and Cole (1981) argue that the context of the social practices in which literacy is acquired and used makes it understandable. Their investigation of literacy shifted from a cognitive to a practice view of literacy. They conclude their study stating:

Instead of focusing exclusively on the technology of a writing system and its reputed consequences.....we approach literacy as a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it (p. 236).

For Barton (2007), the quote above constituted a shift from a psychological to a social view of literacy. In other words, literacy came to be viewed as not only related to the cognitive abilities of an individual, but also to their sociocultural surroundings. In this context, Gee (1986) concludes that:

literacy in and of itself leads to no higher order, global cognitive skills; all humans who are acculturated and socialized are already in possession of higher order cognitive skills, though their expression and the practices they are embedded in will differ across cultures (p. 742).

Street's (1984) study is another important piece of research in the field of literacy. He studied villagers in Cheshmeh, Iran. Part of Street's study included examining the abilities of people to read and write. He describes his approach as ideological, i.e. literacy is always rooted in social practices such as those that are related to a job or an educational setting. Street believed that literacy could not simply be a technical and

neutral skill. It has to do with what people do with reading and writing, which is tied up with their sense of identity. He believes that the practices of reading and writing rely on aspects of social structures. In other words, Street started to talk of literacy in terms of social practice, as Scribner and Cole did. In this line of research, Gee (2000) adds that over the last few decades there has been a focus on social and cultural interaction instead of emphasizing individual behaviour and individual minds. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement was one among others that took part in this social turn.

### **2.3 The New Literacy Studies (NLS)**

From the mid-1980s onwards, a group of scholars (Barton, 1994; Street, 1993) began revisiting the traditional view of literacy and tried to re-define literacy. In so doing, they started a new interdisciplinary field of study (Gee, 2015b), whereby the focus of research moved to understanding the social practices that surround the writing process (Lea, 1999).

A major view of NLS has been that literacy is not a single skill that has a set of expected consequences for individual or social development, but rather there are multiple literacies, which differ in time and place. These literacies are embedded in specific cultural practices. For example, Street (1984) refers to three types of literacy he came across in Iran, and these literacies are: *maktab* or Quranic literacy, schooled literacy, and commercial literacy. Each one of these literacies is linked to a context. In the Iranian village, Street (2001b) found that the identity that was associated with *maktab* literacy was derived from the “traditional authority” in the context of learning the Quran where men mostly dominate (p. 22). Schooled literacy was related to new ways of learning and modernisation, which enabled village children to have access to urban centres and provided job opportunities. Commercial literacy, Street argues,

emerged as a result of the economic activity of selling fruit to the neighbouring cities, which necessitated writing notes to facilitate the commercial exchange (Street, 2001b).

From an education perspective, the NLS perspective requires curriculum designers and teachers to consider the differences and contestations in meaning that students bring with them to new contexts (Street, 2017). One of the features that characterises the NLS research is its focus on student writing as a social practice and recognition of practices as being multiple (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009). Therefore, the effort of scholars who viewed literacy from the NLS perspective has led to a plural concept of literacy, i.e. literacies. As long as social and cultural practices which incorporate literacy are different, there are various literacies such as “legal literacy, gamer literacy, country music literacy, or academic literacy” (Gee, 2010, p. 4). Gee (2015a) notes that individuals write specific types of text in specific ways for specific contexts. He believes that what determines such ways of writing are the values brought by different social groups.

### **2.3.1 Models of literacy**

As indicated earlier, the NLS movement views literacy not only as a set of technical skills but also as a social practice, and it introduced a recognition of multiple literacies that vary with time and space. In an attempt to explore the notion of multiple literacies, Street (1984) makes a distinction between autonomous and ideological models.

#### **2.3.1.1 Autonomous model of literacy**

Street defined this view of literacy as one that sees it as a set of technical skills that can be transferred unproblematically into any context. Those who propose such a model of literacy conceptualise it technically, dealing with it as not related to any social settings (Street, 2006). In this context, Olson (1977) argues:

There is a transition from utterance to text both culturally and developmentally and ... this transition can be described as one of increasing explicitness with language increasingly able to stand as an unambiguous and autonomous representation of meaning (Olson, 1977, p. 258).

However, it appears that advocates of the autonomous model did not pay enough attention to the social and ideological features of literacy.

### **2.3.1.2 Ideological model of literacy**

In contrast to the autonomous model, Street has proposed an ideological model of literacy. This model views literacy as not only varying with the social context and cultural norms in terms of identity, gender, and belief, but it also holds that literacy uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power (Street, 1984). Literacy always involves “contests over meanings, definitions and boundaries” (Street, 2001a, p. 18). In this sense, it is then ideological. The ideological model of literacy foregrounds context and the social nature of literacy practices (Lea, 2008) and takes into account the sensitivity of cultural differences in viewing literacy. Hyland (2013) points out that the recent expansion of scholarly research on academic writing confirms the importance of the social context that makes it possible to view literacy as social practice rather than a technical skill.

The ideological model has been adopted by those who are dissatisfied with the assumptions of the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1993). The advocates of an ideological model of literacy recognise the variety of cultural practices associated with writing in diverse contexts (Street, 1993). They view literacy practices as inseparably associated with the cultural and power structures in a given society. According to Street (1993), the ideological model subsumes the underpinning of the autonomous model, and it does not attempt to deny the technical skills or the cognitive aspects of writing.

However, it understands writing as encapsulated within cultural wholes and within power structures (Street, 1993).

There are various types of literacy, but the present study is concerned with writing in the academy, and in particular with academic literacies. In order to present a full picture of this approach it is necessary to describe how the academic literacies model has developed over the last three decades. The starting point was English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which then led to the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) movement of research, which both came as practical attempts to study the needs of learners of English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL). In 2.4 below, ESP is briefly discussed to show how it led to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). A background on EAP is presented in detail in 2.5.

## **2.4 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is English language teaching that is specifically intended to meet learners' needs which cannot be met through instruction in general English only (Woodrow, 2018). Business English, Technical English, English for medical professionals, and English for tourism are examples of ESP. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) note that ESP has always been concerned with results of practice. They argue that ESP has become a vital activity within EFL/ESL teaching. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) see ESP as an approach and not as a product, i.e. ESP does not include a specific type of language, teaching materials or methodology. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) have traditionally been considered as two basic branches of ESP. However, EAP dominated much of the earliest stages of ESP as the majority of the materials produced and research carried out were in the field of EAP (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). EAP developed as one form of ESP and not as a different field that is separate from its "parent discipline" (Ding &

Bruce, 2017, p. 58). The following section discusses in detail how EAP emerged and developed.

## **2.5 English for Academic Purposes (EAP)**

As a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), EAP expanded and developed quickly during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and became an important part of English language teaching and research (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Hyland & Shaw, 2016). Tim Johns was the first one to coin the term EAP in 1974 (Hyland, 2006), and the term made its first appearance in 1977 in a collection of papers edited by Cowie and Eaton and published under the title of ‘EAP’ (Jordan, 2002). Hyland and Shaw (2016) see EAP as a subfield of applied linguistics that explores efficient teaching and evaluation methods. EAP describes linguistic structures of texts in the academic disciplines and offers analysis for the practices of educators in academic contexts. Durrant (2019) defines EAP as a field that attempts to understand and teach the use of English for tertiary contexts, aiming at helping NNESSs to succeed in their tertiary study, and that is how it tends to be viewed now.

Dudley-Evans (2001) notes that EAP is often practice-driven where English is studied for a purposeful and practical need. Therefore, those who design EAP curricula investigate target language characteristics in specific academic contexts, and teaching staff focus on such characteristics in the classrooms. Such specificity in the focus of EAP influences what data researchers need to collect and how they collect it, as well as the theoretical frameworks they adopt to interpret that data (Hyland, 2016b).

The most influential factor in the development of EAP has been the changing face of higher education globally. Massification and diversity of tertiary education around the world were among the major characteristics of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Daddow, 2016; Guri-Rosenblit, Šebková, & Teichler, 2007). This

massification transformed tertiary education from an elite system to a more accessible one (Leach, 2013; Mok & Neubauer, 2016). Non-traditional students such as those from working-class backgrounds and those who are older than 18 when they start a university course, who were previously excluded from tertiary education, re-shaped the structure of the student body, especially in the UK context (Lea & Street, 1998). Hussey and Smith (2010) note that:

There was a time, not so long ago, when the way into the secret garden of higher education was known to very few. Over the last four decades in Britain, successive governments have striven to change things: from being the privilege of a middle class elite to being accessible to a huge section of society (p. 1).

In the United States context, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement was a response to a similar expansion in higher education in the 1970s (Russell, 1991). In addition, WAC emerged at a time when there was an increasing sense of the importance of writing for helping learning and of the limitations of writing teaching practices (Horner, 2014).

Another indication of change and the expansion of tertiary education has been internationalisation. Knight (2008) defines internationalisation of tertiary education as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 21). Internationalisation describes the process of non-English-speaking students coming to English-medium universities because of the importance of English (Le Ha, 2013). This led to the elevating of Western academic literacy (Canagarajah, 1996) as being the academic literacy for which people must strive. The increase in the number of international students studying overseas has grown rapidly (Robinson, 2018), and international education has become a booming business in the past twenty years (Cheng, Cheung, & Ng, 2016).

In other words, students now come from various backgrounds bringing new cultures and ideologies into tertiary education. This diverse body of students at tertiary institutions is viewed as a challenge for practitioners because the distinctive literacy practices of these students might be different from those required for success in an academic context (Daddow, 2016) at Western universities. Such an environment creates tremendous challenges for university academic staff because they will be dealing with students who have different backgrounds from academics' own, and these students are bringing with them different concepts of literacy (Hill, 2008; Reid & Parker, 2002). Hyland (2006) points out that the language teaching profession responded to these challenges with EAP because the more diverse students there are who study in English the more EAP courses and teaching staff are needed. Ding and Bruce (2017) note that EAP courses are often perceived as a "support service," which has an uncertain status in many contexts (p. 4). They argue that such a service is provided by universities such as "the health, counselling and accommodation services" (p. 4). However, they argue that EAP is an academic field of study that is informed by scholarly research and activities.

EAP can be divided into English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) (Jordan, 1997). In fact, Blue (1988) was the first to distinguish between EGAP and ESAP. The focus of EGAP is on English tuition for students regardless of their disciplines, whereas ESAP is concerned with the needs of students in specific disciplines (Flowerdew, 2016). In what follows, the arguments for both approaches as far as writing is concerned, are presented.

### **2.5.1 English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)**

There are several arguments in favour of providing EGAP writing instruction. One of these arguments is that students will naturally acquire the language that is related to their fields of study or their content teachers will teach them that specialized language



(Flowerdew, 2016). Therefore, there is no need to teach such language (Spack, 1988). In addition, language teachers are generally more qualified to deal with language issues than discipline-specific content (Flowerdew, 2016).

### **2.5.2 English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)**

ESAP writing instruction seems to be based on the assumption that specific linguistic features are related to specific disciplines, and for students to study effectively in their disciplines they need to be competent users of these features (Flowerdew, 2016). In addition, ESAP provides the possibility for content teachers, who may not have the expertise to help students with language issues, and the EAP teachers to cooperate. Another argument in favour of ESAP is that students might be more motivated when they write texts that are related to their disciplines than writing general texts (Hadjiconstantinou & Nikiforou, 2012).

However, some scholars such as Pennycook (1997) and Benesch (2001) have criticized ESAP for being too pragmatic in trying to accommodate the needs of the institutions and for supporting the unequal relations of power in the classroom. This perspective gave rise to a more critical approach, i.e. Critical English for Academic Purposes (CEAP).

### **2.5.3 Critical English for Academic Purposes (CEAP)**

From a CEAP perspective, EAP instruction needs to be linked with questions of power, ideology and social justice (Macallister, 2016). Such a perspective views the classroom as a place where teachers and students challenge hegemonic power because a classroom is a place for liberation (McLaren, 2002). One of the major aims of CEAP is that critical practices inside classrooms can result in “reforms in academic institutions” and improved ‘conditions in the workplace and community’ (Benesch, 2001, p. xviii). Benesch (1999a) argued that CEAP had to shift from a “needs analysis” to a “rights

analysis” approach (p. 313). One of the aims of CEAP is to encourage students to become engaged with the power relations that frame writing contexts and to question the genres that are valued in their fields instead of simply reproducing them. In other words they needed to develop their own identities as writers (Storch, Morton, & Thompson, 2016).

Pennycook (1997), Benesch (2001) and Canagarajah (2002) reject the concept that EAP is the acquisition of some cognitive skills or the reproduction of valued texts. They argue that the aim of EAP should be developing students’ critical literacy (Storch et al., 2016). Such scholars also draw on the work of Lea and Street (1998) and Lillis and Scott (2007). Lea and Street (1998) emphasise the cultural and contextual nature of academic literacy, and call for a more student-centred approach that emphasises practices and the contextual factors that surround writing, rather than an exclusively text focused approach.

## **2.6 Academic literacy**

Spack (1997) defines academic literacy in tertiary education as “the ability to read and write the various texts assigned [in university]” (p. 3). Molle (2015) expands this definition viewing academic literacy as the students’ ability to make meanings in the various disciplines that hold value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. Braine (2002) notes that the foundations of acquiring academic literacy are knowledge of a specific field of study, skills for conducting research, and abilities to read and write. Similarly, Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) consider that academic literacy as a term is applied to the skills and the cultural knowledge that are essential for success in academic fields. Such a view foregrounds other types of literacy such as technological literacy or health literacy among others (Blue, 2010).

Zamel and Spack (1998) offer a similar perspective and argue that there is no generic literacy in the academy. Since students come from diverse backgrounds and study various disciplines, academic literacy now adopts multiple approaches to knowledge. Accordingly, the academic literacies concept was introduced to academia to reflect the complex and diverse pedagogical literacy practices in the various contexts and disciplines. Such a concept emphasises that academic language is one among many resources available for students to draw on when engaging with the learning process (Molle, 2015). Street (2015) suggests that in the literacy field, there is considerable agreement among scholars that it is not suitable to expect one single form of literacy, but rather there are various literacies particularly in international academic contexts.

### **2.6.1 Academic literacies**

The concept of academic literacies developed from the New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement (Barton, 2007; Baynham, 1995; Street, 1984) which views student writing from a sociocultural perspective. Academic literacies are defined as forms of “oral and written communication-genres, registers, graphics, linguistic structures, interactional patterns that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalised, or ritualised” (Duff, 2010, p. 175), showing that there is not a single academic literacy, but multiple ones. Another definition was proposed by Lillis and Scott (2007). They define academic literacies as a field that has epistemological and ideological perspectives towards the study of academic reading and writing.

In contrast to the language skills that EAP focuses on, academic literacies research puts the emphasis on people and what they do in specific social contexts. Lillis and Tuck (2016) note that academic literacies research tries to explore academic writing as a social practice through ethnographic methodologies. Such research stems from

language, literacy and ethnography studies of specific literacy practices without locating itself in a particular discipline (Russell et al., 2009) .

Student academic writing at tertiary level has been canvassed extensively in the literature. As noted earlier, views range from traditional ones which conceptualise academic writing as basically a cognitive skill that already resides in individuals' minds to the sociocultural models of writing which view academic writing as a social practice and meaning-making process (Tran, 2014). The dominant view among teachers and students is that writing is generic and transferrable (Balmer & Murcott, 2017; Lea & Street, 1998). This perspective implicitly involves the hypothesis that writing is concerned with a group of decontextualized skills that have little relationship to identity (Lea & Stierer, 2000b). However, an academic literacies perspective sees learning to write in the academy as learning to master various linguistic practices which are based on a complex range of discourses, identities, and values (Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 1999).

### **2.6.2 EAP vs. academic literacies**

Lillis and Tuck (2016) argue that both EAP and academic literacies came about because of an interest in bringing theory and practice together to help diverse students to succeed in communication in English-medium contexts. They suggest that both fields share an interest in making the often-implicit nature of academic conventions explicit. The authors also suggest that EAP and academic literacies researchers highlight the importance of “investigating academic literacy as a highly situated practice” (p. 36). Academic literacies and EAP both share an interest in the requirements of discourse.

However, Lillis and Tuck (2016) offer some basic differences between EAP and academic literacies in terms of their positions towards the phenomena they investigate, and among these differences are the following:

- The text is the main object under investigation in EAP, while the meaning-maker is the main object of investigation from the ‘academic literacies’ perspective.
- Standard English is the overt language of focus in EAP. However, in academic literacies, the specific nature of English is challenged since the focus on non-traditional students and their desire for various versions of English problematizes the taken-for-granted assumptions about having one acceptable form of academic English.
- The dominant metaphor that describes students’ participation from the EAP perspectives tends to be “novice-expert trajectory” (p. 36). This metaphor is also used in academic literacies; however, the diversity of the lived experiences and knowledge that students bring into the academy tend to be emphasised.
- EAP orientation to pedagogy is normative, while it is transformative in academic literacies. In other words, EAP research usually operates from the position that once students are introduced to target conventions and genres, they can be inducted into these unproblematically. In academic literacies, on the other hand, students and academic communities are responsible for “agility and responsiveness” because change is perceived as a characteristic of academic discourse (Lillis & Tuck, 2016, pp. 36-37).

### **2.6.3 The academic literacies model**

Over the last three decades, there has been a tendency in the literature to move away from a study-skills approach to the teaching and research of academic English at tertiary institutions to an academic literacies perspective (Murray, 2016). Lea and Street (1998) apply the term ‘academic literacies’ to their model that demonstrates different ways of inducting students into academic fields. Nallaya (2018) argues that the academic literacies model has been introduced as an alternative to other approaches that view literacies as separate skills students need to master. Advocates of the academic literacies

model view student writing and learning from the perspective of epistemology and identities, and not only surface language skills. Based on the findings of their research, Lea and Street (1998) described three stages of writing instruction: study-skills, academic socialisation, and academic literacies (see Figure 1 on page 47). In what follows, each model is discussed in more detail.

### **2.6.3.1 The study-skills model**

The study-skills model emphasises the surface features of a text. This model suggests that mastering the correct grammatical and syntactic structures, as well as punctuation and spelling, guarantees students' competence in academic writing (Gorska, 2012). In this model, writing is viewed basically as an individual and cognitive skill (Lea & Street, 2006) as well as an instrumental skill (Gorska, 2012). From the perspective of this model, students can transfer knowledge of writing and literacy across different contexts unproblematically. However, context is given little attention by the study-skills model. Despite this, Gorska (2012) notes that the study-skills model seems to be the dominant approach of learning support in most universities in the UK.

It should be acknowledged, nevertheless, that the study-skills model is important in that it provides students with foundational skills they need to engage in reading and writing at tertiary level. Several studies have advocated that programmes that teach study skills improve students' academic attainment (Fraser & Hendren, 2002; Henning & Manalo, 2012; Manalo, Wong-Toi, & Henning, 1996). A study by Knox (2005) found that a generic preparatory programme that included study skills enhanced students' sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy. In support of these findings, an earlier study by Tuckman (2003) had pointed out that students' performance in tertiary contexts could be improved when students engage in programmes that are designed to teach them cognitive and motivation strategies. The findings of Tuckman's study indicated that

students who attended a study-skills programme achieved significantly higher Grade Point Averages (GPAs) than those who did not attend.

### **2.6.3.2 The academic socialisation model**

The second model, academic socialisation, assumes that for students to become successful writers they need to be inducted into the genres of specific fields (Lea, 2008).

This approach suggests that conventions and genres of the disciplines are stable, i.e. once students master the basic rules of a particular academic context, they can then reproduce them in any other context without any problems (Lea & Street, 2006).

Hermerschmidt (1999) argues that the academic socialisation model views academic literacy practices as fixed and available for students to acquire and adapt to. This approach implies that students simply acquire the writing conventions of their disciplines without the need for specific training (Lillis, 2006). The academic socialisation model assumes that lecturers' effort in making the requirements of discipline-specific writing explicit to students is the main factor in helping students to become competent in academic writing (Street, 2009).

Lea and Street (2006) believe that the academic socialisation model recognises that disciplines use various genres and discourses to help students construct their knowledge in appropriate ways for the disciplines. However, Lea (2004) argues that this model fails to identify the multiplicity of communities of practice within the academy. Similarly, Tran (2014) notes that since the academic socialisation model suggests that students are inducted into the institution through learning the conventions of discourse, the model fails to address the issues of ideologies and power relations embedded in the conventions of discourse practices. Therefore, it cannot be called an instructional approach (Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

Furthermore, the social practice this model characterises shows that it shares a common basis with the study-skills model which views writing as a set of “instrumental skills and a transparent medium of representation” (Tran, 2014, p. 38). At school and tertiary levels, both the study-skills and academic socialisation models direct the development of curricula and the practices of teaching and research (Lea & Street, 2006).

### **2.6.3.3 Academic literacies model**

The third model, academic literacies, subsumes the features of the other models, and emphasises issues in student writing such as meaning-making, power and ideology (Street, 2009). This model focuses on the institutional nature of knowledge in any specific context (Lea & Street, 2006). To a certain extent, this model is similar to the academic socialisation model. However, the academic literacies model views the processes that facilitate acquisition of the appropriate uses of literacy as being complex. These processes involve both knowledge issues and social processes (Lea & Street, 1998). The academic literacies model allows a socially situated understanding of the processes in which writing in tertiary education is embedded (Jones, Turner, & Street, 1999; Street, 2015).

While the academic literacies model incorporates the other two models, it also critiques them. The study-skills and academic socialisation models are seen as limited. They seek to fix students’ deficits (Turner, 2011). Lillis and Tuck (2016) argue that the academic literacies model challenges the deficit view of writing in tertiary education. Writing is not seen as a mere tool for assessment, rather it is at the crux of learning (Lea, 2006).

The strength of the academic literacies model lies in the fact that it does not adopt the view that students can be inducted into the academic culture without any problems by engaging them in the practices of educators (Lea, 2004). As Arkoudis and Tran (2007) explain:



The literature reveals that the challenges international students may encounter appear to go far beyond the level of study skills and linguistic forms in writing. More important is the nexus between their own culture-situated interpretations of approaches to knowledge and academic writing, their personal values, and the specific requirements of a distinct discipline regarding these approaches (p. 158).

Lea (1999) also believes that the academic literacies model considers the variety of literacies in which students engage as part of their studies. She argues that the model acknowledges the varied identities that both writers and readers adopt when participating in the writing process.

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***Study skills:***

*Student deficit*

- 'Fix it'; atomised skills; surface language, grammar, spelling.
- Sources: behavioural and experimental psychology; programmed learning.

*Student writing as technical and instrumental skill*

***Academic socialisation:***

*Acculturation of students into academic discourse*

- Inducting students into new 'culture'; focus on orientation to learning and interpretation of learning task, e.g. 'deep', 'surface', 'strategic' learning; homogeneous 'culture', lack of focus on institutional practices, change and power.
- Sources: social psychology; anthropology; constructivism.

*Student writing as transparent medium of representation.*

***Academic literacies:***

*Student's negotiation of conflicting literacy practices*

- Literacies as social practices; at level of epistemology and identities; institutions as sites of/constituted in discourses and power; variety of communicative repertoire, e.g. genres, fields, disciplines; switching with regard to linguistic practices, social meanings and identities.
- Sources: 'new literacy studies'; critical discourse analysis; systemic functional linguistics; cultural anthropology.

*Student writing as meaning-making and contested.*

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**Figure 1: Models of students writing in higher education.**

**(Lea & Street, 1998, p. 172)**

The three models described above are helpful for researchers who wish to understand literacy practices, particularly writing, in a better way, and for developers of curricula and teaching programmes (Lea & Street, 2006). Canton et al. (2018) argue that academic literacies is the most influential conceptual model for writing practitioners at UK tertiary institutions. Since Lea and Street introduced the academic literacies model, it has been discussed in scholarly research, and it has been applied to several contexts outside the UK.

Nevertheless, the academic literacies model has been criticised for not being sufficiently developed as a pedagogical model. It is more focused on serving as a critique framework. For example, Lillis (2003) suggests that in contrast to the other two models, i.e. the study-skills and academic socialisation, the academic literacies model is vague in terms of pedagogic practice. Lillis (2003) argues that:

Whilst powerful as an oppositional frame, that is as a critique of current conceptualisations and practices surrounding student writing, academic literacies has yet to be developed as a design frame which can actively contribute to student writing pedagogy as both theory and practice (p. 192).

However, Lea's (2004) case study of an online postgraduate course offers some principles of course design based on the academic literacies model. This model takes into consideration the different texts involved in student learning. It is also important to highlight that Lea and Street (2006) stressed that the three models are overlapping, i.e. one does not deny the other. For example, both the academic socialisation model and the academic literacies model acknowledge the importance of the grammatical features highlighted in the study skills model but in addition they focus on the relationship between knowledge and acts of writing and literacy in the disciplines (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 2016). However, the academic literacies model goes further by focusing on the

relationship of epistemology and writing in terms of more general institutional requirements (Lea & Street, 2006) such as plagiarism or feedback. In addition, the academic literacies model is a useful critical research frame to identify limitations in writing instruction (Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). However, it must be acknowledged that research in this area has been based on limited case studies and ethnographic research (Lillis & Scott, 2007). This fact might be the reason that academic literacies researchers have not framed clear outlines for teaching writing.

As indicated earlier, students are expected to have knowledge of their chosen field of study, research skills, and good reading and writing abilities. This study is an attempt to contribute to an understanding of the academic writing experiences of Arabic-speaking students from the perspective of the academic literacies model. The study acknowledges the existence of multiple literacies that multiple disciplines require. Since the target participants in this study vary widely in terms of their backgrounds, they will be bringing varied realities into their tertiary disciplines. Therefore, this perspective is in line with the academic literacies concept that emphasises the importance of the writer as opposed to concentrating simply on the text.

## **2.7 Academic writing at tertiary level**

‘Academic writing’ has been conventionally used as an encompassing term to refer to the kind of writing practised in academic domains (McNamara, Morton, Storch, & Thompson, 2018). Over the past two decades, English academic writing has gained immense importance because of three basic developments (Hyland, 2013). These developments include the unprecedented expansion of tertiary education internationally, the fact that universities are increasingly becoming subject to “teaching quality audits by funding bodies” (Hyland, 2013, p. 54), and the fact that English has emerged as the international language of research and education. Most academics and students now

have to write research papers, assignments or theses in English. Writing is used as the main tool of assessment at the tertiary level in the Western world, and it is not unusual for several pieces of writing to make up 90% of the total mark of a course (Patel, Bakhtiyari, & Taghavi, 2011).

It is acknowledged that in order to succeed in their study programmes, students at tertiary level are required to master the academic literacies expected of them in their disciplines (Nallaya, 2018). Canagarajah (2001) argues that for students to become literate in English they have to “negotiate a place” for the discourse conventions that they bring with them, as well as for their intellectual traditions and unique cultural practices (p. 117). In addition, students are required to master other skills such as the ability to think critically and search databases to locate relevant information. Students are also expected to be familiar with academic conventions such as “referencing, use of formal register and the ability to manipulate a range of academic genres” (McWilliams & Allan, 2014, p. 3).

Students’ ability to produce written texts that meet the expectations of their lecturers is important for progress at university (Schulze & Lemmer, 2017). University students are often expected to write “with a high degree of precision” even before embarking on their degree programmes (Lillis & Turner, 2001, p. 65). Some argue that there seems to be an assumption among lecturers that students will develop academic writing skills easily and their writing will meet the standards expected of them at university (Gimenez, 2008; Skinner & Mort, 2009). A common assumption is that students need only grammar and structure to be able to construct a text, treating these parts of text writing as abstract and value-free (Canagarajah, 2002). However, writing is not only language or structure, but it is also a “representation of reality, an embodiment of values, and a presentation of self” (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 5).

In addition, when students are assessed through writing they are expected to critically engage (Benesch, 1999b) with the content of the references they consult through self-representation, i.e. student voice (Elbow, 1994, 2007). Student voice in academic writing is perceived as a student contributing to the academic debate in their academic field by presenting their views about the issues under discussion (Hyland, 2002).

Over the past two decades researchers in writing have examined the importance of enabling students to express their voices in writing by providing them with a sense of purpose and meaning, as well as motivation (Diltz, 2006; Elbow, 1994, 2007). Diltz (2006) advocates using several types of reflective writing exercises to help students to “activate” their voices (p. 41). She acknowledges the struggle many educators face in attempting to increase students’ interest in writing and to encourage them to move to reflecting their voices through generating their unique and individual ideas in writing (Nielsen, 2014).

Because of the importance of academic writing at the tertiary level, there have been concerns about the challenges students would encounter in writing (Skyrme, 2018). Research on the teaching and assessment of student writing indicates that academic writing constitutes a challenge for many students (Knight, Buckingham Shum, Ryan, Sándor, & Wang, 2018). Academic writing involves learning new rules in academia, and students need to learn how to play by these rules that vary across the disciplines (Dong, 1997). NESSs and NNESSs alike may find playing by these rules challenging as the audience and the objective of writing differ as the writing context differs. Previous research has reported a range of student writing problems in areas such as mechanics, i.e. grammar, spelling and punctuation (Baynham, Beck, Gordon, Lee, & San Miguel, 1994; Lea, 1995); ability to understand and explain facts (Russell, 1991); ability to develop an argument and structure (Lea & Street, 1998); and plagiarism (Baynham et

al., 1994; Currie, 1998). Research also showed that what is viewed as an adequate command of English writing differs from the students' countries to other host countries (Collins & Slembrouck, 2005; Preece & Martin, 2009). In light of the research highlighted above, the situation becomes more complicated when students have to write across the disciplines.

### **2.7.1 Writing across the disciplines**

From an academic literacies perspective, academic writing is essentially “situated in particular disciplinary cultures” (McNamara et al., 2018, p. 18). In other words, each context of study will have unique social and cultural practices that underpin the writing process within that context (Day, 2018; Lea & Street, 1998). Similarly, Strauss and Goodsir (2010) point out that writing in the academy is context-based, i.e. some ways of writing might be acceptable in some fields of study and not in others. They note that structure and argument are not standard concepts that can be transferred from one context to another. In this context, Bartholomae (2005) refers to the heterogeneous nature of writing across the disciplines at the tertiary level. He notes that:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community (Bartholomae, 2005, p. 60).

Clerehan, Moore, and Vance (2001) refer to two types of transition, which students find themselves required to negotiate when embarking on tertiary studies. They refer to vertical transition when students move from school to the tertiary context. The second type of transition is lateral, which refers to the discrepancies in the demands of the different disciplines. Therefore, when students take ways of knowing and writing as

solid constructs from one context to another, they often find that their attempts are “unsuccessful and [are] met with negative feedback” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 163).

Previous research indicates that there is a lack of consistency among academic staff regarding what counts as acceptable academic writing (Hardy & Clughen, 2012; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Tran, 2008), and academics have very different criteria for judging students’ writing. Hardy and Clughen (2012) argue that this difference among academics in their expectations of student writing means that each writing task results in “a unique set of particular expectations” (p. 26). This could mean students are uncertain as to what is expected of them by different lecturers. Joining academic disciplines involves processes that are more complex than acquiring the language of a particular discipline (Starfield, 2001). It also requires a thorough understanding of the context. Students can also be required to deal with different stylistic requirements from lecturers in the same discipline area (McNamara et al., 2018).

Lea and Street (2009) found that the difference in the writing requirements of degree programmes caused students to do what they called ‘course switching.’ In course switching, students find themselves forced to interpret the writing requirements of different fields. This switching does not just involve switching between different surface-level requirements of the course, but also switching between how to negotiate and represent knowledge in a specific discipline (Eriksson & Carlsson, 2013). From the students’ perspective, a mismatch exists between the writing they had learnt and the requirements of the new writing task. For students, frustration may become a barrier that prevents them from approaching that encounter as a learning opportunity (Eriksson & Carlsson, 2013). However, this frustration may not be evident for teaching staff who may assume that students might be lacking basic skills (Bailey, 2010). As indicated earlier, it has been suggested that teaching staff need to be more explicit about their

expectations of student writing across various disciplines (Bailey, 2010). In this context, the academic literacies research suggests that writing at the tertiary level does not simply mean acquiring decontextualized or transferable skills, but rather it focuses on what counts as knowledge in a given context (Lea, 2005).

### **2.7.2 Academic writing and students' knowledge**

The academic literacies approach explores factors outside the text that influence student writing (Clark & Ivanič, 2013; English, 1999; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998, 2000, 2009; Lillis, 2001). These factors include beliefs about student knowledge about writing practices and student voice in written texts (Tran, 2014). In other words, views of academic writing at tertiary level have moved away from considering it a decontextualized skill (Hyland, 2003). Focus has shifted to viewing writing as a tool for constructing and reflecting students' knowledge of content in an appropriate way (Bazerman, 2000; Hyland, 2013; McNamara et al., 2018; Simons, Van der Linden, & Duffy, 2000). In the same vein, Lea (1999) supports the belief that knowledge is not transferred but rather it is constructed when students interact with specific learning contexts. She notes that effective learning happens when students are able to acquire the practices they are expected to have in order to be full members of their academic community. However, Canagarajah (2011) problematizes the link between writing and knowledge. He argues that there is a multifaceted interaction between both, where knowledge leads to writing, and vice versa. This perspective is contrary to the common perspective that suggests that knowledge precedes writing. Wingate and Dreiss (2009) point out that the writing skills in general cannot be separated from content and ways of knowing.

Since academic writing is used for assessing and developing student knowledge and learning, evaluators of academic writing usually expect writing that reveals a student's



knowledge and understanding of the subject and shows originality by “crafting” their own narrative instead of copying from others (Day, 2018, p. 4). Academic writing has specific requirements in terms of “structure, organization and presentation” depending on its purpose (Day, 2018, p. 6). It adopts a formal style and follows the conventions in a specific discipline, which may require technical vocabulary and “agreed principles for citing and referencing” (Day, 2018, p. 6). Bruce (2013) further posits that discourse competence in academic writing requires knowledge of the social context, which includes the wider academic world and the discipline for which a written text is produced. Learners require knowledge of the content of a particular text and some functions and patterns of organising texts, as well as meta-cognitive knowledge that includes “the systems of the language including orthography (spelling), vocabulary, syntax and grammar” (Bruce, 2013, p. 3). Writing is also expected to follow the conventions of a given discipline, including structure and style and to use a method that is appropriate in the field, where “critical analysis” is evident (Day, 2018, p. 5).

### **2.7.3 Learning advice at tertiary level**

Students at tertiary level, regardless of their L1, may similarly encounter challenges in dealing with the demands of academic language which is nobody’s native language (Hyland, 2016a; Jenkins, 2014) since it has “disciplinary dialects” (Doyle, Manathunga, Prinsen, Tallon, & Cornforth, 2018, p. 7). However, dealing with these demands is clearly more difficult for those students who are struggling with their mastery of formal English. As well as students for whom English is a second language, others drawn from non-traditional backgrounds might also struggle more with the demands of academic English than their peers who have coped successfully in the traditional schooling system.

In many tertiary contexts in English-speaking countries, the presence of these students from different backgrounds creates challenges for tertiary institutions. On the one hand, institutions operate within a neoliberal ethos that adopts the notion of “universities as businesses” and students as “consumers to be satisfied” (Matthews, Dwyer, Hine, & Turner, 2018, p. 960). On the other hand, there seem to be some concerns that university standards are dropping because of the massification resulting from recruiting non-traditional and international students (Williams, 2005; Devos, 2003). Therefore, these cohorts needed more help than traditional students, which led to the opening of Student Learning Centres (SLCs) since the 1980s (Roberts & Reid, 2014).

### **2.7.3.1 Student Learning Centres (SLCs)**

In the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, SLCs are reported to share similar features, including the reasons behind establishing them and how they operate (Murray & Glass, 2011; Roberts & Reid, 2014). SLCs’ initial purpose was to help tertiary institutions to achieve their goals of promoting student retention and completion (Dunworth & Briguglio, 2010; Fraser, Manalo, & Marshall, 2010; Krause, 2001). SLCs offer workshops, provide resources and online support, as well as individual one-to-one learning advice consultations with Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) (Baldauf, 1997; Wilson, Collins, Couchman, & Li, 2011). Typically a consultation with a TLA lasts for about 30-60 minutes (Roberts & Reid, 2014). During a consultation, the TLA and the student work closely to discuss the student’s concerns, which may include “understanding how to interpret an essay question, structure an argument, or write in an appropriate academic style” (Roberts & Reid, 2014, pp. A-37). TLAs can also help students to understand referencing criteria (Laurs, 2010; Manalo, 2008; Roberts & Reid, 2014).

SLCs have witnessed regular restructuring (Percy, 2015; White & Schnuth, 1990) as they are operate outside the core institutional structures of faculties and departments. A survey of SLCs in Australia found that around two thirds of SLCs have witnessed restructuring and undergone changes in their leadership (Challis, Holt, & Palmer, 2009). Challis et al. (2009) argue that “volatility within the sector has been a consistent trend” and “a probable principal reason for this is a lack of clarity regarding the core business of such centres and the contested nature of academic development” (p. 383). Others believed that ambiguity about the role of SLCs could be partly attributed to the values that align more with the consumption culture of the private sector than the culture of the public sector (Marginson & Considine, 2000). This lack of clarity in the institutional role of SLCs means that TLAs find themselves in a position where they have to negotiate a place within the educational practices of the institution (Macdonald, Schneider, & Kett, 2013).

Since the present study is concerned with the situation of language support in the New Zealand context, the next section examines the situation of SLCs and the role of TLAs in New Zealand.

#### **2.7.3.2 Tertiary learning advice in New Zealand**

Beech (2018) notes that higher education is a key export industry for many industrialised nations. Fees paid by international students are “increasingly necessary to the financial well-being of the institutions at which they study” (Turner, 2011, p. 16). New Zealand is among the top five countries most affected by international student enrolments (Beech, 2018). Similar to the situation in other English-speaking countries, New Zealand witnessed massification in tertiary education due to the recruitment of unprecedented numbers of non-traditional students (New Zealand Ministry of

Education, 2007; Tertiary Education Advisory Commission, 2001) and international students (Kligyte, 2011).

SLCs in New Zealand are usually aligned with other student services such as counselling or advice departments instead of academic ones (Laur, 2010; van Rij-Heyligers, 2005). Tarling (1999) notes that in the University of Auckland in 1984 David Simpson proposed establishing a SLC. The proposed SLC had been preceded by a Counselling Service which provided study skills only. Simpson's proposal aimed for a "more pragmatic" action towards student learning problems in order to reduce "student wastage" (Tarling, 1999, pp. 99-100). The proposal for such a SLC opposed the view held then by a minority that the university is not responsible for teaching English to students who lack mastery of the language. When the proposal was endorsed by the University of Auckland in 1985, it started to offer several programmes including drop-in sessions, one-on-consultations, and study skills courses.

Early this century, TLAs who work in these SLCs in New Zealand formed the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand (ATLAANZ) (ATLAANZ, n.d.). For many TLAs in the New Zealand tertiary context, provision of literacy support has been within an unpredictable environment as most of them are recruited on a part-time basis (Cartner, 2008). This insecure status of TLAs may contribute to a negative feeling among students that their needs are not valued by the institution (McInnis, 1997). The feeling of marginalisation among TLAs could be evident in the existential questions appearing in the articles published by TLAs about their roles and identity, such as "Who are we?" (Carter & Bartlett-Trafford, 2008, p. 40). Several metaphors sum up the feeling of being marginalised and undervalued such as "field hands waiting at the back door" (Harris, 1990, p. 20), a "precarious niche" (Carter & Bartlett-Trafford, 2008, p. 45), or "fringe dwellers and in a precarious position"

(Trembath, 2006, p. 67). Some researchers have maintained that the perception of TLAs' work as remedial is attributed to one-to-one consultations, which represent the crux of the practice of many TLAs (Barkas, 2011; Wingate, 2006).

In her study, Strauss (2013) interviewed 21 TLAs from seven New Zealand universities to explore how they saw their role within their institutions and the impact of how they view their role on their work. Many TLAs indicated while they could offer enormous support, they believed that the attitude towards their job is that they are tasked with a remedial help for students who have a poor level of English. What may add to TLAs' feeling that their job is peripheral is the "sense of shame" expressed by some students if they need to seek help from TLAs (Strauss, 2013, p. 4). The study also found that while few lecturers and supervisors appreciate the work done by TLAs, the common attitude towards TLAs' work is that it is technicist, which may undermine other academic staff's perception of the value TLAs could offer. Therefore, TLAs may not be willing to approach the academic staff to discuss concerns raised by students. Furthermore, TLAs expressed a feeling of uncertainty and confusion regarding the restructuring witnessed by most of learning centres where TLAs are based. Among the findings of Strauss's (2013) study is that discipline lecturers' knowledge about the availability of language support in the institution seemed to be limited in most of the universities. Manalo, Marshall, and Fraser (2011) note that TLAs in the New Zealand context are "an endangered species" due to the restructuring or disestablishing of many SLCs, which ultimately jeopardises the TLA positions (p. 32).

Despite the overall gloomy view towards the TLAs' role, Carter and Bartlett-Trafford (2008) argue for the importance of the role TLAs play in the New Zealand tertiary institutions. They believe that TLAs are more aware of the diversity of students than many lecturers are because the latter usually meet students in large classrooms, while

the former meet students in one-to-one sessions. Therefore, TLAs are thought to have more useful insights that could help students to develop their academic literacy.

### *Generic language support*

Peach (2005) advocates that the skills that TLAs teach outside a discipline are not necessarily decontextualized. She notes that TLAs help students to develop a broader understanding of the nature of the tertiary environment. Canagarajah (2002) believes that teaching writing within a context of a specific discipline limits the orientation of the teaching process to that specific discipline; therefore, students are not encouraged to explore concepts beyond their field of study. He advocates the generic support approach as students are not expected to spend their whole lives in one field, and they may need to write for other fields. In addition, Swales and Feak (2012) refer to the financial aspect behind preferring a generic approach of writing support. They note that even universities with high financial capabilities may find appointing discipline-specific TLAs not feasible.

Among the criticisms that are levelled at providing learning and writing generic support is that it supports the fallacy that writing skills are decontextualized and could be separated from the content (Barkas, 2011; Lillis, 2001; Wingate, 2006). Furthermore, generic writing support has been criticised as the abilities it aims to enhance may not always be transferrable to students' further studies (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005). Due to the discrepancy between the writing students do on generic courses and the writing required in their disciplines, "learning transfer" (James, 2009, p. 69) represents another problem with generic language support. James's research indicates that students struggle to apply what they have learnt from writing instructors to academic writing tasks they need to perform outside the writing course. Students may not see the relevance of the support they receive for their tertiary studies (Butler, 2013). Therefore,

students' motivation to engage in any serious way with such support may be low, which raises the need for discipline-specific or embedded support.

### ***Embedded language support***

In the last two decades, there has been a tendency in tertiary institutions towards offering language support where literacy is embedded within disciplines. Some suggest that language support should be integrated within wider programmes of academic socialisation and literacies to be carried out in the first year of study (Beatty, Collins, & Buckingham, 2014; Göpferich, 2016).

It is argued that embedding academic literacies within the curriculum should improve the learning experiences of students and how they understand “the ways of researching, thinking, writing, questioning and practising in their discipline” (Thies, Wallis, Turner, & Wishart, 2014, p. A45). One reason for integrating language with disciplines is motivation. Students' motivation to write is improved when they are asked to write on topics which are relevant to their future careers (Beaufort, 2007; Johnstone, Ashbaugh, & Warfield, 2002). If students write on topics that seem irrelevant to their field of study, they may lose their enthusiasm to write, and the writing process per se loses its knowledge-construction function (Galbraith, 1999).

The tendency towards favouring embedded language support over the generic may have been reinforced by the academic literacies model of Lea and Street (1998) which assumes that each discipline has a specific discourse. Each discourse is framed within the epistemological system adopted by the members of a given discipline, which is not always stable. For Lea and Street, being a member of the community of a given discipline does not necessarily mean that one is an effective writer in that discipline. Students in different disciplines need to understand the processes and tools of how knowledge is communicated within each of these disciplines. Therefore, some suggest

that writing classes should “teach students discipline-specific writing conventions, in order to make them aware of what “good” writing means beyond the writing class” (Baratta, 2008, p. 1).

As a result of the support for embedding the development of academic literacies into disciplinary teaching, normative models of learning development (Jones et al., 2001) evolved. In other words, TLAs aim to hand over responsibility for teaching learning and writing skills to academic staff so that TLAs can then withdraw from direct involvement in teaching within the course (McMorrow, 2018). Discipline lecturers are ‘insiders’ of the discourse community in their field of study (Monroe, 2006). Therefore, they are seen as in the best position to induct students into the literacy practices expected of them in their discipline (Wingate et al., 2011). Writing lecturers, or TLAs, usually focus on the technical aspects of writing such as paragraphing and referencing (Kaldor & Rochecouste, 2002). They may not have expert discipline-specific knowledge. Discipline lecturers may consider technical aspects of writing as given and students should already be equipped with the level of literacy required for writing academically (Göpferich, 2016). In addition, discipline lecturers often feel that they do not have the expertise so they could teach academic literacies (Ferman, 2003; Bailey, 2010; Donahue, 2010), and they may not have sufficient time or motivation to learn (Chanock, Horton, Reedman, & Stephenson, 2012).

However, embedded writing support has been criticised based on various grounds. The main criticisms levelled at discipline-specific writing support have been the practical challenges in successfully implementing it (Butler, 2013). Green, Dymock, and Floyd (2017) point out that students may acquire knowledge of writing requirements across the disciplines through prolonged practice and exposure to epistemological expectations adopted in the different disciplines. Furthermore, embedded support requires TLAs to



closely cooperate with discipline lecturers who are already overwhelmed with tasks (Fanghanel, 2012; Göpferich, 2016).

## **2.8 Pathway courses**

Every year New Zealand receives many international students who come to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (Mol & Tin, 2008). Students whose L1 is not English are required to provide evidence that their proficiency in English meets the standard that enables them to successfully embark on tertiary study in English. Students can demonstrate that proficiency through presenting a score on standardised tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOELF) (Humphreys et al., 2012). The scores tertiary institutions require may vary based on the level and the type of course the students are applying for. For undergraduate courses, tertiary institutions usually ask applicants to provide an IELTS score of at least 6.0 (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Mol and Tin (2008) note that many international students in New Zealand and Australia enrol in pre-university courses, known as pathway courses, which are offered at a tertiary institution or private language school. Pathway courses are one form of embedded support, which have emerged as a result of internationalisation in tertiary education (Benzie, 2011). Pathway courses allow students, once they have completed the course successfully, to proceed to university studies without the need to obtain the requisite entry scores on one of the English proficiency tests such as IELTS or TOEFL (Dooey, 2010; O'Loughlin, 2009).

Pathway classes in New Zealand usually accommodate students from different language backgrounds and disciplines (Coxhead, 2011). Such courses are often not discipline-specific since students who attend them are not always clear on which university path they will take upon the completion of the pathway course (Mol & Tin, 2008). Holmes

(2004) suggests that NNESSs in New Zealand need better preparation for the shock they encounter in the new learning environment. She adds that pathway discipline-specific courses are among the methods that could be utilised to help students overcome the cultural and learning divide. Such courses provide valuable cultural, educational, and linguistic knowledge and emphasise the academic conventions adopted in specific learning contexts (Holmes, 2004).

In the Australian context, fee-paying students who are deemed underprepared for tertiary education because they are perceived to lack necessary academic or linguistic skills must complete short courses of 5 or 10 weeks before entering university. A small percentage of international students secure a place in a tertiary programme in Australian tertiary institutions based on an IELTS score (Kirkpatrick, 2016). However, the majority of international students get accepted into Australian universities through pathway courses (Birrell, 2006; Murray & O'Loughlin, 2007), which cater for students who could not meet the university's entry requirements (Dyson, 2014). It also seems that while some international students achieve the required IELTS score they opt for attending a pathway course hoping to become better equipped with the skills required for tertiary studies. Nevertheless, pathway courses have received insufficient attention in the scholarly research. The extent to which pathway courses are successful in preparing students for studies at the tertiary level has not been examined adequately (Benzie, 2011).

## **2.9 Help-seeking strategies**

In light of the challenges students encounter with the demands of academic writing, research indicates that help-seeking is an important strategy that positively affects student learning (Karabenick & Sharma, 1994). One type of help-seeking is adaptive which takes place when students encounter academic challenges and actively seek help

to meet the academic demands (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Scholarly research has found that adaptive help-seeking is an active strategy that helps students to succeed academically by overcoming challenges (Karabenick & Newman, 2013; Webb, Ing, Kersting, & Nemer, 2006; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001).

Help-seeking may differ from one context to another. For example, in a classroom in a school context, students usually seek help from their teachers who are expected to encourage them to ask questions. Such a relationship results in effective learning whereby students are expected to act as active learners and not passive ones (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Therefore, help-seeking is a dynamic relationship between a student and teacher (Williams & Takaku, 2011). In the Arabic-speaking world, research has found an alarmingly low level of seeking the help of a teacher or peers (Alghamdi, 2016).

In a tertiary context students usually develop a more dynamic relationship with their counterparts and seek help from them even though help is available for them from lecturers or TLAs. When reaching the tertiary level, students' metacognitive skills will have developed, which enable them to determine their need for help with academic aspects (Paris & Newman, 1990). However, research has found that adult students tend to intentionally avoid seeking help with their academic demands (Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001). Students at a tertiary level may believe that seeking help from lecturers or TLAs indicates a deficit and lack of agency, as well as dependency. Students may hold the perception that when they visit a SLC to have their writing 'fixed' they project themselves as incapable and lacking agency (Conroy, Lerner, & Siska, 1998; Lerner, 2002; Newman, 2000; Ryan et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, Volet and Karabenick (2006) found that help-seeking does not necessarily indicate dependency, instead it indicates that students who seek help when they

encounter challenges become less rather than more dependent on others when they face challenges in the future. Interestingly, the literature reveals that there are significant correlations between help-seeking and self-efficacy, i.e. an individual's belief in their capabilities (Bandura, 2006). Students with high self-efficacy tend to seek help, while students with low self-efficacy seem to be more reluctant to seek help when facing challenges (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Nelson & Ketelhut, 2008; Paulsen & Feldman, 2005; Pintrich & Zusho, 2002). In addition, research on correlation between self-efficacy in writing and achievement suggests that students who visit a SLC to seek help with writing receive better grades than the students who do not seek help, whether they were NESs or NNESSs. (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Ryan et al. (2001) found that high-achieving students are less likely to worry about others who may attribute their help-seeking to a lack of ability.

## **2.10 NNESSs' experiences with academic writing**

Students' ability to understand and critically evaluate an academic text and transform this understanding into a written or spoken form has been and continues to be an interest for scholars to explore (Alco, 2008; Andrade, 2006; Asmar, 2005; Braine, 2002; Chang, 2007; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Ninnes, 1999). Research has shown that NNESSs' unique writing practices from their past scholastic experiences influence their writing experiences at a later stage (Ellis, Taylor, & Drury, 2007; Hellstén, 2002). Sawir (2005) argues that no student starts a new learning journey as a 'blank sheet'. For her, all students are influenced by their already existing knowledge and the way they had learned to learn.

Unfortunately, NNESSs are challenged by a deficit remedial frame (Haugh, 2016) which views their presence in the university as a problem to be fixed and not an "asset to be welcomed" (Marshall, 2009, p. 41). According to this frame, the different ways of

knowledge construction are perceived as problematic in the English-medium institutions. Tran (2014) shows that NNESSs have been raised having their own ways of viewing the world, and they reflect this in writing. Accordingly, some approaches to knowledge in different cultures may influence the way NNESSs construct an argument in writing. In what follows, I present some empirical studies on the challenges facing NNESSs in English academic writing. In presenting these studies, I follow the work of Krause (2001), in which she categorises the challenges that students encounter in academic writing into two areas: 1) challenges within the broader education context; and 2) challenges posed by the writing process.

### **2.10.1 Challenges within the broader education context**

Ellis et al. (2007) investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of, approaches to writing on a biology course in an Australian metropolitan university using closed-ended questionnaires. The questionnaire was completed by 121 students. The study found significant relationships amongst different prior and post perceptions of writing and achievement. The findings suggest that the effective support of student writing experiences necessitates teachers' awareness of students' perceptions about the purpose of the writing programmes in which students are engaged. The findings also suggest that students' prior writing experiences had an impact on their perceptions of writing in the Australian context. Ellis et al. (2007) found that when students develop positive perceptions of the importance of writing for learning in their disciplines, and when they clearly understand the goals of the writing process, they achieve better in writing assignments and report a better quality of the learning experience.

Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) followed four NNESSs during their first year of graduate school to examine the ways they employed in learning how to write and think in their new discourse community. The four learners' writing reflected that they adopted

ways of writing and thinking that were different from the practices followed in their discourse community. The learners also expressed difficulty in organising ideas and structuring writing in a way that is acceptable to their fields of study. They reported difficulty in understanding the purpose of writing. These findings highlight that the ways NNESSs learn to write in their home countries and in English-speaking communities are considerably different.

### **2.10.2 Challenges posed by the writing process**

Kalikokha, Strauss, and Smedley (2009) explored the first-year Malawian students' perceptions of the essay writing process. Their findings showed that students felt that essay writing was challenging. The challenges included finding relevant references, paraphrasing, summarising, and using an acceptable writing style. The authors concluded that the challenges students face in writing are not only attributed to the students' lack of the basic writing skills, but also to the cultural shift they went through in their new institutions which hold different assumptions about and expectations of writing. This finding is in line with Brown's (2007) study, in which she points out that the difficulties with academic writing are attributed not only to language obstacles faced by NNESSs but also to the students' lack of understanding of academic writing requirements and expectations from tutors and institutions.

In the New Zealand tertiary context, Johnson (2008) investigated the challenges facing NNESSs. All the participants in her study had received English tuition, and the time of tuition ranged between 7 and 14 years. The participants reported that they found understanding written assignment requirements challenging, and all the participants reported similar reasons, which included "complex wording, too wide a topic choice or topics that were too general, and use of such terms as evaluate or discuss" (p. 236). The author argues that students' lack of training in academic literacies before embarking on

tertiary studies and lack of understanding what these studies involve contributed to the challenges the students encountered in New Zealand.

In the Asian context, Fujioka (2001) claims that Asian NNESSs encounter problems in grammar and vocabulary in English academic writing. Another study (Izzo, 1999) found that Japanese university students lack the organizational features in their English academic writing, and such difficulties were attributed to students' tendency to translate from Japanese to English. Evans and Morrison (2010) conducted a longitudinal study that explored undergraduate students' English writing in a tertiary context in Hong Kong. Among the areas that the students highlighted as the most problematic areas of academic writing was grammar.

In the same vein, Al-Jarf (2018) shows that the difficulties in EFL writing can be attributed to several reasons including the students' fear of making mistakes, lack of grammar, inability to "generate ideas" in the L2 (p. 1), and lack of vocabulary. The latter has often been cited as a major challenge that students encounter in academic English (Durrant, 2016).

Nevertheless, the previous learning experiences of Arabic-speaking students and their impact on students' ability to write in English do not appear to have been adequately explored in the relevant scholarly research, especially in English-medium contexts. Therefore, it is of importance to listen to students in order to learn about their past language learning experiences and to explore their attitudes towards studying at an English-medium institution, where assessment is mostly carried out through writing.

## **2.11 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the theoretical framework that underpins the present study. The chapter has shown how the traditional view of literacy has changed from viewing it

as a neutral practice to seeing it as social practice. The chapter has also presented a comparison between EAP and academic literacies. The academic literacies model was outlined in detail in this chapter. In addition, the formation of SLCs and the challenges faced by TLAs seeking to counsel students experiencing difficulties with academic writing have been presented. The following chapter reviews the relevant literature and presents challenges associated with diversity of students in tertiary education. Relevant empirical studies on the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter in English writing will be reviewed in Chapter 3, and the gap this study attempts to fill will be highlighted.



## Chapter 3 Literature review

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the relevant empirical studies associated with the main areas of interest in the present study. These areas are firstly, the challenges facing Arabic-speaking students in English academic writing; and secondly, the impact of prior learning on students' writing proficiency.

The chapter starts with an overview of the spread of the English language and then moves to a discussion of the background of international, including Arabic-speaking, students in New Zealand.

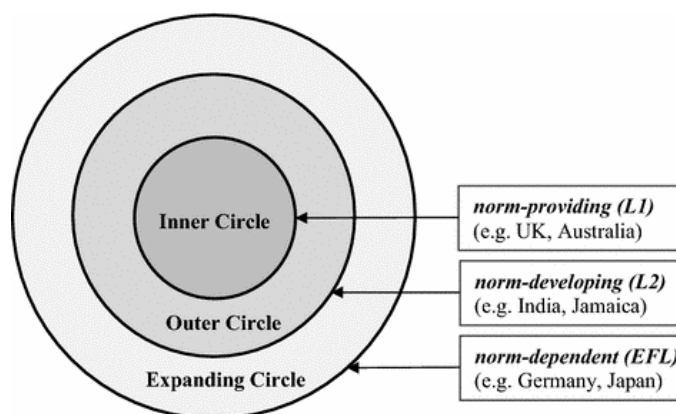
### 3.2 English as a global language

Over the last three decades, the debate around the spread of English as a global language has been informed by two main paradigms: World Englishes (Kachru, 1992) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011). In this context, Pennycook (2017) notes:

While the World Englishes approach has framed its position as a struggle between the former colonial centre and its postcolonial offspring, the English as a lingua franca approach has located its struggle between so-called native and non-native speakers (p. ix).

Kachru (1992) presents the World Englishes model where he divides the world into three concentric circles (see Figure 2 below). First, the Inner Circle consists of places where English is the dominantly-used language by the majority of the population including the UK, the US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Second, the Outer Circle consists of countries that were colonised by Britain and the US such as India and Singapore where English enjoys a strong status. Third, the Expanding Circle includes all countries that do not fall within the Inner or the Outer Circles where English is not

institutionalised as an official language but its importance as a FL is recognised in instructional settings, tourism, trade or international communication. Examples of countries from the Expanding Circle are China, Egypt, Japan, Korea, and Saudi Arabia (Kachru, 1992).



**Figure 2: Kachru's World Englishes model**

(Adapted from Kachru, 1992)

While Kachru's model has been very significant in highlighting the changing expansion of English, it has been criticised for being unable to consider the heterogeneity of the communities that use English. In other words, the model has assumed that the political histories of different countries can be simply divided into three major circles (Park & Wee, 2009). In addition, the model has been criticised for being tied to national identities (Pennycook, 2017). Pecorari (2018) argues that the acknowledged status of English as a global language means that the number of individuals learning and teaching it is increasing globally. The Arab world, as part of the Expanding Circle, is no exception (Green, Fangqing, Cochrane, Dyson, & Paun, 2012). English language learning in the Arab world is motivated by a desire to actively participate in global business, politics, and tourist economies (Abdo & Breen, 2010).

The second paradigm is the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) one. ELF has been defined as the language of contact between people who do not have a shared native tongue or a common culture, and who choose English as a language for communication

(Cogo, 2018). This paradigm has resulted as dissatisfaction with Kachru's model has grown. ELF seems more promising as it does not work with nation-based linguistic models. However, while the ELF paradigm has been able to avoid some of the problems of the World Englishes, it has never engaged adequately with questions of power (Pennycook, 2017).

### **3.3 Diversity in tertiary education**

As indicated in the introductory chapter, the demographics of English-medium tertiary institutions have rapidly changed in recent decades as they have witnessed an influx of enrolments resulting in internationalisation of campuses (Cheng et al., 2016; Neumann, Padden, & McDonough, 2019; Schoepp, 2018). According to the OECD report (2018), the number of international students enrolled in tertiary programmes worldwide has “exploded” over the past two decades, rising to 5 million in 2016 from more than 4 million in 2013 and 2 million in 1999 (p. 224). The number is expected to rise to 7 million by 2020 (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). The report shows that 3.5 million international students enrolled in the OECD countries in 2016. The largest number of international student enrolments in 2016 were in in the US, the UK, Australia, France, Germany, Canada, and Austria (OECD, 2018).

In such a context, English has become the language for academic interaction in tertiary education (Koo, 2009) and the large numbers of students enrolling at English-medium tertiary institutions have been associated with concerns about students' English language proficiency (Neumann et al., 2019). Stakeholders of tertiary education continually express their frustration about the low English language skills of NNESSs (Haugh, 2016). New Zealand tertiary institutions share these concerns (Johnson, 2008).

### **3.4 International students in New Zealand**

New Zealand has been involved in international education since the 1950s when the country received international students through the Commonwealth Colombo Plan (Smith & Rae, 2006; Rapley, 2017). Similar to the situation in many English-speaking countries, New Zealand received more international students in the 1980s (Smith & Rae, 2006; Vaccarino & Dresler-Hawke, 2011; Butcher, 2009; Butcher, 2010). The country has moved from tertiary education for a homogenous group of students to internationalisation since approximately 2000 (Leach, 2013). International education is the fifth largest export industry in New Zealand contributing \$2.6 billion to the country's economy and creating 28,000 jobs annually (Joyce, 2013). The New Zealand government aims to double that economic value from \$2.6 billion to \$5 billion by 2025 through increasing international student enrolments (Joyce & Woodhouse, 2013).

According to official statistics, the number of international students enrolled with New Zealand education providers (including schools, English language schools (ELs), Private Tertiary Establishments (PTEs), Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs), and universities) in 2017 was 125,392 (Education New Zealand, 2018). In 2018, the New Zealand eight universities received 30,422 international students (Education New Zealand, 2019). Johnson (2008) shows that since the late 1990s the overall increase in the number of international students studying at tertiary level in New Zealand is 400%. One of the cohorts of international students in New Zealand is Arabic-speaking students who are the subject of the present research project.

#### **3.4.1 Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand**

Arabic is the official language in 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Beeston, 2017). English is spoken widely in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which consist of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar,

Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain due to the presence of various expatriate communities (Sharifian, 2009). The nationals of the GCC countries can get a visitor visa on arrival in New Zealand which enables them to study in the country for up to 12 weeks without the need to apply for a student visa (Immigration New Zealand, 2019). Students from the rest of the Arabic-speaking countries are required to apply for a student or visitor visa prior to their arrival in New Zealand. The GCC countries are oil exporting and wealthy countries (Salehi-Isfahani, 2016), whereas most of the other Arabic-speaking countries have limited natural resources.

In the last decade, New Zealand and the GCC countries started to build relationships in various areas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2013) including the education sector. While Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand represent the ninth largest student market among all other nationalities, Saudi Arabia is the largest Arabic-speaking market whose citizens have enrolled with New Zealand education providers (Ministry of Education, 2018). According to official figures, the enrolments of Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand increased from 2,143 in 2006 to 6,343 enrolments in 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2013). The number of Saudi students in particular in New Zealand grew because of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Scholarship Programme (Shaw, 2009). However, from 2016 onwards, the number of enrolments of Saudi students began to decline due to changes in the rules for the Scholarship Programme by the government of Saudi Arabia, which affected the total number of Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand. These numbers dropped to 2,131 in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2018). The statistics show that these students come mainly from the GCC and other Arabic-speaking countries including Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Yemen and Tunisia.

In response to the increasing numbers of international students, the New Zealand government has put different regulations into effect to organise the relationship between education providers and international students. Such regulations included the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students (2010 & 2016). The Code aims to ensure that education providers in New Zealand take care of international students and ensure their safety (NZQA, 2016). Nevertheless, and similar to the situation in many English-speaking contexts, an influx of international students creates concerns about whether students are adequately prepared to undertake academic studies through the medium of English. To attend to these concerns, English language proficiency tests have been used to determine the English ability of students whose L1 is not English or who have not studied at an English-medium institution (Hayes & Read, 2004). One of the commonly used tests of English is the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is widely used in the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is usually accepted by US tertiary institutions as proof of English proficiency (Badger, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2018).

Starting from 1991, New Zealand tertiary institutions opted for the IELTS as a measure of students' language proficiency for acceptance into programmes (Read & Hayes, 2003). The increasing importance attached to these tests in the education sector raised questions about their influence on teaching and learning, suggesting the impact of tests had a negative effect on language learning (McKinley & Thompson, 2018). The IELTS test and its relation to the tertiary context is discussed in further detail in 3.5 below.

### **3.5 The International English Language Testing System (IELTS)**

The IELTS is a high-stakes test that measures the English-language proficiency of individuals who have academic or professional goals (O'Sullivan, 2018). The main

objective behind the IELTS was to guide decisions about giving NNESSs access to English-medium tertiary institutions (Green, 2019). The IELTS has both Academic and General Training modules, and test takers choose to sit for the module that suits their needs.

In the 1970s, the English Language Testing Service (ELTS) was inspired by the increasing need for focus on teaching and assessing language for specific purposes (West, 1994). The ELTS was developed by a team of staff led by Brendan Carroll from the British Council, and the test was the first one to assess language proficiency for academic purposes in 1980 (Milanovic, 1996; Weir & O'Sullivan, 2017), replacing the English Proficiency Test Battery (EPTB) which had been developed in the 1960s (Freimuth, 2017). The ELTS was revised and the name was changed reflecting its increasing international use and became the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in 1989 (O'Sullivan, 2018). Later in 1995, and after evaluation for 6 years, further revisions were made (Freimuth, 2017). These revisions resulted in changes in the format and the focus of the test (O'Sullivan, 2018). While the TOEFL had been in place for some time in the US context, the IELTS was the first test to assess the four skills (O'Sullivan, 2018). Currently, the IELTS is administered by centres in more than 140 countries globally, bringing the annual number of test-takers around the world to 3 million in September 2017 from 1.5 million in 2011 (IELTS, 2017).

This section focuses on the Academic module of the IELTS. The Academic module requires candidates to write a report of around 150 words based on a table or diagram for Task 1. For Task 2, candidates are asked to write a short essay of around 250 words discussing an issue or giving their opinion about a topic. Candidates are given 60 minutes to complete the two writing tasks (Uysal, 2009). More weight is given to Task 2 in marking than Task 1. The importance of this is that it may influence students'

emerging understanding of what academic writing in Western universities is (Moore & Morton, 2005). Currently, IELTS bands 6.0 and 6.5 are the most common entry scores required for entry at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012). However, some programmes might require a higher entry score as might some universities (e.g. 7.0) (Green, 2007). These scores are below those recommended by the IELTS organisation as suitable levels for academic study (IELTS, 2019) as Table 1 below shows:

**Table 1: Acceptable IELTS band score requirements for different programmes.**

<b>Band Score</b>	<b>Linguistically demanding academic courses</b>	<b>Linguistically less demanding academic courses</b>
7.5 – 9	Acceptable	Acceptable
7.0	Probably acceptable	Acceptable
6.5	English study needed	Probably acceptable
6.0	English study needed	English study needed
5.5	English study needed	English study needed

**Adapted from IELTS (2019).**

Therefore, it is evident that tertiary institutions do not follow IELTS guidelines that stipulate that students with a band score of 6.0 are probably not equipped to deal with the demands of tertiary study. In spite of the fact that IELTS recommendations are not followed, tertiary institutions and lecturers in most English-speaking countries seem to assume that NNESSs are ready for tertiary study, and for the demands of academic writing, if they achieve a certain level determined by the institutions themselves in standardised tests such as the IELTS (Pilcher & Richards, 2017). It is not surprising that, given this assumption by the tertiary institutions, students will also assume they will cope with the language demands of their chosen course of study when they achieve a particular score on the IELTS test.



### **3.5.1 Washback effect**

The term ‘washback effect’ refers to the impact of testing on the design of curricula, teaching practices, and learning behaviours (Hughes, 2003). This impact operates in ways that affect the choices learners and teachers make. For example, teachers may teach for the test, and learners may concentrate on what helps them pass tests, assignments and exams rather than what they can gain from the discipline (McKinley & Thompson, 2018).

McKinley and Thompson (2018) argue that the washback effect in language testing can be positive (beneficial) or negative (harmful). A positive washback results when procedures of testing encourage good teaching practices, e.g. introducing an oral proficiency test based on the expectation of promoting the teaching of speaking skills. A negative washback occurs when the content or format of a test is based on a narrow definition of language ability, which limits the context of teaching and learning (Taylor, 2005). Davies et al. (1999) offer the following illustration: “If, for example, the skill of writing is tested only by multiple choice items then there is great pressure to practise such items rather than to practise the skill of writing itself” (p. 225). Therefore, instructional goals may be abandoned for the sake of test preparation.

Empirical research that investigated the washback effect of the IELTS on students’ academic achievement has offered varied findings. Researchers examined the washback effect of IELTS scores, IELTS preparation courses, and the IELTS writing content.

#### **3.5.1.1 IELTS scores**

On the one hand, some researchers found statistically significant correlations between students’ scores on the IELTS and academic performance. Woodrow (2006) found a moderate correlation between students’ overall IELTS score, writing, speaking and listening sub-scores, and Grade Point Average (GPA). Similarly, Cotton and Conrow

(1998) found moderate correlations between students' reading and writing sub-scores on the IELTS and self-assessment, as well as faculty assessments. On the other hand, some researchers found that students' IELTS scores and academic achievement, measured through GPA, had weak, no, or negative relationships (Arrigoni & Clark, 2015; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Oliver, Vanderford, & Grote, 2012). Therefore, some have challenged the power invested in the IELTS and argued that students' readiness in English should be determined within the context of their chosen subject (Pilcher & Richards, 2017).

More recently, Neumann et al. (2019) examined the correlation between international students' academic performance, language proficiency and academic self-concept (ASC). The sample of the study was first-year undergraduate international students studying business programmes at an English-medium university in Canada. The data of the study included students' grades in degree programmes courses, annual GPA, and English Proficiency Tests scores and sub-scores. The authors referred to the lack of clarity in the relationship between students' IELTS scores and their subsequent academic achievement. They suggest that obtaining information about students' academic self-concept (ASC) may offer valuable information that helps in anticipating students' academic success in the future. They define ASC as a concept that is "related to the personal perception of the self in the academic domain and is generally measured through self-report data" (p. 327). Their findings showed that students' ASC and language abilities have an impact on their consequent academic achievement in the school and tertiary contexts. The importance of this study lies in the fact that L2 students must be viewed in the wider context in which they practise literacy.

### 3.5.1.2 IELTS preparation courses

Other studies examined the washback effect of the IELTS preparation courses on learners (Green, 2003, 2006, 2007). In his study, Green (2006) examines the expectations students bring to IELTS preparation courses and compares them with student experiences reported at the end of the course. The author also investigated the impact of teacher priorities on learners preparing for the writing section of the Academic Module of the IELTS. The findings from the study show that both the teachers and the students had different expectations about the courses and their outcomes. In the beginning of the course, the students had expectations about instruction, which differed according to the course aims. In addition, the findings show that the outcomes of IELTS preparation courses included the description of graphs and diagrams which are required in Task 1 of the writing section, whereas the outcomes of the non-IELTS courses entailed “referencing, learning about university writing tasks and learning about differences in university study across cultures” (p. 131). The latter outcomes are viewed as aspects about which learners on the IELTS preparation courses may not have received sufficient tuition (Green, 2006).

In another study, Green (2007) compares three different courses that aimed at preparing students for entry into tertiary studies. The courses are: an IELTS preparation, academic writing, and a combination of the two. The study aimed at finding whether students’ test scores had improved after receiving instruction in writing skills on each course.

Furthermore, another purpose of the study was to determine whether there were any significant differences between course types and students’ test scores if variables such as course length and learner background had been considered in the analysis. The author used questionnaires and pre- and post-tests to collect the data over a period of 4 to 14 weeks. In the test preparation course, no significant improvement in students’ writing skills was found. The findings by Green (2007) challenge the power attached to

preparation courses to deliver the anticipated outcomes. Students' scores on courses 1 and 2 (the IELTS preparation and the combined one) did not improve greatly when compared to students' scores on the second type of course, i.e. the pre-sessional EAP courses (which do not focus on IELTS preparation). Furthermore, the findings show that the instruction based on the test did not raise students' scores. The study found that the courses that are confined to test preparation may not necessarily be more effective than other courses that have a wider range of foci in improving students' test scores.

In the New Zealand context, Hayes and Read (2004) investigated the washback effects of the Academic Module of the IELTS test. The authors compared an IELTS preparation course with a full-time General English course. The duration of each course was four weeks, and both courses aimed at developing students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, which are needed for the Academic Module of the IELTS.

While the two courses shared the same aim, they differed in their objectives and structures. The IELTS preparation course was described as one that aimed at preparing the students for the techniques they needed for the test and not for language in general. The General English course was described as one that is topic-focused and aimed at developing students' academic English skills rather than just familiarising them with the test. Using interviews, class observations, questionnaires, and pre- and post-tests, the authors found clear evidence of washback effects in the IELTS preparation course. However, such effects did not appear to be the kind of positive ones predicted before conducting the study. In other words, the focus of teacher and students in the IELTS preparation course was on practising the tasks required for the test and not developing academic language. The General English course was found to cover a range of needs required in academic study and to promote students' language development in general (Hayes & Read, 2004).

### 3.5.1.3 IELTS writing content

The IELTS has unique ideological and psychological aspects that are based on concepts of “grammatical accuracy, accurate spelling, spontaneity and flexibility” (Pilcher & Richards, 2017, p. 6). To achieve the IELTS score they need, students have to master these aspects (Moore, 2011) as they are part of the marking criteria for the various sections of the test (Aish & Tomlinson, 2012). While writing for tertiary courses is always based on prior reading of the existing literature in the field, the IELTS writing Task 2 usually includes the following instruction:

You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience and support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence (Weigle, 2002, p. 158).

The instruction above entails a striking difference between university writing and the IELTS writing. The difference is the need to support any writing for tertiary courses with evidence from the existing literature, while in the IELTS writing, candidates are encouraged to use their knowledge and personal experience when writing to support their points without any backup evidence (Uysal, 2009).

The typical academic writing tasks for tertiary studies were evidenced in Horowitz’s (1986) ground-breaking study which drew on the analysis of 50 writing tasks set for students at a US university. Horowitz’s analysis was based on the information sources to be used by students in conducting the task. He recorded some categories that were largely used by the students in written assignments including summarising reading, reporting on a certain participatory experience, connecting theory to data, conducting a case study, synthesising various sources and doing a research project. The research indicates that most of the assignments required students to do research whereas tasks that required students to base their writing on their personal experience were minimal.

Moore and Morton (2005) found in their research that almost all the university writing tasks they investigated contained a research component that required the use of either primary or secondary sources, or both. However, the IELTS Task 2 items were found to be mostly framed around the use of prior knowledge of the candidate. Moore and Morton (2005) also found that a major rhetorical function that is predominately used in the IELTS writing tasks was hortation (Liu & Stapleton, 2018). In prompts that include hortation, students need to comment on the desirability of a given action. These tasks are framed within the notion of should-ness (Moore & Morton, 2005). In contrast, hortation was relatively rare in the university writing tasks investigated by Moore and Morton (2005). A basic requirement of the essay at tertiary level appears to be writer's ability to show a critical stance through the text (Bruce, 2016). Therefore, Moore and Morton (2005) concluded that the writing section in the IELTS resembles non-academic genres, and it should not be considered as similar to the type of writing required in the tertiary context.

Daher (2014) investigated the perceptions of Arabic-speaking students of the predictive validity of the IELTS test. The participants were 30 students whose IELTS scores ranged between 6 and 7.5. The author aimed to see if the students who were studying at a tertiary institution in the UK believed that IELTS writing is similar to the academic demands required in the Western university context. The results show that around 67% of the participants perceived the IELTS score as an accurate indicator of their ability in English. However, the participants viewed the IELTS test and their scores on the test as a generally poor predictor for their academic performance at university. The students also felt there was a mismatch between the IELTS and the challenges they encountered with the study skills required at tertiary level. Daher (2014) found that around 73% of the respondents disagreed with the concept that the IELTS writing indicates their ability to write academically. They emphasised critical writing as an important skill for their

tertiary studies. The sample also indicated the differences between the skills required at university and those included in the IELTS writing section. In the former context, the students felt that they needed skills such as “summarising, evaluating, and making a stance compared to the skills required in the IELTS writing sub-test” (p. 414).

A study by Lewthwaite (2007) appears to be in contrast to most of the research. The aim of Lewthwaite’s (2007) study was to identify the attitudes of teachers and students in an Arab university towards the usefulness of the two writing tasks on the IELTS test in preparing candidates for tertiary study at an English-medium university. The participants in his study were 17 teachers and 36 students. Most of the participants strongly agreed that learning to write for Task 1 is good preparation for university study. Teachers mainly believed that the exam required candidates to engage in “higher-order thinking” through identifying the most and least relevant data and categorising information (Lewthwaite, 2007, p. 5). The students acknowledged the benefit of acquiring the writing skills required for Task 1, and such a perception was echoed in comments such as

.. it helps me when I study or reading [sic] because it summarise [sic] the information...because in my faculty [Engineering/ Business] I will face graphs and charts and it’s also useful for my career (p. 6).

While teachers highlighted differences between the IELTS writing section and the writing tasks at tertiary level, they viewed the IELTS writing as a suitable guide for teaching practices. The study found that teachers and students felt that the IELTS Tasks 1 and 2 as had a positive impact on class-based writing skills and a relationship with skills required for tertiary studies. Furthermore, the majority of teachers agreed that the type of writing required for Task 2 would indicate which students are likely to write well at university and those who have higher cognitive skills that could help them survive university. The author indicates that candidates who can adequately respond to

the IELTS writing tasks are likely to become literate in English and ultimately survive in the university context. These writing tasks include describing, summarising, interpreting and justifying opinions on topics that are mainly relevant to some social or economic events or ideas. The students highlighted the relevance and usefulness of Task 2 for academic language at tertiary level. Some teachers identified that Task 2 is “non-academic” in nature, since it asks candidates to draw on their personal opinion and not on empirical evidence (Lewthwaite, 2007, p. 7).

However, it should be noted that the study was conducted in an Arabic-speaking country, and the participants may not have much insight into what was demanded at the English-medium institutions they hoped to attend. While the findings from Lewthwaite’s (2007) study show that students and lecturers believe that the IELTS was useful it did not appear from the article that either the lecturers or the students had experience of the writing required in various disciplines in English-medium institutions. Therefore, the findings from that context may not be applicable to an English-medium tertiary context where assessment is mostly done through writing.

### **3.6 Status of English in the Arabic-speaking world**

English has become an important factor in disseminating political, social and educational norms, which in turn has given great importance for learning English throughout the world, including the Arabic-speaking world (Kirkpatrick & Barnawi, 2017). Tsui and Tollefson (2007) show that globalisation depends heavily on technology and English. To keep up with these changes “all countries have been trying to ensure that they are adequately equipped with these two skills” (p. 1).

In many contexts in the Arab world, interest in learning English and obtaining a qualification from a country that has a ‘Western’ system of education has been increasing (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015). English ability has become equivalent to success



in academic disciplines, and ambitious students are often recommended to obtain a qualification from an English-medium university (Kirkpatrick & Barnawi, 2017). In addition, English is the language of instruction in most tertiary institutions in the Arabic-speaking world, and it is compulsory for students in fields such as science, engineering, health care, nursing, medicine, and pharmacy (Badry & Willoughby, 2016; Boraie, Arrigoni, & Moos, 2017). The need for communication and dialogue has become a necessity in a new world structure, and the Arabic-speaking nations can no longer live in isolation from the rest of the world (Mahmoud, 2015). As such, Arabic-speaking students' attitudes towards English as a global language are likely to be influenced by the changes taking place in many Arabic-speaking countries (Palfreyman & Al-Bataineh, 2018). These changes ultimately influence the lives of people, both personally and professionally.

On the personal level, the use of social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter has boomed among young Arabic-speaking people (Al-Jarf, 2018). The evolution of English as a lingua franca is expected to continue in the near future (Kirkpatrick & Barnawi, 2017). Technology, which came originally from either the US or the UK, has become part of almost all aspects of life – at university, at home, at work, and using it is greatly dependent on knowledge of English (Bacha, Ghosn, & McBeath, 2008).

Therefore, English has become a facilitator for communication among people (Ahmad, 2016). In addition to the social status associated with mastering a language other than Arabic, proficiency in English is crucial for intercultural communication and social relationships with people from different cultures. Such an attitude towards English has linked mastering it to gaining positions of prestige within the Arabic-speaking nations (Al-Issa, 2017).

On the professional level, a person who has a strong command of English is advantaged and preferred in the job market in the private and public sectors in the Arab world (Al-Hazmi, 2017). Yahya (2012) notes that English is the most important criterion for someone applying for a job or seeking an offer of place from a tertiary institution. In the GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, there has been a rapid integration of the economies and societies into the “global markets and [a] massive influx of expatriates to staff all sectors of the economy,” which has resulted in making English the language of communication (Badry & Willoughby, 2016, p. 194).

Some Arabic-speaking countries in North Africa use French as the language of instruction because of their close ties with France (Click, Drewry, & Khalifa, 2016) but English is a more popular choice. In 1940, the Arabic-speaking world had only ten universities. By the year 2000 the number had increased to 140 universities and then to 260 in 2007 (Romani, 2009). In 2011, the number of universities was 398 (Wilkins, 2011). Boraie et al. (2017) surveyed the universities in the Arabic-speaking countries that use English in teaching. Table 1 below shows the number of English-medium universities (referred to as EMUs) in each country:

Table 2: EMUs in the Arabic-speaking countries

Arabic-speaking country	Number of EMUs
Algeria	0
Bahrain	15
Comoros	0
Djibouti	0
Egypt	17
Iraq	6
Jordan	6
Kuwait	7
Lebanon	8
Libya	0
Mauritania	0
Morocco	1
Oman	25
Palestine	3
Qatar	9
Saudi Arabia	21
Somalia	7
Sudan	3
Syria	5
Tunisia	0
UAE	41
Yemen	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>

(Adapted from Boraie et al, 2017, p. 247)

The table above reflects a growing tendency in the Arab nations towards adopting English as the language of instruction across the disciplines at the tertiary level since around 47% of the universities in the Arabic-speaking world have adopted English as the medium of instruction. According to Weber (2011), in the period between 2000 and 2007, around 40 American, Australian and British tertiary institutions opened branch campuses in the UAE and Qatar alone. With the growing acceptance of the importance of English, education policies in Arabic-speaking countries have come under scrutiny.

The following section presents the English language education policies in several Arabic-speaking countries.

### **3.6.1 English language education policy in the Arab world**

Le Ha and Barnawi (2015) argue that education policies and reform initiatives in the Arabic-speaking countries, mainly in the GCC, indicate that learning English has become a national mission, and the aim behind inclusion of English is to internationalise education. In Saudi Arabia, the largest country in the GCC, several factors contributed to accelerating reforms in English education policy. These factors included the geopolitical reality of English as a global language, the impact of 9/11 on the Muslim countries, the Arab Spring (the anti-government uprisings across the Middle East), and the global financial crisis in 2008 and its effect on labourers conditions globally and locally (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017).

In light of the factors mentioned above, the Saudi government has been spending billions of dollars to internationalise its public and tertiary system by encouraging local education institutions to get involved in partnerships and joint programmes with overseas tertiary providers (Barnawi, 2016).

In another Arabic-speaking country, Oman, the government has adopted English as the only official FL (Al-Issa, 2006). In the Omani context, English is essential in various fields such as tourism and business (Al-Issa, 2006). The government has adopted English as a tool to ‘Omanise’ the country, whereby foreign skilled labour are replaced with Omanis (Al-Issa, 2006).

While Arabic is the official language in Kuwait, another major member in the GCC, the country is linguistically diverse since 66% of the population are expatriates (Tryzna & Al Sharoufi, 2017). Since late 19<sup>th</sup> century, English has been an important language in

Kuwait (Dashti, 2015). English was first used as the language of administration and politics in the country during its time as British protectorate, which lasted from 1899 to 1961 (Tryzna & Al Sharoufi, 2017). Teaching English in Kuwait became a subject in the school curriculum in the 1910s (Al-Yaseen, 2000). This gives English the status of a L2 which is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels of public schooling. Therefore, most Kuwaitis are bilingual. They speak Arabic with family members and friends, and they use English when communicating with expatriates (Tryzna & Al Sharoufi, 2017).

In the context of Egypt, English is currently the main FL. In addition to using it in daily situations, English is widely used in online communication among many Egyptians (Warschauer, Said, & Zohry, 2002). Due to the importance of English, the Egyptian Ministry of Education amended its education policy aiming at improving the teaching of English in public schools by introducing English to students from primary levels. The policy was implemented in two stages, the first of which was in 1993 when English was introduced to students from the fourth and fifth grades. The second stage was in 2003 when English was introduced from the first grade (Abdel Latif, 2017).

In the Palestinian context, in 1922 the British Mandate was established and signalled the introduction of English in Palestine (Bianchi & Razeq, 2017). As a result of the British Mandate, English replaced Turkish and became the language of government. In addition, in light of the large numbers of Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe to Palestine, English became the language for communication among the European Jewish settlers and the Palestinians who spoke Arabic as their L1 (Amara, 2003). Nowadays, English is the most widely spoken FL in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Bianchi & Razeq, 2017). Amara (2003) states that “knowledge of English is a powerful status symbol and class marker” in the Palestinian context (p. 221).

Acknowledgement of the importance of English for Palestinians influenced the

Palestinian English language curriculum (Bianchi & Razeq, 2017). The Palestinian Ministry of Education contracted with MacMillan Education to develop the ‘English for Palestine’ textbooks for the various schooling levels (Dajani & McLaughlin, 2009).

The decision to introduce English from the first grade, instead of the fifth grade, as a main subject was one of the most essential changes in the English language education policy in Palestine (Nicolai, 2007). Dajani and McLaughlin (2009) note that

Curriculum developers, policy makers, teachers and parents would like Palestinian children to learn English from early stages since the English Language is the language of science and technology, a fundamental tool for pursuing higher education, and a means for communicating with a wider community (p. 44).

### **3.6.2 Instruction of English at schools**

In the Arab world, there are two distinct types of school: public (government run) and private schools. While some previous studies (Al-Badwawi, 2011; Robert Ellis et al., 2007; Vardi, 2003) acknowledged the impact of prior language learning experiences on Arabic-speaking students’ proficiency in tertiary contexts, they do not seem to focus on the role of the type of schooling and the consequences associated with it on students’ ability to write in English-medium institutions. The following sections present the situation regarding the instruction of English at public and private schools in the Arab world.

#### **3.6.2.1 Instruction of English at public schools**

English is taught around the world as either a second language (SL) or foreign language (FL). In contexts where English is the SL, the target language is prevalent and exposure to it is extended. Therefore, learning in these contexts is partly incidental as it occurs as a result of engaging in daily activities using the target language (Pecorari, 2018). In contrast, in contexts where English is taught as a FL, learners get exposure to the target

language mainly in the classroom and when they do their homework. Learners in such contexts receive “classroom-based, form-focused instruction” (Pecorari, 2018, pp. 1-2).

In most Arabic-speaking countries, English is taught as a FL and students learn it within an Arabic-speaking context (Keong & Mussa, 2015). Learners in FL contexts, including the Arab world, are usually taught English by Non-native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) (Butler, 2007; Üstünlüoğlu, 2007), and in FL contexts learners may not find a need to use the language outside the classroom (Al-Khatib, 2008; Cenoz, 2003). In the sections below, I present the situation of the teaching of English at public schools in the Arabic-speaking nations in terms of the starting age of learning English, the language of instruction, the degree of exposure to English, and other pedagogical issues.

### ***Starting age of learning English***

From the perspective of the participant, the age when English teaching at school is started seems to be an important factor in the level of learners’ proficiency in English. In this context, there seems a prevalent belief that younger learners are ‘superior’ to adult learners (Scovel, 2000) in learning FLs, i.e. the younger the better. This last concept mainly comes from the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) proposed by Eric Lenneberg in 1967 who suggests that there is a ‘critical period’ for children to develop their linguistic abilities (Lin, Hung, & Wang, 2016). According the CPH, if a child gets exposed to a language within this period, the process of acquiring that language is easy, and the learner will be able to reach a proficiency level consistent with that of native speakers. However, if a learner is exposed to the language beyond that critical period, acquisition of a language becomes more challenging and the learner may not reach the level of native-like proficiency, particularly in pronunciation. However, Lenneberg’s proposal has not gone unchallenged. Rod Ellis (2008), for example, opposes the belief that younger learners find it easier to acquire language although he concedes that the

hypothesis may be partially valid when it comes to phonology. Similarly, Lightbown and Spada (2013) argue that when the goal of FLs' teaching is communicative skill for all students with a commitment to maintaining the children's L1, it could be useful to delay teaching the FL. They add that ten-year old children can catch up faster than six-year old children in FL programmes with exposure to the language for some hours a week.

The CPH was first based on L1 research, but it was later applied to FL acquisition (Lin et al., 2016). Research on age and L2 acquisition reports that younger learners tend to have higher motivation towards learning FLs (Donato, Tucker, Wudthayagorn, & Igarashi, 2000). A higher motivation might be the result of younger learners' positive attitude towards learning in general as opposed to the rejection of the school system which is typically associated with older learners (Cenoz, 2003).

Myles (2017) compared 5-, 7- and 11-year-old learners of French in England. She found that 96% of the 5-year-old learners enjoyed learning French, and 88% of the 7-year olds did. However, beyond the age of 7, children seemed to perceive learning a FL as an arduous task which requires a great deal of time. In the Arab context, Gawi (2012) found that the performance of students who begin learning a FL at an earlier age (e.g. 5 or 6) is better than the performance of those who start later (e.g. 12 or 13). He also concludes that the younger students are when learning English, the better they will learn the language.

Harrison (2018) argues that due to "misinformation" about L2 interference when a student starts learning another language at a young age, many Arabic-speaking countries in the past postponed introducing English until a student's later schooling years (p. 2). She added that this misinformation was accompanied by a common attitude that "Arabic, the holy language of the Qur'an, should be protected" (p. 2). However, as



recently as the year 2000, there has been a tendency in many Arabic-speaking countries to introduce English at a younger age. Table 2 below shows the year at which Arabic-speaking school children start learning English at school as well as the official age of starting school. The table also provides information on the amount of exposure to English students get at school per week.

**Table 3: Starting English learning at school**

<b>Arabic-speaking country</b>	<b>Year of starting English at school</b>	<b>Official age of starting primary school</b>	<b>Exposure to English</b>
Bahrain	1	6-7	-
Egypt	1	6-7	3 lessons a week (in years 1-3) 4 lessons a week (from year 4)
Jordan	1	6-7	5-6 lessons a week
Kuwait	1		4 lessons a week
Oman	1		5 lessons a week
Palestine	1	6-7	4 lessons a week
Qatar	1	5-6	3 lessons a week (in year 1 & 2) 4 lessons a week (in year 3) 5 lessons a week (from year 4)
Saudi Arabia	4	6-7	2 lessons a week (in years 4-6) 4 lessons a week (from year 7)
Syria	1		-
The UAE	1	6-7	4 lessons a week
Yemen	4	5-6	-

**Adapted from Rixon (2013) and Al Dameg (2011)**

In Saudi Arabia, English was taught as a subject at intermediate and secondary public schools. However, the education system changed in 2003 when the Ministry of

Education in Saudi Arabia decided to introduce English as a required subject in public schools starting from grade 6. In 2004, a decision was made to introduce English from grade 5. Later in 2010, English was introduced in lower levels of schooling (starting from the fourth grade of elementary school, i.e. when students are 10 years old) (Alfahadi, 2012). Currently, teaching English starts in public schools from grade 4 (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016; Ebad, 2014).

This earlier introduction of English in public schools in Saudi Arabia was a result of the pressure exerted by the American administration on Saudi Arabia following the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (Elyas, 2008), which was a turning point in teaching English and the policies adopted in several Arab countries. Following the attacks the editorial pages of American newspapers had wide coverage of Arab educational systems, and particularly the systems used in Saudi schools (Rugh, 2002). Therefore, the institutions were seen as deserving much of the blame for nurturing “anti-US terrorism” (Rugh, 2002, p. 396). Karmani (2005) notes that because of the increasing suspicion about the role of the religious educational system in Saudi Arabia,

an extraordinary unparalleled degree of pressure has been escalating on [the] Muslim government to reform its educational curricula, the underlying belief being that [the] current educational system in place in the Muslim world was partly responsible for motivating the terrorist attacks (p. 262).

This has led some organisations and researchers to attempt to review textbooks adopted in the Arab world to trace the political content (Brown, 2001).

The government of Saudi Arabia was initially against teaching English at elementary schools believing that introducing English at such a young age may affect students’ learning of Arabic (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Studies by Al-Seghayer (2014), Al Dameg (2011), Mahboob and Elyas (2014), Elyas (2008), Almansour (2013), and Dahan (2015) indicate that English may be seen as a threat that could erode the native Arab identity.

Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) report apprehension of some parents, teachers, and officials about the present policy and practices of English education in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, some people in the Arab world may associate the wide use of English with the spread of ‘foreign’ or Western’ traits which might lead to the eroding of the Arab culture and customs. Such fears could contribute to demotivating some students in their attempts to learn English. This is especially a problem in a country that is conservative and resistant to change. This resistance to change extends to the introduction of FLs, English in particular, to children at a younger age (Al-Saraj, 2014).

In the Palestinian context, English is introduced from the first grade, instead of the fifth grade (Nicolai, 2007). However, not all researchers agree that it is a good idea to start learning English at a very early age. Shehadeh and Dwaik (2013) questioned the suggestion that ‘earlier is better’ in teaching English. They suggested that the Palestinian Ministry of Education should consider introducing English from the fifth grade in public schools so that they focus on the quality of teaching and materials instead of spreading resources across the earlier grades. However, English had already been introduced in the first grade.

In the context of Bahrain, Abou-El-Kheir and MacLeod (2017) show that in 2000, English was first taught starting from the third grade of schooling (Al-Sulaiti & Abdul Ghani, 2001). Currently students start learning English from the first year in public schools, i.e. “when they are 6 or 7 years old” (Rixon, 2013, p. 15).

### ***Language of instruction in public schools***

Arabic is the main language of instruction in public schools in the Arab world (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016; Findlow, 2006). Therefore, students may not enjoy a great deal of exposure to English because even in the English classes teachers are using a

large amount of Arabic, which can lead to difficulty in adequately learning the language skills, including writing (Abdo & Breen, 2010; Harrison, 2018; Zghyer, 2014).

Al-Qahtani and Al Zumor (2016) confirm that the educational system in Saudi Arabia is influenced by the state religion because Islam is the only religion practiced in the country. They state that the Saudi government aims to maintain the holiness of the religion and the Arabic language. In Saudi Arabia, the education policy includes five articles (24, 46, 50, 114, and 140) that are related to language policy (Al-Abdaly, 2012). The articles stipulate that all levels of education in public schools should be taught in Arabic.

### ***Exposure to English***

The two factors discussed above, i.e. the starting age of learning English and the language of instruction at school, seem to be associated with the degree of exposure to the language. In Saudi Arabia, students in the primary stage (fourth to sixth grades) receive two 45-minute English lessons per week, which increases to four 45-minute English lessons per week in the intermediate and secondary stages (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Alfahadi, 2012). Myles (2017) argues that children learning their native language are expected to get 17,000 hours of exposure to the language when they reach the age of four. Therefore, exposure of four hours weekly in the FL context does not seem to bear any resemblance to this quantity of exposure.

Zghyer (2014) reports that the majority of the participants in her study, who were Saudi Arabian students studying in the US, indicated that their first exposure to English at school was at a later age. Larson-Hall (2008) notes that introducing a FL early plays a significant role in improving the chances for language acquisition since learners get more input. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that merely introducing English at a younger age is not the only solution for problems with English writing among Arabic-

speaking students. An early start to teaching should be enhanced by the quality of tuition. Students in the UAE start learning English from the age of six in public schools, which means they spend 12 years of learning EFL before moving to university (Hourani, 2008). Hourani (2008) notes that in spite of the long years of receiving tuition in English at school, secondary school students in the UAE still have real difficulties with English writing.

### ***Pedagogical issues***

As far as the teaching of English is concerned, rote learning and memorisation are still the core elements of pedagogy in the education institutions in the Arabic-speaking countries (Abukhattala, 2004; Chadraba & O'Keefe, 2007; Harrison, 2018; Tubaishat, Bhatti, & El-Qawasmeh, 2006). Benson and Lor (1999) argue that if students develop a tendency to learn a FL through memorising its segmented components, they are expected to develop a positive attitude towards learning vocabulary and grammar, which may shape their view of what proficiency of a language constitutes. If students tend to view learning a FL as best achieved through natural contexts of use, they are expected to develop a positive attitude towards engaging with the speakers of the language. Therefore, students may develop an understanding that focus in learning FLs should be on meaning-making and conveying ideas rather than the superficial issues such as spelling or punctuation.

Harrison (2018) argues that education, including English, in the Arabic-speaking nations typically involves writing texts that “retell knowledge rather than texts that analyse or synthesize knowledge” (p. 2). Previous research has shown that reading from textbooks is preferred for teaching in many Arabic-speaking countries to illustrate concepts, and students prefer reading materials that include information that can be easily memorised (Burt, 2004; Russell, 2004; Tubaishat et al., 2006).

In the Lebanese context, Esseili (2014) notes there has been a decline in enrolments in public schools due to a lack of faith in the system in these schools and the quality of education they offer.

Fareh (2010) classifies teachers of English in public schools in the Arab world into different groups: teachers with a BA in English Language and Literature, teachers with a Diploma in English, teachers with a Major in Education and Minor in English, and teachers with a BA in translation. He shows that while many teachers hold BA degrees and teach English at schools most of them hold no certificates in teaching English as a FL or may not have attended teacher training that could equip them with teaching skills. In Saudi Arabia, a bachelor's degree in English is the minimum qualification for teachers of English in schools, and no pre-service training in language teaching is required (Alfahadi, 2012). In the same context, in Saudi Arabia, Assalahi (2013) found that some English teachers in public schools use Arabic in giving instructions to students and in transferring the meaning of grammar rules from the L1 to the L2.

Levis, Sonsaat, Link, and Barriuso (2016) show that NESTs make up a quarter of ESL and EFL teachers. Despite this number, many still consider that native speakers of the language should teach languages. Phillipson (2013) terms this as the native speaker fallacy, which endorses native speakers as ideal teachers (Selvi, 2018). Previous research exploring ESL and EFL students' attitudes towards teachers shows that native language plays a major role in the degree of teachers' confidence. Other studies explored students' beliefs about the efficiency of a teacher based on the native language (Benke & Medgyes, 2005; Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, & Hartford, 2004; Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012). Research also investigated administrators' desire to recruit teachers. Research shows that those recruiting teachers internationally tend to prefer NESTs (Mahboob, 2010; Shin, 2008) based on claims that students prefer to be taught by

NESTs (Clark & Paran, 2007). In the Arab world, Mahboob and Golden (2013) analysed 77 job advertisements. The data showed that discriminatory practices in recruiting NESTs are in place in spite of some findings that suggest that students recognise that both NESTs and NNESTs have advantages in teaching. While NNESTs can be viewed less capable because of L2 accents (Florence Ma, 2012), students in the Arab context seem to appreciate the advantages of both NESTs and NNESTs (Alseweed & Daif-Allah, 2012).

Although the importance of English has been widely acknowledged in Palestine, several researchers have highlighted challenges that impede the teaching of English (Bianchi & Razeq, 2017). Shehadeh and Dwaik (2013) note that the quality of teaching English in Palestine is influenced by several factors. One of these factors is the class size. Classes are usually large with an average of 40 students in each classroom, making meeting the English language needs of individual students a challenging task for teachers (Abdo & Breen, 2010). Such large classes may reduce the opportunity for teachers to provide individualised feedback and attention to students. In addition, receiving a limited number of English lessons per week provides very little chance for students to practise the language (Shehadeh & Dwaik, 2013).

Furthermore, teaching English in Palestine using Arabic is a barrier to improving students' abilities in English (Bianchi & Razeq, 2017). Such use of Arabic in English classrooms is attributed to two main reasons. First, most teachers of English in public schools have not received adequate pre-service training and professional development. Second, most teachers never received adequate opportunities to practise and speak in English while they were studying English as a major at university. Bianchi and Razeq (2017) point out that another challenge that limits English teachers' ability to vary their teaching methods is teaching for exams. As they are required to cover the content to

prepare students for exams, teachers are faced with time pressure, which aggravates the challenges they encounter. Consequently, high school leavers exhibit poor English skills, and most of them are not ready for the English courses they have to take at the tertiary level in Palestine (Bianchi & Razeq, 2017).

In the Arab world, teachers may feel not properly equipped in class, as the textbooks they use may not suit the context of the classroom and the profile of the students. Shah, Hussain, and Nasseef (2013) add that teachers in the Arab world are not usually allowed to choose the methods of teaching and materials to be adopted in class, as those methods and materials are often imposed by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, these methods and materials may be inappropriate for the students' learning style. The result of such an environment could be lack of students' engagement with the subject matter and ineffective teaching (Harrison, 2018). In addition, the teaching methodology in many Arabic-speaking countries is teacher-centred. This type of teaching results in passive learning (Fareh, 2010). A teacher in such contexts gives information, while the student receives it (Harrison, 2018).

Among the aspects that influence the quality of English tuition in public schools in the Arab world are the mixed abilities of students, which may create hindrances in teaching English. In terms of varied literacy levels among students, many students in an EFL classroom in the Arab world may be re-sitting the course as they had failed it (Harrison, 2018). Abdo and Breen (2010) refer to what they call flaws in teaching English in Jordan. Because of the government control of the development of student acquisition of the English language, the education system in Jordan allows students to fail a course only once (Joffé, 2002). In practice, this means that if a student fails the course for the first time, they will re-sit the same course the following year. In the second attempt, teachers are required to pass and move the student up to the next level, regardless of the



student's readiness for the level of English taught in the subsequent level (Abdo & Breen, 2010). Ultimately, this may contribute to the gap in students' levels in the same class.

### **3.6.2.2 Instruction of English at private schools**

In contrast to the situation in public schools, private schools are generally perceived as more prestigious and it is thought that they deliver a better quality of education, particularly in teaching a FL (Esseili, 2014). Private schools appear to adopt different policies and pedagogical approaches in terms of teaching a FL, such as English. The following sections present the situation in private schools as far as teaching English is concerned.

#### ***Starting age of learning English***

Private schools in many Arab countries introduce English when students are 5-6 years old (Bacha et al., 2008). While the Ministry of Education does not own private schools, it supervises them. Most private schools provide students with an intensive English tuition from the kindergarten stage (Abdel Latif, 2017).

#### ***Language of instruction in private schools***

Although Arabic is the language of instruction in all public schools at all levels in the Arabic-speaking world, many private schools choose to use English as the language of instruction (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016; Findlow, 2006). In these schools, all teaching activities are conducted in English. Although Arabic is taught as a subject, English is given more focus in the teaching process across subjects to help students to obtain proficiency in English.

There are two schools of thought as to the impact the focus of English could have on students' L1 and, therefore, self-esteem. On the one hand, some researchers found that using English as the language of instruction is beneficial for students and may not

negatively influence students' L1. For example, Al-Qahtani and Al Zumor (2016) explored the attitudes of some Saudi parents towards using English as the language of instruction in private schools. The study aimed at finding the reasons behind some Saudi parents' preference for private schools for their children. The study also examined the impact of using English as the language of instruction on children's L1 and culture, as well as on their achievement in the next education levels. The participants were 68 Saudi parents whose children were attending a private school. The findings of the study show that these Saudi parents generally held positive attitudes towards using English as the language of instruction at private schools. These parents realised the important role English as an international language could play in providing their children with better opportunities in the future. However, there were some parents who raised a concern that that English negatively affected their children's L1 (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016).

On the other hand, some researchers reported a negative impact of using English as the language of instruction on students' ability in Arabic. Belhiah and Al-hussien (2016) investigated students', teachers', and parents' perceptions of the impact of instruction in English on Arabic-speaking students' identity and mastery of Arabic. The study was conducted in two high schools in the UAE. A total of 140 students, 30 teachers, and 40 parents participated in the study. Even though the students recognised the importance of Arabic for their identity, Arabic did not seem to be the core of their social identity. Students indicated that they strongly prefer to use English in their daily activities. The findings show that by being exposed to English more than Arabic at school, through media and the internet, students were gradually becoming more competent in English than Arabic. The authors, therefore, see the need for a bilingual curriculum which utilises both Arabic and English as media of instruction in a reasonable manner, so that English does not replace Arabic or erode students' identity. Hanani (2009) argues that when English is given emphasis at school, students may get the feeling that their L1 is

not appreciated, which could result in a negative attitude towards their L1. Therefore, students may have low self-esteem, and they might feel unwilling to be part of that group of language users.

In the Palestinian context, Abdin (2000) refers to a belief amongst some families that private schools in the Arab world have a missionary role. In other words, such schools bring the Western culture into the Arab societies, and this is thought to have a detrimental effect on the students' Islamic faith. However, over time people have begun to view private schools as better places for their children to receive tuition of a better quality than in public schools.

### ***Exposure to English***

Most private schools offer an intensive study of English from the kindergarten stage (Abdel Latif, 2017). As far as English teaching is concerned, private schools in the Arabic-speaking world can be classified into three types. The first type is private ordinary schools that use the same curriculum as the public schools, but they add an advanced English course to meet the students' needs. The second type is private language schools that teach the language curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education in English and offer students an intensive study of English. The third one is private international schools that follow the British or American educational system (Abdel Latif, 2017).

In addition to the extended exposure to English and practice of writing in private schools, there are greater opportunities created for students. Such opportunities include the conscious decision of private schools to employ teachers who do not speak Arabic, which results in students making a greater effort to use the language to communicate with teachers. In addition, private schools may provide greater resources for teachers to use in teaching English, which include both print and electronic resources (Esseili,

2014). Such an atmosphere could be supported by the presence of non-Arabic-speaking students who live in the Arab world with their parents who work there, a situation that seems to encourage students to develop a habit of using English for communication (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

### ***Pedagogical issues***

The existence of private schools that provide students with intensive English tuition has meant that education authorities face several challenges. In response to some parents' desire to provide their children with intensive English tuition these education government bodies are required to embark on policy reforms so that English tuition in public schools is in line with private schools (Abdel Latif, 2017). Al-Issa (2006) points to the greater opportunities created to provide better English tuition in private schools in Oman. Such opportunities include "imported materials mainly from publishing powerhouses like Longman, Oxford, Cambridge, Macmillan," which "come in full packages, which include a textbook, a workbook, a teacher's guide, charts, audio and videotapes and compact disks" (p. 203). In other words, students are allowed the opportunity to work with materials that come from well-known publishers that have a reputation for developing high-standard English language teaching materials. In addition, these materials give the teachers access to supplementary materials that could be used in classes and resources that are aimed at teachers' professional development.

As indicated in the previous chapter, writing in English represents a challenge for Arabic-speaking students. Before presenting the studies that examined the challenges these students encounter in English writing, it is important to highlight some differences between writing in Arabic and English.

### 3.7 Writing in Arabic and English

Since Arabic is part of the Semitic language family, its morphology and syntax differ from those of English, an Indo-European language (Alhaysony, 2012; Elachachi, 2015). Kaplan's (1966) seminal article in which he scrutinised 600 essays written by NNESSs from different language backgrounds including Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese and Russian paved the way for contrastive rhetoric as a separate field of study. Kaplan's basic assumption was that thought patterns and logic differed across cultures that in turn affected languages. He noted that English rhetoric follows "essentially a Platonic-Aristotelian sequence" and is characterised by a linear development of ideas (p. 3). Based on the analysis of the writing by Arabic-speaking students in his study, Kaplan found that paragraph development in Arabic is based on a "complex series of parallel constructions" (p. 6) of coordination, which would seem "archaic or awkward" to an English reader (p. 8). Kaplan showed that while extensive parallelism is possible in Arabic, English does not have the "necessary flexibility" for it (p. 9). English style maturity is measured by the degree of subordination and not coordination, while the use of coordination is more favoured in the Arabic style than subordination (Kaplan, 1966; Uthman, 2004).

The analysis of argument in the paragraphs written by the sample in Kaplan's study led him to suggest the following 'patterns' of written discourse (see Figure 3 below) where Arabic falls under the Semitic category of languages. Arabic thought is best illustrated in terms of a zigzag line moving gradually from one idea to another, whereas English thought moves directly from one idea to another by means of a straight line.

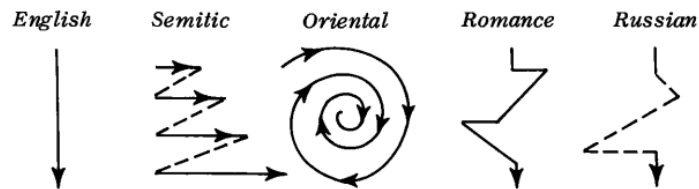


Figure 3: Written discourse patterns

(Kaplan, 1966)

In addition, research shows that one of the differences between Arabic and English is the feature of repetition in writing. As far as repetition is concerned, Mohamed and Omer (2000) argue that the difference between Arabic and English operates at the word and the clause-sentence levels. At the word level, one of the most frequently used cohesive devices in Arabic is the repetition of the same word. In English, this repetition of the same word is replaced using reference, substitution, ellipsis, or a synonym. At the clause-sentence level, clauses or sentences that have similar formal or semantic features are often repeated in Arabic. In English, clauses are repeated but with a noticeable degree of variation in their formal features. Mohamed and Omer (2000) offer some examples of repetition in Arabic and their English translations at the word level:

Table 4: Repetition in Arabic and English

	Arabic	English
<b>By reference</b>	.... and I plunged into deep <i>sleep</i> and during my <i>sleep</i> ....	... I plunged into deep <i>sleep</i> . During <i>it</i> ....
<b>By substitution</b>	... <i>reaching</i> him is no longer an easy thing...and be sure that you will <i>reach</i> .	It is no longer an easy matter to <i>reach</i> him... but be sure that you will <i>do so</i> .
<b>By ellipsis</b>	- and from where will you get <i>the cartridges</i> ? - I bought them. - How many <i>cartridges</i> ?	- and where are going to get <i>the cartridges</i> ? - I bought them. - How many $\emptyset$ did you get?

Adapted from Mohamed and Omer (2000)

Abu Rass (2011) and Connor (2002) show that Arabic-speaking students tend to write lengthy sentences in English with repeated content and form. This is attributed to the fact that repetition is used in Arabic to persuade. Abu Rass (2011) adds:

Repetition is presented by writing more synonyms in the same sentence to convey emphasis (p. 209).

Research on the role of repetition in Arabic (Al-Jaf, 2012) shows that it is a linguistic phenomenon in Arabic, and it appears in the oldest Arabic documents such as pre-Islam poetry, the Holy Quran, sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, and the poetry and prose of Arabs. Al-Jaf (2012) emphasises that repetition in formal Arabic is meant to create a ‘verbal music’ that influences the readers and contributes to cohesive text building (Hervey, Higgins, & Dickins, 2002). This could also be attributed to orality, which focuses on repetition, clarity, and excessive exaggeration (Amanallah, 2012). While Arabic may allow such a degree of freedom in repeating some words and similar structures to emphasise an aspect in the text, English does not offer a similar flexibility in repetition of the same words to emphasise an idea. Repetition is used minimally in English as the more it is used, the more awkward the text is (Tannen, 2007).

Shabbir and Bughio (2009) assert that English and Arabic differ in their alphabet and writing styles. Therefore, Arabic-speaking students consider English academic writing a real challenge regardless of their academic level (Abu Rass, 2015). Mahmoud (2000) found that learners, including Arabic-speaking students, are often misled by the partial similarity between their L1 and the L2 in terms of grammar and vocabulary. In the case of Arabic, this problem of difference between the structure and grammar in English and Arabic is aggravated by the fact that it has two varieties: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Non-standard Arabic (NSA). MSA is used mainly in formal communication, and mainly in writing, which is similar to academic English. NSA is

used daily in spoken communication, which does not follow the same structure in all Arabic-speaking countries. Therefore, the two varieties may add to the confusion of students whether to transfer the structure of MSA or NSA when writing in English.

### **3.8 Challenges facing Arabic-speaking students in English academic writing in the Arabic-speaking world**

Research that investigates the challenges encountered by Arabic-speaking students in English academic writing (Al-Khairi, 2013; Al-Samadani, 2010; Al Asmari, 2013; Al Fadda, 2012; Barnawi, 2009; Grami, 2010; Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000) has been confined within the study skills model described by Lea and Street (1998). In other words, most of these studies focus on the surface deficits that appear in the writing of these students. This section presents the existing research on the challenges Arabic-speaking students face in English academic writing in the Arab world from two perspectives: 1) challenges within the broader education context; and 2) challenges posed by the writing process.

#### **3.8.1 Challenges within the broader education context**

Research in various Arab contexts found that students usually face serious challenges with English academic writing (Bacha, 2002; Rababah, 2003; Tahaine, 2010). Such challenges make it difficult for students to effectively adapt to the requirements of their studies. Research reports several reasons behind students' difficulty with English academic writing. These reasons include students' previous experience with English writing (Al-Badwawi, 2011), the lack of practising writing (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Huwari & Aziz, 2011; Keong & Mussa, 2015; Mourtaga, 2010), outdated approaches and resources (Ezza, 2010; Harrison, 2018; Zghyer, 2014) lack of students' motivation (Al-Zubeiry, 2012), and giving focus to exams which require minimal writing (Ahmed, 2016; Russell, 2004).



### **3.8.1.1 Students' previous experiences**

Al-Badwawi (2011) investigated Omani students' writing. She aimed at gaining an insight into students' experiences with the demands of academic writing and the factors shaping these experience. The study found that writing in the first year was a challenging process for students. Such a process was influenced by a number of interrelated factors. Some factors are related to students' level of English proficiency and previous experience with English writing. The study also found that students' writing experience was influenced by the writing task requirements. Such requirements included: the writing genre, source of information for writing, the level of difficulty of the topic, length of the text, disciplinary discrepancies, and time-constraints under which students are required to finish their writing. Furthermore, the author found that the different disciplines had an impact in shaping students' writing experiences. This impact was attributed to several factors such as teachers' focus when providing feedback on students' writing, teachers' role in making students familiar with the discipline-specific writing requirements, perceptions about who is responsible for improving students' writing, and perceptions about what good academic writing is.

Another factor that contributed to students' challenges with writing was the context at tertiary level since transition to tertiary writing is an intimidating experience for undergraduate students (Al-Badwawi, 2011). The difficulty lies in the fact that students are expected to reflect their understanding of the content of their courses using writing, in which they may not be fully competent. Such a challenge for students becomes more evident for EFL students when they move to study at English-medium institutions (Al-Badwawi, 2011).

### **3.8.1.2 Lack of writing practice**

In the Palestinian context, Mourtaga (2010) examined the reasons behind the weakness of Palestinian EFL students in writing. He attributes this weakness to two reasons:

insufficient practice of writing, and writing teachers' misunderstanding of the writing process. His study found that the approaches that are used in teaching writing in most of the Palestinian schools mainly focused on writing as a skill, a mechanism, a reflection, the concern was with correct punctuation, correct sentence structures or correct spelling. The approaches used by teachers are based on the activities in the curricula that the Palestinian Ministry of Education provides. The author concludes that EFL learners are not in need of more work with language but rather with writing. The study suggests that English teachers in the Palestinian context should work on aspects beyond linguistic and grammatical abilities of learners. In other words, attention should be paid to the communicative competencies in class to enhance academic writing required for the university context (Mourtaga, 2010).

Huwari and Aziz (2011) found that Jordanian students' difficulties in English writing skill in public schools and universities can be attributed to the fact that they "do very little writing in English" (p. 191). Another study by Huwari and Al-Khasawneh (2013) explored the causes of weakness of English writing of students at Taibah University. The findings show that the lack of practice of writing was among the main causes of writing errors students committed.

### **3.8.1.3 Education policies**

Harrison (2018) notes that English writing instruction is often hampered by intrinsic differences between the pedagogy and culture of the Arab world and the Western world. She adds that some of the barriers that hinder English writing teaching in an EFL context in the Arab world include the educational philosophy that underpins teaching English. Instruction in Arabic-speaking countries characteristically follows a teacher-centred approach, and it involves memorisation and composing texts whereby knowledge is retold instead of analysing knowledge through writing (Harrison, 2018).

Among the studies that considered the role of education policies in shaping student writing experiences in the Arab world was Ezza's (2010) research. The author emphasises that factors such as "teacher/student ratio, the number of students in the classroom, the number of writing courses, course materials, teaching methodology" have not been sufficiently addressed as possible reasons for Arabic-speaking EFL learners' problems in writing (p. 33). The study concludes that writing problems are often attributed to employing "outdated approaches and resources" (Ezza, 2010, p. 33).

Al-Khasawneh (2010) refers to a weak foundation and the English language teaching methods used in some Arab countries as the reasons behind the weakness of students in English writing. He further explains that having a "weak foundation" is related to "the students' motivation to learn English" (Al-Khasawneh, 2010, p. 16). This lack of EFL learners' motivation may lead to a situation where they lack interest in learning the target language; therefore, affecting their overall proficiency in the language (Al-Zubeiry, 2012).

#### **3.8.1.4 Importance of exams**

In the education systems in many Arabic-speaking countries writing is given importance only for sitting exams, including in tertiary contexts (Russell, 2004). Attaching importance to writing for exams may reduce its importance from the students' viewpoint where writing becomes viewed as decontextualized (Ahmed, 2016). Therefore, students may lack understanding of concepts such as the writing purpose or target audience (Ahmed, 2016). It should be noted, however, that the problem seems to lie in the nature of these exams. Exams in schools in Arabic-speaking countries usually have a fixed format or template set by the Ministry of Education, and students can be trained on that format without the need to study the whole textbook (Fareh, 2010). Examples of what these exams may test include students' ability to explicitly state

information, predict the meaning of specific lexical items from the context, in addition to a couple of questions on cohesive devices or referencing (Fareh, 2010). Fareh (2010) notes that among the neglected skills in exams used in the Arab world are students' ability to deduce implicitly stated information, evaluate things, differentiate between opinions and facts, or reflect critical thinking. Therefore, there is little testing of higher-order thinking that goes beyond merely memorising facts. This makes it difficult for students to link new knowledge with other concepts or use the information as solutions to new problems (Thomas & Thorne, 2009), which are all important in tertiary contexts.

### **3.8.2 Challenges posed by the writing process**

Much of the previous research that investigates the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter in academic writing focuses on Saudi students (Al Fadda, 2012; Ankawi, 2015; Mudawy & Mousa, 2017; Saba, 2014), Omani students (Al-Badwawi, 2011), or Jordanian students (Al-Khasawneh, 2010). The findings of such research refer to various challenges in writing, ranging from grammar (Nuruzzaman, Islam, & Shuchi, 2018; Younes & Albalawi, 2015), sentence structure (Sawalmeh, 2013), articles (Alhaysony, 2012), punctuation, prepositions, spelling (Al-Tamimi, 2018), translation from Arabic (Abdel Latif, 2014; Zghyer, 2014).

A study by Younes and Albalawi (2015) examined the common error types made by 40 female students in the Department of English and Translation at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia. Their findings show 358 grammatical errors. These errors were as follows: tenses (29%), prepositions (9.6%), syntactical errors (18.4%) subject-verb agreement (28%) and the use of articles (15%). The errors in tenses seem to be attributed to L1 interference (Younes & Albalawi, 2015). The findings also show that students' writing reflected serious problems with using punctuation correctly. Problems with punctuation included omission, misuse or addition of punctuation marks. The third

area of difficulty of English writing was spelling. The challenges with spelling featured in errors caused by: substituting a letter or more for another (e.g. *beg* instead of *big*), omitting one letter or more (e.g. *affect* instead of *affect*), adding a letter or letters to a word, putting the letters of a word in the wrong order, and writing one word as two. Younes and Albalawi (2015) conclude that the use of Arabic by teachers to simplify the grammatical rules and teaching grammar out of context are among the reasons for students' challenges with grammar in writing. The punctuation errors were attributed to the differences between the punctuation system in Arabic and English. This is exacerbated by the lack of explicit teaching of punctuation marks by teachers who do not use punctuation marks in their own writing (Younes & Albalawi, 2015).

Recently, Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) investigated the error types in paragraph writing by non-English major students in Saudi Arabia. The authors utilised Corder's (1967) taxonomy of writing errors, which include grammatical, lexical, semantic, and mechanics. The findings showed that errors associated with grammar are the most common errors made by the students. Out of 590 errors, 213 (i.e. 36.10%) were grammatical. Errors in verb tense featured the most in all the three groups, followed by subject-verb agreement. The second category of errors was mechanics (i.e. 29.66% of the total errors). Errors in spelling were the most regularly committed by students, followed by capitalisation and then punctuation errors. The third category included lexical errors. Errors in prepositions featured the most, followed by errors in articles and then verbs. The last category was semantic errors, where word choice errors featured the most (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018). The authors attribute the errors made by students to two reasons: 1) L1 transfer; 2) the lack of knowledge of L2.

Sawalmeh (2013) investigated the errors in essays written by 32 Arabic-speaking EFL Saudi learners at the University of Ha'il. The findings indicated that the learners' errors

commonly featured in verb tense. The findings by Sawalmeh (2013) showed that the students had an inadequate understanding of the rules governing tenses. Among the areas of error in student writing was using double negatives in the same sentence. In addition, fragmented sentences featured in student writing, often expressing an incomplete thought. Spelling, punctuation, articles were other areas of error found in the corpus of student writing. The author argues that most of the errors in student writing could be attributed to L1 transfer.

In the same context, in Saudi Arabia, Alhaysony (2012) scrutinised the writing of 100 first-year female Arabic-speaking EFL students at the University of Ha'il. The study showed that one of the recurrent errors was the use of articles. The findings show that errors caused by omission of article were the most frequently committed by students. The second area of error in articles was addition, which occurs when an article is added when it should not be. The author concludes that the errors in articles are attributed to two reasons. The first was inter-lingual interference, which occurred due to transfer from Arabic when writing in English. The second reason was intra-lingual errors, which occurred due to "incomplete application of a rule, overgeneralization, and ignorance of rule restrictions" (Alhaysony, 2012, p. 61).

Another study by Diab (1997) investigated 73 English essays written by Arabic-speaking students from Lebanon attending an intermediate level English course. The analysis of student writing showed frequent errors in grammar, lexis, semantics, and syntax. In terms of grammar, the study found that errors were mainly in: agreement, articles, prepositions, and singular vs. plural words. In terms of lexical issues, students committed errors in translating vocabulary from Arabic without giving enough attention to the difference in meaning in English. As for syntax, the study found that word order, coordination and deletion of copula were the most common errors in students' writing.

The author attributes these errors to students' transfer of Arabic linguistic structures into English. In the same context, in Lebanon, Al-Khatib (2017) raises a similar concern about the level of proficiency in English academic writing that students attain in public schools. The study investigated the writing of 470 final year students from public high schools. The students' writing revealed that they make persistent errors in orthography, grammar, structure, and spelling, especially in silent letters, and vowels.

In another Arab context, in Yemen, Al-Tamimi (2018) conducted a mixed methods study exploring the Arabic-speaking students' perceptions of the errors they make in English academic writing. The study found that students perceived that the use of grammar is the major problem they face in English writing. Grammatical errors featured in "verb tenses, voices, modals, nominalisation, logical connectors and aspects in English" (Al-Tamimi, 2018, p. 222). The author attributes students' difficulty with grammar to the negative transfer from Arabic. In addition, the findings showed that vocabulary constitutes the second major problem facing students in English writing. This is followed by the misuse of prepositions, spelling, and articles.

Elachachi (2015) investigated the narrative English writing of 16 Arabic-speaking Algerian students. Her study emphasises the cross-linguistic differences between Arabic and English such as morphology and syntax. She shows how Arabic-speaking students may encounter challenges in the use of syntactic forms because Arabic originates from a different language family from English.

The findings of the studies cited above indicate that many of the challenges students encounter in writing are attributed to similar reasons. Research shows that students' habit of translation from the L1 and the linguistic and rhetorical differences between their L1 and English play a role in challenges with writing. These studies, however, limit their focus to the Arabic-speaking world, where English is used as a FL. The

participants of these studies may not have experienced the academic writing requirements in an English-medium university. Therefore, the lack of research on the learning experiences of these students in English-speaking countries points to the need for more scholarship. In addition, all the studies have concentrated on superficial errors in student writing, i.e. the first level of Lea and Street's model. What seems of importance in this regard is the lack of reference to issues of meaning-making in student writing and students' ability to convey meaning through their writing at tertiary level.

Students' prior learning experiences have an impact on students' perceptions and expectations regarding the new learning environment, especially at an English-medium institution (Hellstén, 2002). Students bring with them their prior knowledge and experiences of academic writing when they are met with an academic task (Vardi, 2003). It is, therefore, important to investigate how teaching contexts in the Arab world prepare students for the demands of academic writing, especially in English-speaking countries. The next section presents some of the empirical studies on academic writing in English-speaking countries.

### **3.9 Challenges facing Arabic-speaking students in English writing in the English-speaking world**

In line with the previous section, I present the previous scholarly research from two perspectives: 1) challenges within the broader education context; and 2) challenges posed by the writing process.

#### **3.9.1 Challenges within the broader context**

Keong and Mussa (2015) used a questionnaire and interviews to explore the English writing difficulties Arabic-speaking students encounter in the Malaysian context. The findings of the study provide reasons for students' difficulties with writing in English including the lack of reading in English, the lack of courses focused on writing, and the



lack of writing practice. However, the study targeted 30 postgraduate students from only one Arabic-speaking country, i.e. Iraq.

The study of Al Murshidi (2014) adopted a mixed methods approach to investigate the writing challenges faced by Arabic-speaking students at US universities. The study found that students struggle in the first year of their study with the demands of academic writing. The participants in her study indicated that they face difficulty in academic writing in English as they were not offered the chance to practise the same genres of writing in their previous scholastic experiences, and their past tuition overall did not prepare them to write academically in English. However, the subjects in Al Murshidi's study were only from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, making it difficult to generalise the findings to other Arabic-speaking students from other countries.

### **3.9.2 Challenges posed by the writing process**

In the UK context, Bailey (2012) investigated the academic writing difficulties NNESSs from various countries encounter in a tertiary context. He interviewed an Arabic-speaking student from Syria. Commenting on the challenges he encountered in writing, the participant attributed these to the difference between Arabic and English in terms of the essay writing styles. He said:

.....in the Arabic method we put [sic] general introduction about the title, and then in the body, which is the core of the essay, we talk about the title in one long paragraph, and then come [sic] the conclusion. While in the English method the introduction is very important because it contains a work plan, moreover it mention points about what the body will talk about, the body is very important too it contains paragraphs, each paragraph explain [sic] the points that was [sic] mentioned in the introduction, then come [sic] the conclusion (Bailey, 2012, p. 178).

In the New Zealand context, Ankawi (2015) explored the challenges Saudi Arabian students face in English academic writing. He found that the participants in his study had a negative attitude towards study in English. The challenges these students faced

were the lack of academic writing vocabulary, the lack of ability to use formal language, the lack of ability to paraphrase or summarise materials, and the lack of ability to find appropriate references. He attributes these challenges to the educational system in Saudi Arabia. However, the study was only restricted to one university in New Zealand and one Arab nationality. In addition, Ankawi's study targeted only male students who participated in the interviews. This makes it difficult to generalize the findings of the study.

Abdulkareem (2013) surveyed 85 Arabic-speaking students from eight Arab countries to identify the challenges they encounter in English writing in the Malaysian context. The findings showed that most of the errors students made in academic writing were sentence structure, vocabulary, and expressing ideas. However, the students were all from the postgraduate level, which may bring different findings from results that may arise from a study of undergraduate students.

The studies presented above indicate a gap in the literature regarding the challenges Arabic-speaking students in the New Zealand context encounter in academic writing in English as a social practice. The present study aims to trace students' experiences with academic writing starting from their prior language learning in their home countries to see how these influence their assumptions about the writing process. The study also aims to trace the challenges students encounter in writing when moving to an English-speaking country, where assessment is mostly done through the written word.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the literature concerned with some areas of importance in the present study. The chapter started with an overview of the spread of English as a global language. The chapter has also presented the current situation in tertiary education where internationalisation is a major theme. Statistics on international, including

Arabic-speaking, students in New Zealand have been offered in this chapter. The chapter has presented the status of teaching English in the Arabic-speaking world. Previous research on Arabic-speaking students' experiences with English writing in both the Arab and English world has been outlined in this chapter. In addition, the chapter highlighted the gap and the need for further studies that focus on academic writing as a social practice and not as a decontextualized skill in the context of English-medium institutions.

## Chapter 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented a review of the relevant literature on the status of English language teaching in the Arab world and the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter in English academic writing. The current chapter describes and justifies the research methodology of the study and the philosophical underpinning and approach of this research project. The chapter also defines and describes the data collection methods and covers details about the sample in the three stages of the study. A description of how the data were triangulated and analysed is provided in this chapter, followed by data analysis procedures across the three stages of the study.

The main aim of the study is to investigate the challenges Arabic-speaking undergraduate students face in English academic writing in New Zealand from the perspective of the academic literacies model. The main research question that guided this study is:

- How can Arabic-speaking students embarking on undergraduate studies at New Zealand tertiary institutions be better prepared for the demands of English academic writing?

The sub-questions that were used to explore this area are:

1. What are Arabic-speaking students' expectations of and assumptions about English academic writing?
2. How have students' past scholastic experiences prepared them for studying and writing in English?
3. To what extent are the disciplinary and institutional expectations of academic writing challenging for Arabic-speaking students?

It was therefore necessary to choose a research design well suited to exploring these questions. To ensure a robust research design, “researchers must choose a research paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality” (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 26).

## **4.2 Methodological paradigm and approach**

Morgan (2007) defines a paradigm as “the set of beliefs and practices that guide a field,” and it usually refers to the set of beliefs researchers hold. Terms such as the philosophical worldview, theoretical lens, and paradigm are used interchangeably in the literature (Doyle, Brady, & Byrne, 2009).

The current study is informed by the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that this approach allows researchers to investigate individuals’ understanding of the world in which they live and interact. Researchers then

develop subjective meanings of their experiences ... These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views ... Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual’s lives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8).

From a constructivist perspective, reality is believed to be subjective and a socially-situated phenomenon (Mason, 2018). In other words, there is no single ‘truth’ that can be generalised to other contexts, and multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The researcher’s role in this paradigm is to uncover the “insider view” of the participants (Mason, 2002, p. 56), while the research participants’ role is to help the researcher to construct a subjective reality.

Lincoln et al. (2011) note that a constructivist-interpretive paradigm is based on the notion that individuals co-construct knowledge through their interaction with others, and knowledge is conveyed within a social context (Crotty, 1998). From a constructivist-interpretive point of view, individual values are honoured, and are negotiated among individuals (Creswell, 2013).

I adopted the constructivist-interpretive paradigm as it enabled me to gather information about the varied realities as viewed by the participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my study, I viewed reality as complex and multiple. In the qualitative phases of the study, I tried to get insights into how the participants view the concept of English academic writing. Since I aimed at getting insights from students from different Arabic-speaking countries, I expected to listen to varied realities, narratives and histories. Students bring multiplicities of expectations and realities about the importance of writing in English, based on their previous histories of learning English (North, 2005).

Mason (2018) maintains that working within the constructivist-interpretive paradigm allows researchers to seek information about how individuals perceive, interpret, and understand daily-lived experiences. This understanding seems to fit the purpose of exploring how Arabic-speaking students construct an understanding of academic writing at tertiary institutions in New Zealand and the challenges they encounter in that process.

A mixed methods design was utilised for this research project. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative instruments were used to provide data on the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter in English academic writing. While the practice of collecting different types of data dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the real breakthrough in mixing qualitative and quantitative data occurred in the 1970s when the

concept of triangulation was introduced to social research (Dörnyei, 2007). This breakthrough overcame the incompatibility thesis, which referred to the belief that the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods is impossible due to fundamental differences in the paradigms that underlie the two methods (Howe, 1988).

In the 1990s, the ‘paradigm war’ or ‘debate’ lost its power, and mixed methods researchers were able to gain confidence as research methodology texts began to include chapters that discuss mixed methods (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Two influential publications (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003) established mixed methods research as a valid mode of inquiry in the field of social sciences (Dörnyei, 2007), and it was called the “third methodological movement” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011, p. 285).

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2011) present some characteristics of mixed methods research, the first of which is methodological eclecticism. This characteristic originates from debunking the incompatibility thesis. Mixed methods researchers confronted the incompatibility thesis with the compatibility thesis, i.e. qualitative and quantitative methods are compatible (Howe, 1988). Howe (1988) described the compatibility thesis as follows:

The compatibility thesis supports the view, beginning to dominate practice, that combining quantitative and qualitative methods is a good thing and denies that such a wedding is epistemologically incoherent (p. 10).

Another characteristic of mixed methods research is paradigm pluralism, i.e. various paradigms could serve as an underlying philosophical worldview for research that uses mixed methods. In this context, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2011) describe mixed methods research as a “big tent” as researchers who use mixed methods come from different philosophical worldviews (p. 287).

Recently, Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined mixed methods research as an approach to inquiry where the researcher collects both quantitative and qualitative data, integrates them, and then interprets the findings to reach an understanding of the research problem under investigation. A straightforward definition of mixed methods research is offered by Dörnyei (2007) who defines it as “some sort of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods within a single research project” (p. 44). Therefore, the combination of both modes of inquiry is expected to increase the overall reliability of the findings of a research project.

Researchers stress that a mixed methods approach recognises that more than one approach is available for researchers (Greene, 2008; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Fielding (2012) shows that mixed methods research can offer “depth of qualitative understanding with the reach of quantitative techniques” (p. 124). Greene (2007) points out that mixed methods research is an orientation towards viewing the social world that:

actively invites us to participate in dialogue about multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important to be valued and cherished (p. 20).

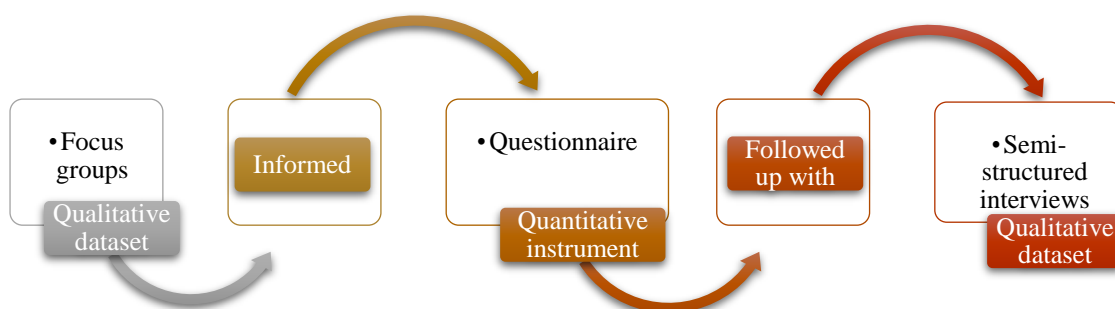
Dörnyei (2007) argues that a mixed methods approach is strongly recommended since the strengths of one research strategy (e.g. quantitative or qualitative) can overcome the weaknesses of the other. Using mixed methods research aims to gain “more, and a more nuanced, analysis of the research problem” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 366).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) propose different designs for mixed methods research. These include: convergent parallel mixed methods, where quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis are conducted in parallel. The datasets are then compared, which leads to interpretation of the findings.



Another design is the explanatory sequential mixed methods, whereby quantitative data are collected and then analysed. Data analysis is then followed up with the qualitative data collection and analysis, which lead to interpretation of the findings. This design appeals to researchers who are quantitative-oriented (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The third design is the exploratory sequential mixed methods. In this last design, researchers collect and analyse qualitative data as a first step. Then the findings from the qualitative dataset build to quantitative data collection and analysis, which then lead to interpretation of the findings. In this design, the research project may be initiated with collecting data from focus groups, analysing the findings, developing an instrument and then administering the instrument to the target sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the sequential approach the researcher starts with the qualitative phase of research. The qualitative data are analysed. The second database, the quantitative phase, builds on the results of the initial database (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morse, 1991; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), and then the quantitative results can be correlated with further qualitative data.



**Figure 4: Sequential Mixed Methods**  
Adapted from Creswell and Creswell (2018)

An exploratory sequential approach was adopted in this study. As Figure 4 above shows, the topic of the present study was first explored qualitatively with 14 students in three focus groups. The aim of starting with a qualitative part is that I wanted to talk to

the participants to identify the problems with academic writing that they experienced during their studies in New Zealand. Using the findings from these focus groups, I developed a questionnaire that was self-administered by Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in New Zealand. The questionnaire aimed to elicit numeric data from Arabic-speaking undergraduate students at New Zealand tertiary institutions. Following the questionnaire, I moved to semi-structured interviews with the questionnaire respondents who had volunteered to be interviewed. The aim of the interviews was to explore in greater depth the key findings from the questionnaire.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) present some of the strengths and limitations of using the exploratory sequential design. They note that among the strengths of this design is the fact that conducting research in separate stages makes implementing and then interpreting the data straightforward. Moreover, this design enables the researcher to produce an instrument, which in fact occurred in the present study as the questionnaire was developed based on the findings from the qualitative focus groups.

As for the limitations of a sequential design, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue that having research conducted in more than one stage will require considerable time to implement, which may not be possible for all research projects. Researchers are also recommended to use a small sample in the first phase and a large one of different participants in the second phase to avoid any bias in the quantitative part. In addition, adopting this design requires checking for validity of the qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To minimise the limitations of using a sequential design and to increase the quality of conclusions from research findings of this study, I followed the steps suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018):

- Purposively selecting individuals to participate in the quantitative phase and then following up with a group of these individuals in the qualitative phase,
- Using a large sample for the quantitative part of the study and small sample for the qualitative part, and
- In terms of data analysis, choosing significant results to follow up in the qualitative phase.

In my study, I purposively selected the sample for the questionnaire, as the respondents had to be Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in New Zealand, from any Arabic-speaking country and from any discipline. The sample included 177 respondents. From the respondents, 20 students were then interviewed to follow up on the significant findings. As for checking for validity of the data, conducting the focus groups in the beginning of the study and then following them with a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with other participants enabled triangulation of the data.

### **4.3 Data collection methods**

This study utilised three data collection instruments: focus groups (questions in Appendix C), an online questionnaire (Appendix F), and semi-structured interviews (Appendix J). In what follows, each of these instruments is discussed in more detail.

#### **4.3.1 Focus groups**

The first data collection method I used was focus groups. The use of focus groups has been widely adopted in scholarly research as a method to explore individuals' opinions on a topic under investigation. Krueger and Casey (2014) define a focus group interview as a session that is aimed at gathering the perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of the participants about a topic in a friendly environment. Focus group sessions generally last between 1 and 3 hours allowing in-depth discussion facilitated by the moderator (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

Among the advantages of focus groups is that they represent a socially-oriented research procedure (Krueger, 1997) where data are obtained through interaction between the participants and the moderator in a setting that is similar to real-life situations.

Furthermore, Patton (2015) adds that one of the advantages of focus groups is that participants' interaction enhances the quality of the collected data because participants tend to provide checks on each other. Focus groups are cost effective for data collection as they enable the researcher to obtain data from several participants at the same time. They are also flexible as they allow the moderator to intervene in order to further probe into specific points during the discussion (Krueger, 1997). In addition, focus groups offer considerable validity and in-depth information about exactly how individuals view an issue (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

However, using focus groups is not without shortcomings. Some participants may refrain from sharing their opinions in front of others when they find out that their opinion is a minority one (Patton, 2015). A similar limitation is that less confident and less articulate participants may be intimidated and discouraged from speaking (Gibbs, 1997). Furthermore, among the limitations of focus groups is that one or two participants may dominate the discussion if the moderator cannot control the run of the discussion. Additionally, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) note that focus group interviews do not usually result in numerical or quantifiable data which may lead to generalisations.

To overcome some of these limitations, I conducted the focus groups in Arabic to give all the participants an equal opportunity of expressing their opinions in their L1 and to ensure that the more fluent English speakers were not at an advantage because we were all using our mother tongue. The participants were informed in advance that their

participation was voluntary, and I would keep their participation confidential during the research project.

### **4.3.2 An online questionnaire**

The second data collection method I used in this study was an online questionnaire. Rea and Parker (2014) show that questionnaires, as a tool in the social sciences research, result in significant credibility as they are widely used and accepted among academics and institutions. One type of questionnaire is the online one that is an alternative to the traditional hard-copy method.

In terms of the advantages of using questionnaires, Patten (2017) points out that questionnaires are efficient in providing data that can be analysed easily, and responses in big numbers can be scored or tabulated efficiently using software. In addition, questionnaires can be anonymous to protect the identity of the respondents, which may encourage respondents to honestly answer questions, particularly sensitive ones (Patten, 2017). Another advantage of using questionnaires is the fact that they are economical. In other words, many responses can be collected from respondents in different locations.

However, Patten (2017) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) refer to some of the disadvantages of using questionnaires. The first drawback is the low response rate, which is an “acute problem” (Patten, 2017, p. 4). Another drawback of questionnaires is that some respondents may provide responses which they assume are “socially desirable” even though they are not accurate responses (p. 5). Patten (2017) shows that even though the anonymity of questionnaires reduces respondents’ tendency to provide socially desirable answers, some individuals have a strong need to seek social desirability. Because of these issues, it is necessary to validate the responses. This validation was achieved through collecting 177 responses from female and male

respondents. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to further explore the reasons for the respondents' choices when completing the questionnaire since the latter does not drill down to find reasons for answers (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) and provides only a snapshot at a particular point in time (Patten, 2017).

In my study, I opted for using a questionnaire as I aimed at reaching a relatively large sample of students. I aimed at getting responses from Arabic-speaking undergraduate students from different tertiary institutions in New Zealand. The themes that emerged from the focus groups showed the need for investigating data quantitatively to understand some of the relationships and correlations among different variables, and the impact specific variables have on other ones.

To minimise the threat of misunderstanding the questions and since I had no prior knowledge of the level of English of the respondents, I provided the questionnaire items in Arabic and simply worded English. The aim of the bilingual questionnaire was to encourage students to respond and interact with the questionnaire and to avoid any possible misinterpretation of the questionnaire items as well as to encourage them to take part in the interviews.

#### **4.3.3 Semi-structured interviews**

The third method I used to collect data was semi-structured interviews. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) note that interviews are a powerful data collection method as they allow one-to-one interaction between interviewer and interviewees. Interviews help researchers to identify how individuals organise their own worlds and the meanings they attach to the action they take in these worlds. Therefore, the aim of conducting interviews is to allow researchers to explore the interviewees' worlds (Patton, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews are more frequently used than other types of interview in research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). They combine some pre-determined open questions, and the interviewer can then further explore particular themes or responses. This type of interview is a common data collection method that has proven to be both useful and flexible. It allows a dialogic interaction with the participants (May, 2011) and enables reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta, 2013). Informed by the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, I viewed the participants' perceptions, experiences, and interactions as "meaningful properties of the social reality," which my research questions were intended to investigate (Mason, 2018, p. 111).

However, Denscombe (2010) discusses the 'interviewer effect' as one of the drawbacks of semi-structured interviews. He demonstrates how interviewees may respond differently depending on how they perceive the interviewer. In addition, among the drawbacks of interviews is what Gomm (2008) refers to as demands characteristics, when the interviewees' responses are influenced by what they think the situation requires. To overcome these drawbacks, I made clear at the beginning of each interview what the purpose and topic were, and I attempted to put the interviewee at ease through using Arabic for the discussion. Informed by the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, the interviews were meant to explore some of the findings from the questionnaire in further depth and to explore the participants' worlds in relation to their experiences with academic writing in English.

The interviews were carried out in Arabic to enable the participants to express their thoughts more clearly in their L1. In cases where the potential participant asked for the indicative questions of the interview, they were sent a set of questions developed by the

researcher as a guide for interviews (see Appendix J). However, the participants were encouraged to broaden the discussion if they so chose.

#### **4.4 The sample**

Selection of the participants in this study was purposive. Maxwell (2013) defines purposive sampling as a type of sampling where “particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide” (p. 235).

Despite the fact that purposive sampling techniques are usually linked with qualitative methods, purposive sampling can also be used in quantitative or mixed methods studies (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Purposive sampling seemed appropriate for my study for several reasons. Firstly, across the stages of the study I aimed at exploring the challenges in English academic writing from the perspective of students whose L1 is Arabic. Secondly, in the focus groups I purposively included participants from the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The aim of including postgraduate students in the focus groups aimed at giving students the chance to reflect on their experiences with the demands of English academic writing. I purposively selected male and female participants to avoid the limitations of previous studies, which included the voices of only one gender. Similarly, including participants from different Arab nationalities was meant to bridge a gap in the existing research on the topic. In the focus groups, I arranged the participants in such a way that enabled discussion among participants who were not from the same country to maximise the chance of benefit from the session. Thirdly, for the questionnaire, I only targeted Arabic-speaking undergraduate students regardless of their tertiary majors as I wanted to survey as many students as possible. My interest in exploring the experiences of students at the undergraduate level was attributed to the fact that most students usually move immediately to that level upon finishing high school in their country. Therefore,



the transition from a school mindset in the Arab world to a tertiary mindset in New Zealand was expected to be challenging to the students.

This study made use of the snowball purposive sampling technique. This technique involves utilising circumstances and events as they occur while conducting the data collection process (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Snowball sampling involves using participants to find other participants who can add to the study. It uses “insider knowledge to maximise the chance” that the informants who are brought to the study are of value to the topic under investigation (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 283). In snowball sampling, interpersonal relations play a key role (Browne, 2005), as the researcher depends on friends and acquaintances (Noy, 2008). I used snowballing in the focus groups when some participants invited other participants who could add to the discussion. The questionnaire also included a statement that encouraged the potential respondents to send the link to the questionnaire to other Arabic-speaking students they knew. The criteria for inclusion of participants in each stage of this study are outlined below.

#### **4.4.1 Inclusion criteria**

To achieve the purposive sampling technique and before embarking on the different stages of the study, the following criteria for inclusion of the participants were set:

- Participants in the focus groups (hereinafter referred to as FG participants) had to be native speakers of Arabic. They could be from any tertiary institution in Auckland city. The FG participants were excluded from the questionnaire and ultimately the interviews. However, they were asked to trial the questionnaire that was developed based on the findings from the discussion with them and the reading of the relevant literature. The aim of selecting students from any level was to gain as much insight as possible from them about what difficulties they

faced or were still facing in English academic writing in New Zealand across the disciplines. Having participants from different disciplines helped me formulate the kinds of question that would elicit information from the students about their expectations of, and assumptions about, the academic writing process.

- The questionnaire respondents (hereinafter referred to as QUS respondents) had to be native speakers of Arabic, and they had to be undergraduate students in any New Zealand tertiary institution. They could be in any tertiary undergraduate study year and from any discipline. I aimed to include male and female respondents.
- Participants in the interviews (hereinafter referred to as INT participants) were the ones who volunteered after completing the questionnaire.

#### **4.5 Research location**

This study was conducted at the City Campus of Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand. However, the focus groups and interviews were conducted in locations that suited the participants. Data analysis took place in AUT.

#### **4.6 Ethical considerations**

Participation in this study was voluntary. An ethics application was submitted to the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) for the three stages of the study (application number 17/19). Data collection procedures started after obtaining Ethics Approval from AUTEC in two stages. The first approval was obtained on 27/02/2017 for conducting the focus groups (see Appendix D), and the second approval was granted on 25/05/2017 for the questionnaire and interviews (see Appendix I).

Cohen et al. (2011) note that informed consent means that potential participants agree to participate in the research after they get enough information about the study and the facts that may affect the decisions they could make. Therefore, before embarking on the

study, the FG participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A) that contained the details of the research including the objectives of the research project and their role in the study. The FG participants were sent a Consent Form (see Appendix B) which was signed and returned before conducting the sessions. The FG participants were told that their participation was voluntary, and they would be assigned a pseudonym in the data analysis, so their names would not be mentioned in the thesis. The participants were also told that the discussion would be recorded.

The questionnaire was anonymous, and the QUS respondents were provided with information about the project and the aims of the study. The QUS respondents were informed that their participation in the questionnaire meant they had consented to participate in the study.

The INT participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix G) and a Consent Form (see Appendix H) to sign. All the INT participants were provided with assurance that all data would remain confidential and only used for the research purposes. Confidentiality of the INT participants was maintained throughout the study by using a coding system developed by the researcher.

#### **4.7 Triangulation of data**

Within mixed methods research, validity is defined as the researcher's ability to reach some conclusions from the data that are accurate (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Fielding (2012) refers to triangulation as "convergent validation," which is one of the purposes of using mixed methods (p. 124). He argues that triangulation is about whether findings from different methods agree. Triangulating different sources of data enables researchers to examine evidence from these sources and provide a coherent justification for the themes that emerge from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Denscombe (2008) suggests that mixed methods research provides the researcher with more accurate data and a better understanding of the issue under investigation.

Similarly, Day, Sammons, and Gu (2008) argue that mixed methods approaches can provide more accurate explanations than single method approaches to the complexities of phenomena under inquiry. Therefore, the use of mixed methods aimed at achieving the objectives of the study and overcoming the weaknesses of one single mode of inquiry. In this context, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) refer to the term ‘inference’ denoting the last step of any given research. They suggest two ways in which the term inference is used:

- Inference quality, which refers to the standards followed to assess the quality of conclusions reached from research findings. In quantitative research, internal validity and statistical conclusion validity correspond to inference quality. On the other hand, in qualitative research, credibility and trustworthiness correspond to inference quality.
- Inference transferability refers to the extent to which the conclusions reached through the research could be applied to other contexts. In quantitative research terms, it corresponds to generalisability and external validity and transferability in qualitative research.

The constructivist-interpretive paradigm adopts terms like “credibility, transferability, and dependability” as criteria for trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13). To check trustworthiness of the qualitative data, I utilised three techniques: member checking, thick descriptions, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Firstly, member checking was used to enhance the validity of the collected data. The transcripts of focus group discussions and interviews were emailed to the participants

for member checking. The participants were asked to go through the transcript and edit as they wished. They could remove any part that related to them if they felt uncomfortable with it. Secondly, thick description of the data collected aimed to contribute to transferability of interpretations and findings from the qualitative part of the study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Thirdly, peer debriefing is defined as a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer to explore aspects of the analysis “that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Noble and Smith (2015) mention that peer debriefing enhances the credibility of the inquiry through highlighting any bias. In my study, peer debriefing was conducted to ensure the quality of my inferences following the data analysis and to avoid any bias towards my own interpretation by working closely with my supervisors.

This section outlines the procedures that were followed in collecting the data across the three stages of the present study.

#### **4.7.1 Focus groups**

Recruiting participants for the focus groups occurred through advertising the study on posters around the campuses of the tertiary institutions that gave me ethics approval to access their students. The poster included a statement in Arabic to draw the attention of Arabic-speaking students in the institutions and to encourage them to participate in the study. The poster briefed the potential participants about the study and the nature of the discussion. My email address was provided for students who wanted to participate in the study to contact me. For ease of communication, a QR code was also included in the poster for students to scan. The code was linked with a template email message indicating interest in participating in the study. I then received emails from potential students indicating their willingness to participate. I contacted each student to learn their

names, nationalities, and fields of study. At times, I asked the FG participants to invite other Arabic-speaking students to take part in the discussions.

Three focus groups were held in March and April 2017. Each session lasted for around 90 minutes. The focus groups had a set of indicative questions (see Appendix C). Each session started with some ‘opening questions’ that aimed at finding out about the participants’ nationalities, previous tuition before coming to New Zealand, major of study in New Zealand, and reasons for choosing a particular major. During the discussions, I made sure to include every participant through rotating the questions in a way that seemed comfortable for the students. The findings from the focus groups are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

The data and the main themes from the focus groups, as well as the reading of the literature helped me develop the second instrument, i.e. the questionnaire. The latter aimed at finding about students’ past learning experiences with writing in English, age when starting learning English at school, and IELTS scores and writing sub-scores. The questionnaire was also meant to gauge more information from undergraduate students about their perceptions of their confidence in their English academic writing skills.

These skills included expressing ideas in academic English, paraphrasing, using academic vocabulary, citing reference properly, and writing under time-constraints.

Building on the focus groups’ findings, the questionnaire also aimed to elicit data from the students about their perceptions of the support offered by Student Learning Centres (SLCs) and Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs). A further question in the questionnaire aimed at finding what strategies students employed to overcome the challenges they encounter in English academic writing. Moreover, the respondents were surveyed about their opinions of what lecturers at tertiary level could do to help them with writing.

Analysis of the questionnaire data (see 4.8) was intended to measure the impact of some

of the variables above on other variables, and how all these shaped students' experience with English academic writing as a social practice at tertiary level in New Zealand.

#### **4.7.2 An online questionnaire**

Once the questionnaire had been designed, some FG participants were asked to comment on it. They were asked about the context of the questionnaire and the ease of use. In general, the participants' feedback was positive about the ease of reading and understanding the content of the questionnaire. The participants found the items straightforward. They also mentioned that it was a good decision to provide the Arabic translation of each item for students with an easy English equivalent. Several FG participants who gave feedback about the format of the questionnaire pointed out that most of the scale items of the questionnaire were positively worded. This might lead to participants not reading the items properly. Accordingly, after consultation with my supervisors, the wording of some items was changed into a negative one to avoid the possibility of random answers.

In this study, I utilised the Qualtrics survey tool to administer the questionnaire. Full access to this tool was provided by the AUT. The findings of this quantitative questionnaire were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis of the questionnaire informed the last part of data collection, i.e. the qualitative interviews.

Recruiting students for the questionnaire occurred through advertising the study around the campuses of the tertiary institutions which I had contacted and from which I had obtained approval to conduct my research. Presidents of Arabic-speaking students' clubs and associations in New Zealand were approached so they could introduce the study to the target students. The link to the questionnaire was disseminated through

social media pages (Facebook, Twitter) and WhatsApp groups of Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand.

As indicated in 4.6, the questionnaire was anonymous, and the introductory note encouraged the respondents to send the link to the questionnaire to any potential Arabic-speaking friends they knew. The questionnaire contained a brief covering note explaining the aim of conducting the study and the objectives and importance of the questionnaire (see Appendix F). It provided an assurance of anonymity and instructions for completing the questionnaire. In the introductory covering note, the students were informed that their completion of the questionnaire meant they consented to take part in the study. The first section of the questionnaire covered demographic information about the respondent. The section elicited information about age, gender, nationality, time spent in New Zealand, qualifications, and the IELTS/TOEFL score. I was interested in these data because during the focus groups some factors (e.g. gender, the IELTS score) seemed to influence the FG participants' perspective regarding the demands of writing at the tertiary level in New Zealand. Therefore, I wanted to get more information about how these factors impact on other variables, which are covered in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire included 18 items on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree). Following the completion of the questionnaire, the QUS respondents were asked if they would like to take part in the interviews.

The questionnaire was made available online on 26 May 2017, and the link remained active until early July 2017. By then, I had received 177 responses. I waited for two more weeks for any more possible respondents. However, no new responses were received. Therefore, I decided to move on to analyse the data of the questionnaire, which then led to a follow up stage that utilised semi-structured interviews.



### **4.7.3 Semi-structured interviews**

Twenty interviews were conducted with male and female Arabic-speaking undergraduate students from different tertiary institutions in New Zealand (see Table 11 on page 190). As mentioned in 4.3.3, the interviews were carried out in Arabic to enable the participants to express their thoughts more clearly in their L1 (questions in Appendix J). The interviews were audio recorded after obtaining the consent of the INT participants. As soon as I had finished the interviews, I started transcribing them into English, and the transcripts were sent back to the interviewees by email for member checking. The INT participants were asked to go through the transcript and change any part as they wished. They were told that if the researcher did not receive a reply from them within one week, this would indicate they were happy with the transcript.

Conducting the interviews took place in different locations that suited the participants. The interviews took place between 27/07/2017 and 23/11/2017. One participant wanted to provide her answers to the indicative questions of the interview in writing. She then sent her answers by email. Another female participant refused to allow recording of her interview, so I had to take notes of her answers to the questions during the interview. Once the transcript of the interview was ready, the participant had the chance to check it. The length of the interviews varied between 26 and 72 minutes (average 36 for each interview).

## **4.8 Data analysis**

In this mixed methods study, data analysis was conducted in three phases, in which each phase informed the other. For analysing the qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews, I used thematic analysis to identify the major themes and patterns emerging from the data. As for the analysis of the quantitative data, which emerged from the

questionnaire, I used the SPSS software. More details about the data analysis in each phase of the study are presented below.

#### **4.8.1 Qualitative data analysis**

In this study, I opted for thematic analysis to identify the themes emerging from the qualitative data from the focus groups and the interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method of data analysis that researchers use to identify and report the patterns emerging from the data collected. Thematic analysis is commonly used across all qualitative designs (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). As it is the nature of qualitative data to be collected over a period of time, I started analysing the data concurrently with collecting further data to better inform the following stages of research and to see if the same patterns would emerge from the discussions that followed. My decision was informed by Cohen et al. (2011) who suggest that when researchers start analysing the data early they avoid the problem of data overload. Researchers also get the opportunity to recognise the most significant themes or patterns emerging from the already collected data. Therefore, researchers can explore these patterns in further detail in the next stages of data collection.

To analyse the qualitative data of the study, I followed the guidelines set by Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (2017). They suggest six phases of thematic analysis. In what follows, the actual application of these six phases of thematic analysis in the present study is described in detail.

##### **4.8.1.1 Becoming familiar with the data**

In this first phase of data analysis, I started with verbatim transcribing of the focus groups and interviews. As I transcribed the recordings myself, I familiarised myself with the data. In addition, since I translated the discussions from Arabic into English I developed a better grasp of the collected data. In my translation, I adopted free

translation of the original to convey the intended message of the participants in a way that reads clearly in English, while being as close to the original transcript as possible. Once I had finished translation of the transcripts, I asked an Arabic-speaking PhD student to double check my translation. His feedback was positive, and no major issues were reported. When I had finished transcribing the recordings, I read the transcripts more than once in order to familiarise myself with the data in English.

#### **4.8.1.2 Generating codes**

A code in qualitative data is defined as a word or phrase that is assigned to a part of text as it captures its essence (Saldaña, 2016). When assigning a code to any part of the data, I tried to make sure that whatever I coded was relevant and meaningful to the topic of the study. In qualitative research, a code can be assigned to a text chunk regardless of the size of the text as long as it represents one single theme (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016).

Before embarking on the coding process, I read all the transcripts to better understand the data. I then started to assign relevant codes to segments of data. As I was reading the transcripts, I manually highlighted with different colours the chunks that could generate codes relevant to the topic.

#### **4.8.1.3 Constructing themes**

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that constructing themes entails grouping the various codes into suggested themes that could be recurrent in the data. Creswell (2013) refers to such a process as “winnowing,” i.e. reducing the codes into a number of themes that could ultimately be written in the final report (p. 186). At this stage, I was thinking about what different codes have in common, and I then began organising similar codes with extracts according to my new understanding. This enabled me to group similar codes that ultimately led to potential themes.

#### **4.8.1.4 Reviewing potential themes**

At this stage, my aim was to make sure the data within themes hung together to make sense, while there were still clear distinctions between the different themes. I adopted the two levels of reviewing suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). In level one of reviewing, I read the coded extracts for each theme to see if they made a coherent and meaningful segment and hung together. In level two, I went back and read the entire data to see if the themes I got from the extracts covered the whole picture and the story line was connected across the different themes.

#### **4.8.1.5 Defining and naming themes**

This stage entails going through each theme and the data to determine if the theme actually captures the essence of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage, I moved from the specific to the general by assigning the relevant coded extract a theme that captures the essence of the data selected.

#### **4.8.1.6 Producing the report**

This part of the analysis is the final stage where findings are reported in a concise readable and coherent way. At this stage, I made sure that the quotes chosen represented the theme discussed, and the analysis went beyond description of the data obtained from the sample and was linked with findings from previous research in the field.

As indicated earlier, analysis of the qualitative focus groups started immediately after finishing each session. This enabled me to form an understanding of the issues emerging from the transcript. Once I had completed the three focus groups, I produced the final report, which covered the themes that emerged from the data. The findings were discussed thoroughly with my supervisors, and I received feedback on each theme. Based on the final draft of the themes from focus groups, I drew up the questionnaire items to gain more insight from undergraduate students. The analysis of interviews

followed a similar approach, whereby the final report was produced after highlighting the major themes that emerged from the collected data.

#### **4.8.2 Quantitative data analysis**

For the quantitative data analysis, the dataset collected was entered into the SPSS software. The dataset was cleaned by removing the incomplete responses and the irrelevant data. The data were then divided into appropriate levels of measurements (i.e. nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratio). Categories such as tertiary study major, gender, nationality and years of schooling in English belonged to nominal categories. Variables such as age of the participants were marked as interval levels of measurement. Answers to scale questions were identified as interval responses (Bernard, 2013; Bryman & Cramer, 2001).

Before conducting the relevant analyses, some items were reversed to make sure that the wording of all the items was consistent. To identify patterns in the raw data, I first ran a descriptive statistics analysis, which presented frequency distribution tables of gender, age, nationality, university year and time spent in New Zealand. For visual representation of the study population, the results were presented in a numeric and percentile form in tables and charts.

Depending on the level of measurement, I ran the appropriate statistical tests.

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted using SPSS to analyse the dimensionality of the 18 items from the questionnaire (see Appendix F). Principal axis factoring extraction method initially specifying a single factor solution was used. The scree plot indicated that a unidimensional solution underpins the 18 items. Then an item analysis was conducted on the 18 items to assess the consistency among the QUS respondents regarding their perceptions of and assumptions about English academic writing and the strategies they employ in writing.

To identify the students' perceptions regarding their ability to meet the challenges presented by academic English, some items from the questionnaire were grouped into subscales based on conceptual grounds. Four subscales were identified. The subscales are related to the QUS respondents' past scholastic experiences with academic writing, degree of confidence in academic writing skills, academic writing strategies, and perceptions of academic writing support in the New Zealand context. Reliability analysis was conducted on each subscale. The aggregate scores were then computed for the items of each subscale to find the mean score for each respondent across items. To answer the research questions that guided the current study and to quantitatively explore the themes that were raised by the FG participants, some questions were set based on a conceptual basis and in relation to each subscale. The results of the quantitative data analysis were later correlated with the qualitative findings. The findings of the statistical tests are reported in Chapter 6.

## **4.9 Summary**

This chapter described the research methodology of the study. The philosophical worldview underpinning the study and design adopted were also presented and justified. The chapter outlined the data collection methods, which included focus groups, an online questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. The sampling techniques and the justification for choosing the sample in each stage of the study were discussed in detail. Issues that are related to reliability and ethics have also been presented. Data collection procedures have been presented in this chapter. The chapter also outlined the data analysis procedures. The next chapter presents the findings from the first stage of the study, i.e. the focus groups.

## **Chapter 5 Findings – Focus groups**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents findings of the first phase of data collection using focus groups adopting a constructivist-interpretive approach. Through the discussions with the 14 focus group (FG) participants, I aimed to explore the challenges Arabic-speaking students encountered when they first engaged with the demands of academic writing in the New Zealand tertiary context, or in another English-medium context. The findings from the discussions were intended to develop the quantitative instrument, i.e. the questionnaire. The number of participants for a focus group was between four and six, both male and female. Three focus groups were conducted with a total number of 14 students. Three focus groups were held in March and April 2017. Each session lasted for around 90 minutes. The focus groups had a set of indicative questions (see Appendix C). The FG participants did not participate further in the research. They informed the questionnaire items and then commented on the draft questionnaire.

### **5.2 Participants**

Table 4 below outlines the profiles of the participants who volunteered to take part in the three focus groups. All the participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and to ensure confidentiality.

Table 5: Focus group participants' profiles

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Degree</b>
<b>Dalal</b>	F	Egyptian	MSc, Renewable Energy
<b>Hazim</b>	M	Jordanian	PhD, Computer Science
<b>Mohammed</b>	M	Jordanian	PhD, Computer Science
<b>Ahmed</b>	M	Jordanian	PhD, Information Technology
<b>Huda</b>	F	Saudi Arabian	Bachelor, Commerce
<b>Ramiz</b>	M	Saudi Arabian	Bachelor, Social Work
<b>Hani</b>	M	Saudi Arabian	Master, Applied Language Studies
<b>Abdullah</b>	M	Saudi Arabian	Bachelor, Mechanical Engineering
<b>Rania</b>	F	Saudi Arabian	Master, Applied Language Studies
<b>Eman</b>	F	Saudi Arabian	MSc, Pharmacology
<b>Faisal</b>	M	Saudi Arabian	Bachelor, Automotive Engineering
<b>Abdulaziz</b>	M	Saudi Arabian	Bachelor, Automotive Engineering
<b>Samer</b>	M	Saudi Arabian	Bachelor, Automotive Engineering
<b>Salem</b>	M	Sudanese	PhD, Information Systems

### 5.3 Themes emerging from the focus groups

Based on the thematic analysis that was applied to the data, four themes were identified as the most common and recurrent across the three focus groups. The themes are:

- 5.3.1 The type of schools the participants had attended seems to impact on the quantity and quality of English tuition they received.
- 5.3.2 The writing instruction in IELTS preparation courses does not seem to adequately prepare the participants for the writing they have to do for university courses.
- 5.3.3 Arabic-speaking students appear to be uncertain about the kind of help they can get from Student Learning Centres (SLCs).
- 5.3.4 Several FG participants tended to seek help with writing from their Arabic-speaking friends.



The remaining part of this chapter will discuss these four themes in more detail.

### **5.3.1 Type of school and English tuition**

A major theme was the impact of the type of school the FG participants had attended in their home countries on the quantity and quality of English tuition they received. It appeared that for some students the English tuition they received in public schools contributed to the gap in the participants' English proficiency in general and writing in particular. There were several aspects including the starting age of learning English, the degree of exposure to English at school, the quality of English teaching, and the English textbooks and resources available at school.

#### **5.3.1.1 Starting age of learning English at school**

There are two types of schooling in most Arab countries – public and private. The FG participants included students who had studied at both public and private schools, with the majority completing their schooling at the former. The comments of the participants revealed noticeable differences between the two types of school. From the FG participants' perspective, the first difference is the starting age of learning English as a FL.

As noted in 3.6.2, in most of the Arabic-speaking countries, schooling often starts at the age of five or six. As indicated in the literature review, public schools in some Arabic-speaking countries such as Palestine, Egypt, the UAE, and Jordan start to teach English in the first grade. In private schools, English has always been introduced from the first grade. In most Arab countries, at the age of 12, students start the intermediate stage of school, i.e. from the seventh grade to the ninth grade. In response to my question about when they started learning English, many FG participants seemed to have started learning English when they were 11 – 13 years of age, although a few did start when they were five or six.

As indicated in Table 4 above the majority of the FG participants (9 out of 14) were from Saudi Arabia. As shown in the literature review chapter, English used to be introduced at the age of 12-13 in public schools in Saudi Arabia. Changes have been made to the starting age of learning English. Nowadays, English is introduced in public schools in Saudi Arabia starting from the fourth grade, i.e. when students are 10 years old. In other Arabic-speaking countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, there have been legislative changes as well. In these countries, English is introduced starting from the first grade, i.e. when students are 5-6 years old.

The FG participants who had studied at public schools attributed their problems in English, and particularly in writing, to the fact they had started to learn English relatively late. These students regarded the early starting age as the most important factor in their English proficiency. The participants who had studied at private schools seemed to show greater confidence in their ability to meet the demands of studying in an English-speaking country. The latter's confidence may be attributed to the fact they, in most contexts, started learning English at a younger age. As indicated in the literature review chapter, early introduction of the FL is expected to help students get better insights into the language and better preparedness (Cenoz, 2003).

The findings demonstrate that many FG participants believed that the context in which English as a FL is introduced to students at a young age alongside their L1 is of great importance. An old Arabic proverb states "early learning is akin to carving in stone," i.e. it lasts forever. This belief was illustrated in Abdulaziz's comments:

*I understand that the older you are, the more difficult it becomes to learn a language. The age of 15 is better than 20 and so on. A child can learn faster.*

Abdullah had studied at a public school in an Arabic-speaking country. He recalled how “some students in my class got high grades because they had studied English from the first grade at private schools and then moved to public schools.” One example of those students was Ahmed who attended a private school until the fifth grade before moving to a public school. He noted:

*I found that students in the public school were only learning the alphabet, while I was already able to speak in English.*

Another example was Dalal who attended a private school. She said:

*I studied at a private school in Egypt and therefore started learning English from the first grade. All schools both public and private in my country now start teaching English from the first grade.*

However, there are other factors than merely early introduction of English to students. Such factors appear to include the amount of exposure to English and the degree of time spent practicing it.

#### **5.3.1.2 Exposure to English**

Several FG participants emphasised that the later introduction of English in their scholastic career ultimately resulted in a lack of exposure to English at schools, which affected the amount of input they got by the time they finished school or joined university. However, in light of the FG participants’ responses, early introduction of English at school does not seem to guarantee that students would have more exposure and benefit for the long term. As discussed above, the context in which English is practised is of importance for developing learners’ language skills. In a typical English class at a public school in an Arabic-speaking country, an English language teacher would explain the grammatical rules using Arabic for most of the time and then give students time at the end of the lesson for some controlled practice. The opportunity for

students to put whatever they learn into communicative practice seems to be minimal. Once outside the classroom, students may find it challenging to practise English because of the limited use of English in the country.

Not only did the comments of the FG participants indicate a lack of exposure to English in schools, but also it seems that practice of English is missing in many non-academic contexts in Arabic-speaking countries. Since English is taught as a FL at schools in most of the Arabic-speaking countries, and English is not used in the wider community, students do not seem to get adequate exposure to the language. Parents speak Arabic at home, communication with friends in person and online occurs mostly in Arabic, and daily transactions are mainly carried out in Arabic. Therefore, the chance to apply what students learn at school to real contexts seems minimal. This perspective was echoed in Rania's comments:

*I believe I was fortunate to get access to education in an English-speaking country, the UK. I attended high school in Manchester. However, I lost much of what I had learned because of the lack of practice of English in Saudi Arabia.*

In private schools, on the other hand, students appeared to get considerable exposure to English as it is the language of instruction across most of the subjects. As indicated in the literature review, many private schools in the Arab world accommodate native English-speaking teachers and students who live with their parents who may be working there. This in turn gave students in private schools the chance to use English as a language of communication. As Dalal noted:

*We used to speak English during the whole day with teachers and other students. This was a good practice to improve our communication skills in English.*

### 5.3.1.3 English writing practice

As far as this study is concerned, less exposure to English meant less practice of English writing. Most FG participants reported that writing was not emphasised in their English classes at public schools. The lack of English writing practice did not seem to be limited to one context. Hani mentioned: *“In Saudi Arabia students are not used to writing.”* Hazim noted that in Jordan there was *“no writing, no feedback, no advice, no comments.”*

Exams seemed to be the common form of assessment with few, if any, written assignments. Huda indicated that assessing students’ performance mainly through exams seemed to decrease their motivation to practise the language in daily life situations where they only prepare to pass the exams by *“memorising the brief content”* they got from teachers. Similarly, Eman mentioned:

*Our previous tuition was mostly exams but no assignments. We used to get a book, summarise the content that will be included in the exam only.*

Such exams did not seem to require students to write in English as they simply included multiple choice questions, or a minimal amount of writing. As Eman noted:

*Even the writing we did for exams at school was brief. You just write one or two words as the answer to a question, or circle the correct answer from different choices. I mean there was no actual writing.*

When asked about the writing difficulties they encounter in their current study in New Zealand, the participants who had received education from a private school felt that they were able to deal with the challenges associated with English writing in the New Zealand context. For example, Dalal mentioned that she studied at a private school from the first grade, but in the seventh grade, she moved to a public school. She recalls how

well she was prepared compared with her counterparts in the public school who had just started learning English. For Dalal, receiving English tuition in a private school in the first 6 years of school offered her a privilege that benefited her in the long term when she moved to New Zealand. She said:

*When I moved to New Zealand, I could adapt to the demands of academic writing because I had practised writing at school. At least I was aware of the requirements of writing. I cannot say I am perfect, but at least I know what I should do in my assignments.*

#### **5.3.1.4 English resources at schools**

In most Arabic-speaking countries, the Ministry of Education is the body that is responsible for preparing the curricula that are taught at public schools. Through talking to the FG participants, it appeared that the resources used for teaching English at public schools are considered insufficient to equip students with the skills required in a tertiary context, particularly in an English-speaking country. Touching upon the content of English language classes at school, Ramiz who received schooling from a public school stated:

*We did not use to complete or study the whole English textbook. Teachers used to skip some content. I feel what we studied was basic and we did not go in depth.*

Similarly, Samer mentioned:

*The English content we studied at school regardless of the stage was unfortunately basic. I do not recall getting any extra materials or activities except what the teacher chose to teach from the student's book.*

In response to my question about whether the English textbooks are prepared locally by specialists in the Ministry of Education or are brought from international publishers such as Longman, Collins or Oxford, Abdullah said:

*The student's book was specifically prepared by international publishers for Saudi Arabia. The content was censored by the Ministry of Education. The content was meant to suit our culture.*

While several participants referred to the insufficiency of the English content offered at public schools due to the teachers' selectivity in what to teach, a few participants mentioned that private schools usually add extra materials to be taught along with the main curricula prepared by the Ministry of Education. Dalal referred to the situation in private schools in her home country. She said:

*Private schools students are given the chance to read a lot from extra materials that are made available for students. I mean we had a large library full of resources we could utilise such as books, computers with access to the Internet, and CDs on different topics. I used to borrow books in English and read at home.*

#### **5.3.1.5 Quality of English tuition at schools**

As indicated earlier, the degree of students' exposure to English and practice of writing seemed to be contributing factors to their proficiency in the language skills. However, what seemed to be an issue is not only the amount of exposure to English or the practicing of it, but also the quality of tuition students received at schools. The participants' responses indicated that the quality of English tuition the participants had received during their scholastic career, mainly during schooling, also varied due to the different type of school.

Comments by Hazim, Samer, and Hani show how disadvantaged they felt by studying at public schools. The participants referred to issues regarding the abilities of the

teaching staff. They seemed to agree that learning English from native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), who teach at private schools, is advantageous for students. A number of FG participants thought that it would have been better if English had been taught by NESTs. They seemed to think that having a NEST would give students a better chance to practise the language inside the classroom, which is the only opportunity for students to get exposure to the FL. This positive attitude towards learning in private schools was illustrated in Salem's experience. He said:

*My father preferred to send me to a private school because he believed these schools offer better opportunities for teaching English and the quality is much better than public schools.*

However, the opportunity Salem got in his home country may not be accessible for all students due to financial and social factors. In other words, some families cannot afford to send their children to private schools to receive a 'better' education. In the Arab world, private schools are usually referred to as 'the foreign currency' schools as parents pay considerable amounts of money in foreign currency per year (Prokop, 2003). Public schools, on the other hand, are generally free and subsidised by the governments of the different Arabic-speaking countries. In countries where unemployment and poverty rates are high, private schools may seem unattainable for many families. Therefore, public schools may be the only option. During another focus group, Dalal referred to the challenge that parents face when choosing a school for their children. She said:

*The problem in the Arab world is that if parents have money they can provide their children with good education in good schools. Otherwise, the only option is public schools where quality is bad.*



Dalal was firmly of the opinion that the quality of tuition at a private school was better than at a public school. She recalled:

*Studying at a private school until the sixth grade helped me acquire a good amount of the language and when I moved to a public school, I had no problem since I already acquired good command of the language.*

Linguistic proficiency in English could be enhanced by the feedback a teacher gives on what students write. The participants reflected upon their experiences with feedback. For them, they could hardly remember a time when they received feedback on something they had written in school. They believe that they were disadvantaged because of the lack of feedback from teachers of English. As Hani stated:

*Also, here we receive feedback. In our country, we did not get any feedback. No feedback in secondary school. I want to reiterate that I benefited a lot from feedback I got from my lecturers here in New Zealand.*

One reason for the lack of feedback given to students on what they write in English seemed to be the large number of students in one class in Arabic-speaking countries. Hazim said:

*The big size of classes made it difficult to get feedback on writing.*

When sitting for exams, students would not receive feedback on their performance on the exam. They would not know “*why an answer was wrong.*” (Hazim). In public schools in some Arabic-speaking countries, the common number of students in one classroom is 40-50 students, and the class usually lasts for 45 minutes (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Students may get up to 5-6 classes per day, covering different subjects. Therefore, the time allocated to each subject, including English, does not seem

sufficient to enable teachers to give both oral and/or written feedback on students’

English writing. In other words, since teachers may not be allocated extra time to mark student writing, they may avoid asking students to write, which results in the lack of practising the skill in class. In addition, the class size may hinder teachers’ ability to provide students with individual oral feedback on their English writing. In contrast, the situation in private schools is usually different as the number of students in a classroom is 18 to 25. In such small classes, it is easier for teachers to mark and give individual feedback on students’ writing, and the benefit from the activities conducted in class is expected to be high (Bahanshal, 2013).

Even though several FG participants were at the postgraduate level, the challenges they face in academic writing and which they raised may not necessarily be associated with that particular level of study. Among the FG participants, there were six undergraduate students who shared similar challenges as the postgraduate students when it comes to academic writing. Furthermore, listening to students from different education levels in a group discussion provided a more nuanced understating of how to develop the quantitative part of the study, the questionnaire, targeting the undergraduate students.

### **5.3.2 IELTS writing vs. writing in the disciplines**

Another major theme that emerged from the focus groups was the difference between the writing instruction and practice for the IELTS test and the disciplinary writing required for university. When interpreting the comments of the FG participants, I was specifically interested in finding out how the writing section, particularly Task 2, on the IELTS test could be relevant to the writing demands students will encounter, or have already encountered, in their tertiary study.

A number of FG participants reported differences between the two types of writing.

They felt that they had to learn a specific structure and style of writing for the IELTS

test. When moving to university, the participants were asked by lecturers to follow different structures and styles of writing. These participants noted that they had to abandon the writing structure they had learned in the IELTS preparation course as it no longer met the requirement of academic writing at a tertiary level. For instance, Hani highlighted the difference between the IELTS writing and writing for university, especially assignments. He said:

*When I joined university and was asked to write for the different courses, I discovered the big difference between the two things so the IELTS instruction seemed irrelevant to what I was writing for university courses.*

Similarly, Ramiz referred to the specific structure for writing he learned in an IELTS preparation course, which ultimately did not seem suitable for writing at university. Therefore, a few FG participants questioned the value of sitting for the IELTS and having to achieve a specific score as required by the university. Huda said:

*I have a problem – in the IELTS, we learned something. At university, we studied something different...So what is the benefit of it, then?*

There was a feeling among the FG participants that achieving an IELTS score as required by a tertiary institution does not necessarily guarantee that the student is ready for the demands of tertiary study. Eman noted:

*Some students who get the required IELTS score still find difficulties in adapting to the requirements of the university in New Zealand.*

Based on the discussion with the FG participants, the IELTS writing instruction in the IELTS preparation courses does not seem to equip candidates with the skills to meet the requirements of assignments, which include looking for references and summarising and paraphrasing what other writers have written. The FG participants believed that

these strategies are missing in an IELTS context as the latter only requires candidates to write based on their opinions and knowledge without having to back their writing up by reference to the literature (Weigle, 2002). At the tertiary level, on the other hand, students are expected to carry out evidence-based writing, which necessitates referring to the existing knowledge to contextualise what they write with what is already there in the field. This was echoed in Faisal's comments:

*In the IELTS course we did a lot of writing, but I never thought about citing whatever I write. The aim of the task is to write the required number of words with good grammar. At university, the requirements are different. You need to cite other authors and not plagiarise their ideas. That's a big difference between university and the IELTS.*

### **5.3.3 Students' uncertainty about the kind of help offered by Student Learning Centres (SLCs)**

As outlined in 2.7.3.1, tertiary institutions in English-speaking countries have SLCs that offer academic support to help students meet the demands required for success at university. The FG participants reflected uncertainty about the benefit of the support the TLAs who work at the SLCs offer. Several participants believed that it was not helpful with the demands of academic writing. Hazim who had the experience of consulting a TLA stated:

*It was not as helpful as I had expected, but in general I would say it was good.*

Some FG participants seemed to think the support offered by TLAs did not require a great deal of expertise. They believed that software programmes such as Grammarly or native-speaker friends could offer the same help. Hazim's comments reflected such a perspective:

*You know writing is different from one field to another. The field plays a role. The learning advisor was from a different field. So we met, and the overall advice was related to grammar... do this, do that. Frankly, using a software [package] can do the job.*

In addition, the FG participants indicated that they knew beforehand that their need for help is not only associated with language issues, but also with the content, which might require someone with a disciplinary expertise. In light of the supposedly questionable benefit of the writing support TLAs offer, Arabic-speaking students may view this support as irrelevant to their tertiary studies since they get it from someone from outside their field of study. For example, Eman reflected upon her experience with the writing support she received from a TLA. She argued:

*It was helpful, but it was mainly related to the structure and not to the content.*

Hazim referred to the support as more relating to the “*technicalities of the text*” rather than the content.

Several FG participants mentioned how the background and expertise of the TLAs may contribute to the type of help they could offer as far as academic writing is concerned. Eman said:

*There should be a specialist in the area students ask for help with.*

Eman went through the experience of asking a TLA for help with writing for her field of study, but the TLA told her “*I am sorry I do not know about the topic.*” She mentioned that the TLA recommended a book that “*was irrelevant.*”

For Huda, the writing feedback she got from the TLA was completely in conflict with the expectations of her discipline lecturer. She had an assignment to submit but had

“only two days before the deadline.” Huda made an appointment with the TLA at her university. The TLA gave her feedback on what she had written. She said:

*The feedback was on every aspect of what I had written, which made me feel that if I submitted the assignment intact I would fail.*

However, since she had not enough time to revise the assignment as per the suggestions made by the TLA, Huda had to submit it as it was. The surprise for Huda was that she got ‘B’ on that assignment, which made her believe that “*the academic writing expectations vary from one person to another.*” In addition, the discipline lecturer may not have worried about language issues if the content was right.

This was Huda’s first visit to a TLA. When I asked Huda whether she would book another appointment with a TLA, she said she would “*never make an appointment again.*” She felt that the comments the TLA added on her writing “*might disappoint students.*” Huda thinks that the comments the TLA gave were related not only to technical issues of the text such as grammar, punctuation and spelling, but also to the content despite the fact that the TLA did not have expertise in the field. Therefore, several FG participants indicated a lack of interest in visiting the SLCs for help with writing. However, the responses of some participants seem to reflect a lack of understanding of the role of a TLA. TLAs are not specialists in each field of study, Arabic-speaking students may need a clearer understanding of the role of TLAs. This will be discussed in Chapter 8 (see 0).

### **5.3.4 Ways of seeking help with writing in English**

Regardless of being NESSs or NNESSs, students face challenges in meeting the demands of academic English (Jenkins, 2014; Strauss, 2013). In light of students’ uncertainty about the help they could get from SLCs and TLAs, the students may be perplexed when it comes to whom they should ask for help with academic writing. The

FG participants seemed to depend on “*friends*” or “*classmates*” to get help with writing in English (Abdullah, Rania, & Ramiz). Similarly, Faisal noted:

*I ask friends for help and only submit the last draft of writing to the lecturer. I also ask classmates, and may go back to the lecturer, but usually not.*

During the discussion about seeking help from friends, several FG participants indicated that they ask other Arabic-speaking students both those who are currently studying the same course or those who have already finished it. Most of the FG participants indicated that they tend to ask friends from the same culture as they feel more comfortable in understanding the explanation of exactly what they need to do. Samer was the only participant who indicated that he seeks help with writing from “*a native-speaker friend*” who reads his writing and suggests edits in terms of grammar and structure.

Among the FG participants, Salem, Hazim and Ahmed indicated that they do “*self-study by checking the internet*” for extra materials that could help them with the demands of academic writing for their study.

## **5.4 Summary**

This chapter has offered the key findings from three focus groups conducted with 14 Arabic-speaking students from various tertiary institutions in New Zealand. The chapter presented the four major themes that emerged from thematic analysis applied to the data. The themes were related to the FG participants’ past scholastic experiences, perceptions of the IELTS writing instruction and its relevance to writing in the disciplines at tertiary level, attitudes towards the writing support offered by TLAs, and help-seeking strategies. The next chapter presents the findings from the questionnaire.

## Chapter 6 Findings – Questionnaire

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings of the research as derived from the questionnaire that was self-administered by Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in New Zealand tertiary institutions (see Appendix F for the questionnaire questions). The findings relate to the research questions guiding this study, and in particular to the main research question: *How can Arabic-speaking students embarking on undergraduate studies at New Zealand tertiary institutions be better prepared for the demands of English academic writing?*

Section 6.2 outlines the profiles of the questionnaire (QUS) respondents, followed by Section 6.3 that presents the factor analysis and item analysis that were run to find out the dimensionality and reliability of the items. Subsections then follow to present the findings of the subscales that were identified based on the concept they share. Section 6.4 presents the themes that emerged from the responses to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire.

### 6.2 Respondents

The QUS respondents were Arabic-speaking undergraduate students from various disciplines in New Zealand tertiary institutions. The total number of the responses received was 177, out of which 157 responses were valid.

As for the distribution of the QUS respondents, male students made around 62% of the total responses received, representing the majority of respondents.

The QUS respondents were classified into four age groups. Table 5 shows the number of the respondents from each age group. As per the table, respondents from the age group between 21 and 25 years old represented the highest group among the other

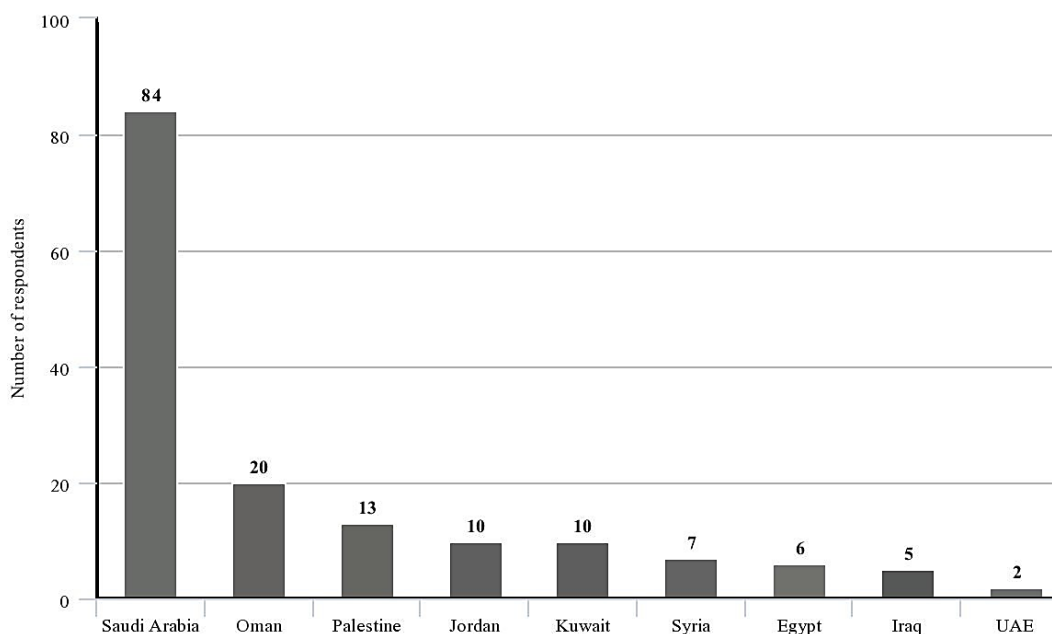


respondents ( $n = 65$ ) followed by those whose age is between 18 and 20 years old ( $n = 46$ ), 26-30 ( $n = 31$ ), and 30+ ( $n = 15$ ).

**Table 6: Age group of the respondents**

Age group	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-20	46	29.3	29.3
21-25	65	41.4	70.7
26-30	31	19.7	90.4
31+	15	9.6	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

In terms of the nationality of the QUS respondents, the following bar chart (see Figure 5) shows the number of respondents from each country. As the bar chart shows, the highest number of responses (84) were received from students from Saudi Arabia, and the lowest number of responses (2) were received from students from the United Arab Emirates (UAE).



**Figure 5: Nationalities of the respondents**

Table 6 below presents the classification of the QUS respondents in terms of the highest qualification they already gained. The majority of the respondents were undergraduate

students who already finished high school and tertiary diplomas (126 and 27 respectively). Only one respondent had already gained a bachelor's degree.

**Table 7: Highest qualification already gained**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
High school	126	80.3	80.3
Diploma	27	17.2	97.5
Bachelor's degree	1	.6	98.1
Other	3	1.9	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

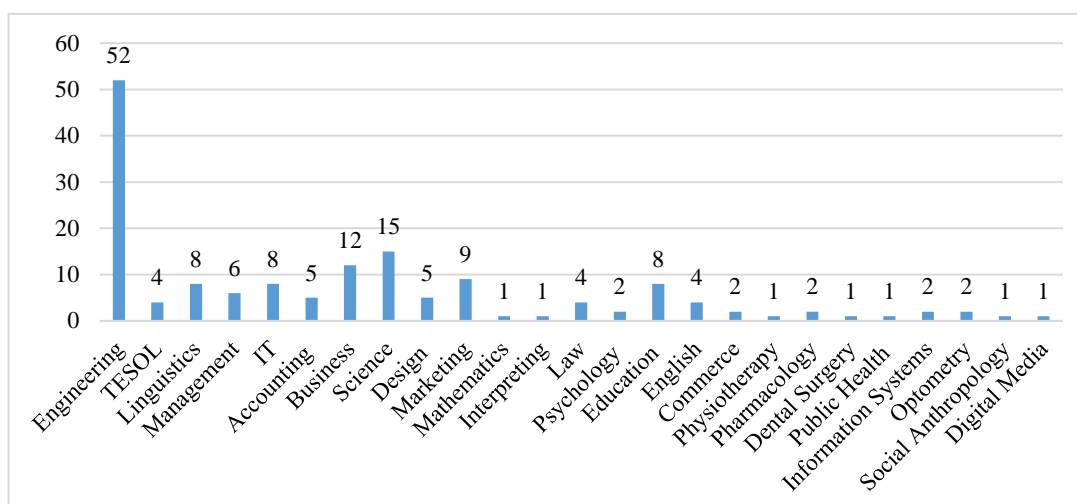
As for the distribution of the university level, Table 7 below shows that the majority of the QUS respondents were in first and second years of their study (48 and 51 respectively).

**Table 8: University year**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
First	48	30.6	32.7
Second	51	32.5	67.3
Third	31	19.7	88.4
Fourth	17	10.8	100.0
Total	147	93.6	
Not reported	10	6.4	
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Figure 6 below shows the distribution of the QUS respondents based on their tertiary major in New Zealand. The respondents represent a wide spectrum of disciplines. In fact, this was the aim of targeting undergraduate students from different fields. The QUS respondents represented 25 fields of study. The highest number of respondents was from an engineering background, which covers various specialisations within

engineering (n = 52), followed by students who study science (n = 15).



**Figure 6: The respondents' majors at tertiary institutions in New Zealand**

Table 8 below shows the distribution of the QUS respondents based on their tertiary institutions in New Zealand. To ensure respondents' confidentiality, institutions are referred to using a letter as shown below.

**Table 9: Respondents' tertiary institutions in New Zealand**

<b>Tertiary institution</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Institution A	57	36.3
Institution B	21	13.4
Institution C	20	12.7
Institution D	6	3.8
Institution E	1	.6
Institution F	9	5.7
Institution G	13	8.3
Institution H	12	7.6
Institution I	1	.6
Other	17	10.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As for the time the respondents already spent in New Zealand, the majority had lived in the country for more than 12 months when they completed the questionnaire (n = 143) representing 91.1% of the sample.

**Table 10: Time spent in New Zealand**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
1 to 6 months	3	1.9	1.9
7 to 12 months	11	7.0	8.9
More than 12 months	143	91.1	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

### 6.3 Quantitative findings

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted using SPSS to analyse the dimensionality of the 18 items from the questionnaire (see Appendix F). Bartholomew, Knott, and Moustaki (2011) note that factor analysis operates on the concept of reducing dimensionality, where measurable and observable variables can be reduced to fewer latent variables which have a common variance and are unobservable. The principal axis factoring extraction method initially specifying a single factor solution was used. The scree plot indicated that a unidimensional solution underpins the 18 items. Based on the plot, no evidence of a multi-dimensional measure was found; therefore, no rotation procedure was run.

An item analysis was conducted on the 18 items to assess the consistency among the QUS respondents regarding their perceptions of English academic writing and the strategies they employ in writing. The item analysis showed a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .89, suggesting that the 18 items have relatively high internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of .70 and higher is considered 'acceptable' in most social science research situations (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Following the item analysis, the mean score for the 18 items was computed to assess the respondents' global perceptions of English academic writing. The mean and standard deviation scores for the sample as a whole on all the items of the survey indicate a neutral attitude towards their ability and the

strategies they adopt in academic writing in English ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ), showing a relatively low variability.

Even though the scree plot showed a single factor solution, some items from the questionnaire were grouped into subscales based on conceptual grounds. Four subscales were identified (see 6.3.1, 6.3.2, 6.3.3, & 6.3.4 below). The four subscales are related to the QUS respondents' past scholastic experiences with academic writing, degree of confidence in academic writing skills, academic writing strategies, and perceptions of academic writing support in the New Zealand tertiary context. Reliability analysis was conducted on each subscale. The aggregate scores were then computed for the items of each subscale to find the mean score for each respondent across items. To answer the research questions that guided the current study and to quantitatively explore the themes that were raised by the FG participants, some questions were set based on a conceptual basis and in relation to each subscale.

### **6.3.1 Past scholastic experiences and academic writing**

The first subscale included four items, and it focused on the respondents' perceptions of whether their past scholastic experiences equipped them with the skills needed for writing and studying at an English-medium institution (see items 1, 2, 3, 4 in Appendix F). Reliability analysis conducted on this subscale showed a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .82. The mean and standard deviation scores for the sample on this subscale reflect a tendency among the respondents towards disagreement with sufficiency of preparedness by their past scholastic experiences for the demands of academic language in the New Zealand tertiary context ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). To understand the impact of the respondents' past learning experiences on their writing ability in English, the following questions were utilised:

- Is there a correlation between the age of the respondents when they started learning English at school (henceforth the starting age) and their past scholastic experiences with academic writing (henceforth the past scholastic experiences)?
- Is there a relationship between the nationality of the respondents and their past scholastic experiences?
- Is there a correlation between the respondents' past scholastic experiences and their tendency to transfer from Arabic when writing in English?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the QUS respondents' starting age and their past scholastic experiences. There was a moderately weak, yet significant, negative correlation between the two variables,  $r(152) = -.24, p < .01$ . This result indicates that the older the respondents were when they started learning English at school, the less prepared by their past scholastic experiences for writing in English they felt. One particular item in the 'past scholastic experiences' subscale focused on the quantity of English instruction at school. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to evaluate the relationship between the respondents' starting age and the sufficiency of the amount of English instruction they received at school to prepare them for writing in the New Zealand tertiary context. The result of the correlational analysis for these two variables showed a significant negative correlation,  $r(152) = -.22, p < .01$ . Starting learning English at school at a later age was associated with the respondents' indication that the amount of English instruction at school was insufficient to equip them with the ability to write in English. An increase in the starting age correlated with a decrease in the quantity of English instruction received.

Furthermore, I was interested in finding the differences among nationalities in terms of past scholastic experiences. A one-way ANOVA was conducted. A univariate test was used in all the ANOVA analyses since the aim was to assess the relationship between

one independent variable and another dependent variable. The independent variable was ‘nationality’ and included nine levels: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. The dependent variable was the aggregate score for the subscale ‘past scholastic experiences.’ The ANOVA finding was nonsignificant,  $F(8, 148) = 0.77, p = .62$ . Table 10 below shows the means and standard deviations for the ANOVA analysis.

**Table 11: Descriptive statistics of nationalities and past scholastic experiences**

Nationality	M	SD	<i>n</i>
Egypt	2.58	1.60	6
Iraq	3.25	.70	5
Jordan	2.35	1.34	10
Kuwait	2.57	1.11	10
Oman	2.78	1.01	20
Palestine	2.50	1.15	13
Saudi Arabia	2.83	.93	84
Syria	3.10	1.15	7
United Arab Emirates	3.50	1.06	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.77</b>	<b>1.03</b>	<b>157</b>

The results of the one-way ANOVA outlined above provided evidence that there was no association between the nationality of the respondents and their past scholastic experiences.

Since the tendency to translate from Arabic when writing in English was emphasised by a few FG participants, the QUS respondents were surveyed about this tendency to gauge its impact on their writing in English. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to find out the correlation between the QUS respondents’ past scholastic experiences with writing and their tendency to translate from Arabic when writing in English. The results showed a significant negative correlation,  $r(155) = -.40, p < .001$ , meaning that the more the respondents indicated that their past scholastic experiences prepared them

for the demands of English academic writing, the less they tended to translate from Arabic when writing in English.

### **6.3.2 Degree of confidence in writing ability**

The second subscale was conceptually based on the degree of the respondents' confidence in their ability to write in English according to academic standards. The subscale included five items from the questionnaire (see items 7, 8, 9, 10, 12 in Appendix F). Reliability analysis conducted on this subscale showed a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .83. The mean and standard deviation scores for the sample on this subscale showed that the QUS respondents reported a fairly neutral response about the degree of their confidence in their ability in English academic writing ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ). The following questions were used to investigate this subscale:

- Is there a correlation between the starting age and the respondents' degree of confidence in their ability in English academic writing?
- Is there a relationship between the highest qualification the respondents had already gained and the degree of their confidence in their ability in English academic writing?
- Is there a correlation between the respondents' IELTS writing score and the degree of their confidence in their ability in English academic writing?
- Is there a relationship between studying in an English-speaking country and the degree of the respondents' confidence in their ability in English academic writing?

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the correlation between the starting age and the respondents' degree of confidence in their English writing ability. The results of the correlational analysis for these two variables showed a significant negative correlation,  $r(152) = -.20$ ,  $p = .01$ . In other words, the older the respondents



were when they started learning English at school, the less confident they felt in being able to write academic English. In addition, to find out about the relationship between the highest qualification already gained by the respondents and the degree of their confidence in their writing ability, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The independent variable was 'the highest academic qualification already gained' and included four levels: high school, diploma, bachelor's degree, and other. The dependent variable was the aggregate score for the subscale 'degree of confidence' in English writing. The ANOVA finding was not statistically significant,  $F(3, 153) = 1.85, p = .14$ . This result suggests that there was no association between the highest qualification already gained by the respondents' and the degree of their confidence in their ability in English academic writing.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to find the correlation between the respondents' IELTS writing score and the degree of their confidence in their ability in academic writing. A significant positive correlation was found,  $r(125) = .22, p = .01$ . In other words, a higher IELTS writing score correlated with a higher degree of confidence among the respondents in their ability to write in English.

The findings showed that the majority of the QUS respondents scored less than 7.0 in IELTS overall scores: 32 scored 5.5 (20% of the respondents), 43 scored 6.0 (27%), 36 scored 6.5 (23%), 14 scored 7.0 (9%), and 4 scored 7.5 (3%). As for the QUS respondents' IELTS writing sub-scores, they were as follows: 20 scored 5 (13% of the respondents), 40 scored 5.5 (26%), 34 scored 6.0 (22%), 19 scored 6.5 (14%), 9 scored 7.0 (7%), 4 scored 7.5 (3%), and 1 scored 8.0 (1%). Two respondents did not report a writing score.

Furthermore, an independent-samples *t* test was run to evaluate the impact of studying in an English-speaking country on the degree of the QUS respondents' confidence in the

ability to write in English. There was a significant difference in the scores for the respondents who had studied in an English-speaking country ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) and the respondents who had not studied in an English-speaking country ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ );  $t(155) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .01$ . These results suggest that studying in an English-speaking country was associated with a positive effect on the respondents' degree of confidence in having the ability to write in English.

To compare the degree of confidence in English writing between male and female respondents, an independent-samples  $t$  test was conducted. There was no significant difference in the score for male participants ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) and female participants ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ );  $t(155) = .14$ ,  $p = .88$ . These results suggest that there was no association between the QUS respondents' gender and the degree of their confidence in their ability in English writing.

### **6.3.3 Strategies employed in producing academic writing**

The third subscale focused on the strategies the QUS respondents employ in producing English academic writing. This subscale included two items (see items 13, 14 in Appendix F). The two items aimed at identifying whether the respondents seek clarification from lecturers regarding feedback given on writing and revisit marked assessments to avoid making the same writing types of error. Reliability analysis conducted on this subscale showed a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .71. The mean and standard deviation scores for the sample as a whole on this subscale showed a slight tendency among the respondents to seek clarification from their lecturers on feedback given on writing in English and revisit previous marked writing assessments to avoid making the same types of error ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ). To explore this finding with other variables, the following questions were utilised:

- Are there differences between genders as to the strategies employed in English academic writing?
- Is there a correlation between the starting age and the strategies employed in English academic writing?

An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to identify the differences between genders in the strategies employed in academic writing. There was no difference in the score for male participants ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) and female participants ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ );  $t(153) = .14$ ,  $p = .98$ . These findings suggest that there was no association between the respondents' gender and the strategies they employ in academic writing. In addition, a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to find the correlation between the respondents' starting age of learning English and the strategies they employ in academic writing, especially in attending to the feedback by lecturers. There was no statistically significant correlation,  $r(150) = .07$ ,  $p = .37$ . Therefore, the starting age of English learning at school did not seem to influence the strategies the respondents employ when writing academic English.

#### **6.3.4 Perceptions of writing support in the New Zealand context**

The fourth subscale was related to the QUS respondents' perceptions of the academic writing support the SLCs in New Zealand tertiary institutions offer compared to private tutoring. This subscale included two items (see items 16, 17 in Appendix F). Reliability analysis conducted on this subscale showed a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .71. The mean and standard deviation scores for the sample as a whole on this subscale showed that respondents tend to stand in a neutral position regarding their perception of the writing support offered by the SLCs at New Zealand tertiary institutions ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). The following questions were utilised in exploring this subscale:

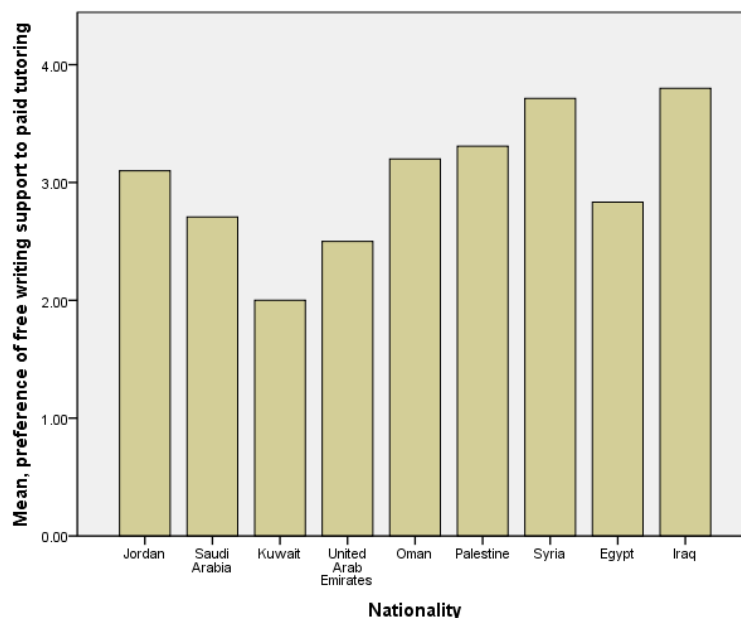
- Are there any differences among the nationality groups and the perception of the writing support from their tertiary institution in New Zealand?
- Are there differences between genders on the perceptions of the writing support from their tertiary institution in New Zealand?
- Is there any difference among the nationality groups and the preference for the free writing support from their tertiary institution in New Zealand to private tutoring?

In an attempt to understand the relationship between the QUS respondents' nationality and their perceptions of the writing support available for them in the tertiary context in New Zealand, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The independent variable was 'nationality.' The dependent variable was the aggregate score for the subscale 'perceptions of writing support.' The ANOVA was nonsignificant,  $F(8, 146) = 1.26, p = .26$ . No association was found between nationality of the respondents and their perceptions of the writing support.

In addition, an independent-samples  $t$  test was conducted to identify the differences between the respondents' perceptions of the writing support offered by the SLC in their tertiary institution in New Zealand based on gender. There was no statistically significant difference in the scores for male participants ( $M = 2.96, SD = 1.06$ ) and female participants ( $M = 3.00, SD = 1.10$ );  $t(153) = 0.22, p = .82$ . These results suggest that there was no relationship between the respondents' gender and their perceptions of the writing support available for them from their tertiary institutions.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to find out the relationship between the respondents' preference for free writing support to paid private tutoring and their nationality. The dependent variable was 'preference of free writing support offered by the Learning Centre to private tutoring.' The independent variable was 'nationality.'

The ANOVA was marginally nonsignificant,  $F(8, 146) = 1.98, p = .05$ . Figure 6 below shows the mean scores for the respondents' preference of free writing support to paid private tutoring, based on nationality.



**Figure 7: The respondents' preference of free writing support to private tutoring**

Despite the fact that the group sizes were unequal, a follow-up test was conducted to evaluate the pairwise differences among the means. A post hoc Tukey test showed that the difference in the means lies mainly between the group from Kuwait ( $M = 2.00, SD = 1.24$ ) and the Syrian group ( $M = 3.71, SD = 1.11$ ) on the one hand and the Iraqi group ( $M = 3.80, SD = 0.83$ ) on the other.

In addition to the analyses run on each subscale, some other tests were run to find out the relationship among the different subscales. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to find out the correlation between the respondents' past scholastic experiences with English writing and the degree of their confidence in having the ability to write in English. There was a significant positive correlation,  $r(155) = .66, p < .001$ . This result indicates that the more the students noted that their past scholastic experiences prepared them well for writing and studying in English, the more confident in their ability to write academic writing the respondents felt. Likewise, a Pearson

correlation coefficient was computed to gauge the correlation between the respondents' degree of confidence in having the ability in English academic writing and the strategies they adopt in writing. There was a significant positive correlation,  $r(153) = .56, p < .001$ . This result indicates that the more the respondents felt they were confident in having the ability to write in English, the more they reflected that the strategies they employ in English writing are in line with what is expected of them at a tertiary level.

In the same way, some other variables were investigated seeking an insight into the respondents' perception of their English writing proficiency in the New Zealand context. An independent-samples  $t$  test was conducted to compare between male and female respondents and their perceptions of whether their academic writing improved during the first year at the tertiary level. There was no statistically significant difference in the score for male respondents ( $M = 3.85, SD = 1.02$ ) and female participants ( $M = 4.05, SD = 0.74$ );  $t(152) = -1.34, p = .18$ . These results suggest that the respondents tend to agree that their writing skills improved during their first year in the undergraduate study in New Zealand. However, the respondents' gender was not associated with the level of students' writing improvement during the first year of tertiary study.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to find out the correlation between the respondents' age when starting learning English and their IELTS writing and overall scores. There was a significant negative correlation between the variables,  $r(122) = -.37, p < .001$  and  $r(124) = .41, p < .001$  respectively. In other words, the older the respondents were when they started learning English at school, the lower their IELTS writing and overall scores were.

The QUS respondents were surveyed about the actions they take to address the difficulties with academic writing. Figure 8 below shows the distribution of the choices of the respondents, taking into account that the respondents were able to select all the

options that apply. On the top of the list of options the respondents selected was *‘seeking help from a fellow student.’* This is in line with the finding that emerged from the focus groups about students’ tendency to ask friends for help with the demands of academic writing. This was followed by *‘seeking help from lecturer/tutor.’* In fact, the FG participants did not identify asking lecturers for help with the demands of academic writing as an option they use to address their problems with writing. The third action the QUS respondents take to address difficulties with writing was *‘paying a private tutor.’* The fourth action on the list was *‘getting a native speaker of English to edit’* the written work.

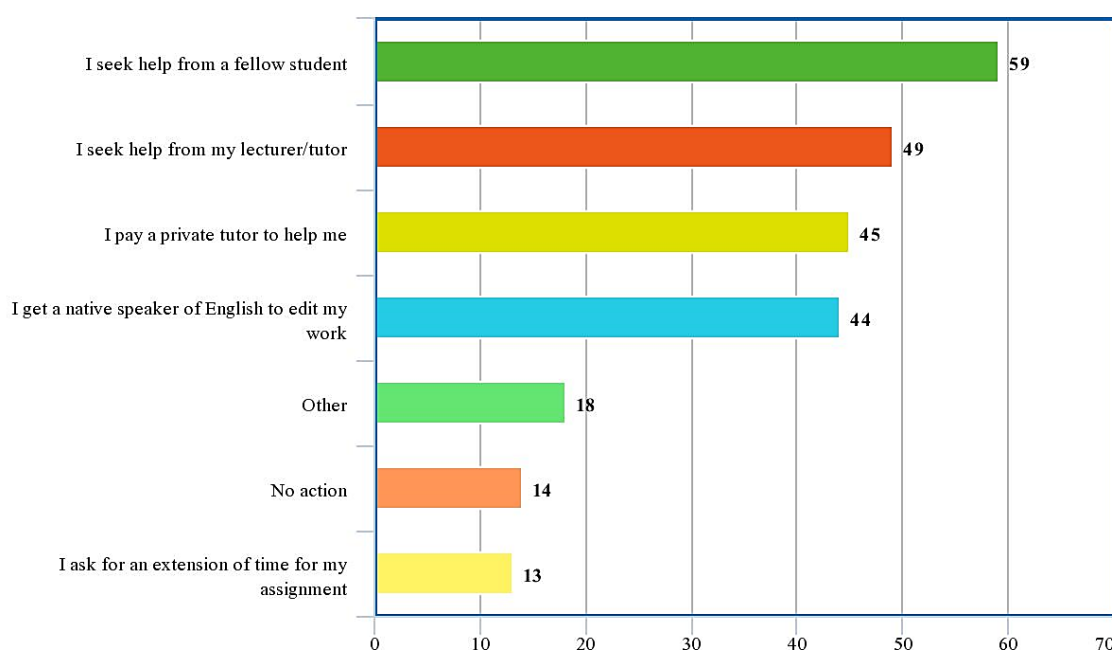


Figure 8: Actions students take to address writing difficulties

## 6.4 Qualitative findings

This section presents the findings from the open-ended questions from the questionnaire (see Appendix F). The open-ended questions were intended to elicit insights on the challenges facing the QUS respondents in English academic writing and the role lecturers could play in helping students with these challenges. In what follows the findings are presented under these two main headings.

#### 6.4.1 What kind of difficulties do you experience in English academic writing?

While open-ended questions in questionnaires yield large non-response items (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec, & Vehovar, 2003), the response rate for the open-ended question about the difficulties the respondents experience in English academic writing was significant: 106 responses (59.8% of the total responses received). In response to the question above, the QUS respondents cited various challenges they encounter with academic writing. The most cited areas of difficulty were academic vocabulary and spelling. The responses reflected the QUS respondents' feeling that they lack the academic vocabulary required for their majors. It should be noted that two respondents chose to write their comments in Arabic, while all others wrote their comments in English. The following comment is one of the two responses in Arabic. The English translation follows.

"في مراحل التعليم الأولي في البلد الأم لم يكن هناك أي شيء يتعلق بالكتابة الأكاديمية وإنما مجرد قواعد بسيطة لتركيب الجمل ومعظم الطلاب السعوديين محصلتهم في جمع المفردات ضعيفة جدا وهذا ما يظهر جليا أثناء تقديم شرح تفصيلي أمام مجموعة من الطلاب وايضا فيما يخص الجزء المتعلق بالكتابة اذا تطلب الأمر العمل كمجموعة مع بعض الناطقين بالإنجليزية او بعض من حصلوا على تعليم أولي ذو مستوى عالٍ نوعا ما مقارنة بالتعليم الأولي في بلدي الأم."

*In the early stages of education in our home country, there was nothing related to academic writing. It was only simple grammar, i.e. how to form a sentence. Most Saudi students have a very limited lexical resources, and this becomes clear when presenting to a group of students. As for weakness in writing, it becomes evident when we work with a group of native speaking students or other students who had received high quality tuition, compared to the tuition I received in my home country.*



These two areas were followed by the difficulty that students encounter in expressing their ideas clearly in English. Eighteen responses included reference to the challenge the QUS respondents face in getting their “*message through*” using the correct words. A respondent mentioned:

*Getting exactly what I mean across sometimes. I might have an idea, but it can be a little difficult to explain it, especially if there is a limited word count.*

The fourth and fifth difficulties on the list were “*structure*” and “*style*” in English. Twelve respondents cited each of these areas of difficulty. The challenge with structure seemed to refer to sentence structure and essay structure in writing, but there was no indication of the discipline. For example, a respondent commented:

*The style of writing is new to me. I think I do not have problems in the language, but I still need more practice in the way my field requires writing to be done.*

Another difficulty in academic writing was grammar, including prepositions and articles. Issues with grammar in writing featured in several comments by the respondents. For example, one student wrote:

*Grammar and spelling are an issue for me as well as referencing. Overall, my writing is good in terms of content but perhaps not in terms of grammar, spelling and referencing.*

Furthermore, the students mentioned challenges in referencing, paraphrasing, and/or summarising. One student wrote:

*The most challenging part of writing in summarising and paraphrasing.*

Another respondent commented:

*I think writing about my own ideas is easier than paraphrasing.  
However, in academic writing you usually are not allowed to express  
your own opinion, unless there is someone else in [the] literature  
[that] supports yours.*

Eight QUS respondents indicated that the IELTS writing instruction and content were “irrelevant” to the writing they do for university courses, which constituted a challenge for them later at the tertiary level. The respondents illustrated this perspective towards the IELTS writing content in some comments:

*I found a big difference between IELTS writing and university writing.  
Whatever I learnt seemed irrelevant when I moved to university.*

*I find the IELTS writing different from university. IELTS writing  
teaching should focus more on what the students need for university.*

In addition, the L1 interference and translation from Arabic became evident in the comments of four QUS respondents as one of the challenges they encounter in English writing. This perspective was illustrated in the following comment:

*I am always lost in translation when writing in English. Style  
difference between Arabic and English makes it difficult for me.*

Another respondent raised a similar concern about their tendency to translate from Arabic when writing in English.

*My main problem in English writing is that I try to translate whatever  
I want to write from Arabic into English, which sometimes does not  
makes [sic] sense. I think the two language are completely different.  
And its [sic] time consuming.*

#### 6.4.2 What do you think lecturers should do to help you improve your writing?

Sixty eight QUS respondents answered the question above. They cited various ways they think lecturers and tertiary institutions could use to help them to improve their ability in English academic writing. Ten respondents mentioned that providing prompt and clear feedback on student writing is a major aid lecturers could offer to students.

This was commonly mentioned with the students' need to know their areas of weaknesses in writing and how to improve these. A respondent commented:

*They should understand that English is not our first language so they should give us feedback every now and then about what we write.*

Another respondent suggested that:

*Perhaps for each assignment there should be a compulsory draft due first, where the lecturer gives feedback. The student then can edit their work before handing the final one in. This will help students become more aware of their mistakes and can critically reflect on the feedback and change the errors made. This, I found this good to vividly remember mistakes, without having the pressure of handing in a final assignment. I tried this this year with a paper called "Writing and Inquiry" and it helped a lot.*

The second suggestion that was made by five respondents was that lecturers should be clear in stating their expectations of writing in the disciplines at the beginning of the study journey. One of these respondents wrote the following comment in Arabic, and the English translation follows:

"هناك عدة طرق للكتابة الاكاديمية. ويفترض من الجامعة التوضيح قبل البدء في دراسة المقررات لأن الطالب تعلم طريقة واحدة للكتابة الاكاديمية خلال دراسته في مرحلة اللغة، واطافة على ذلك كل دكتور أو بروفيسور يريد الكتابة الاكاديمية بالطريقة التي يريد، وهكذا يكون الطالب في ضياع تام بين هذه الطرق."

*There are various ways of academic writing. A university should be clear on this before [students] embark on studying the courses because students usually learn one way of academic writing during the language period [before university]. In addition, each lecturer has his or her own preferred way of academic writing. This results in a total loss for the student.*

Another respondent commented:

*Be clear on what they expect from us when we write. What is academic style? Is there an agreement on this? It seems each lecturer expects one single academic style in writing that is different from others.*

Similarly, a respondent wrote:

*Lecturers should be clear in telling us what steps to follow in order to write according to their expectations and the field.*

A similar response raised a similar need, but the respondent indicated that schools in the Arab world have a responsibility to prepare students for what to expect in terms of English writing. The student wrote:

*Universities should make it clear for us from the beginning what our field of study requires in terms of writing so we prepare. Schools in our countries should give us clear understanding of what to expect when moving to an English-speaking country. Also, I think we should practise English writing more and more.*

From the perspective of the QUS respondents, lecturers could help students to improve their disciplinary writing through providing “writing models” they had written, or other strong students had submitted. Such a practice seemed to be viewed by the respondents

as a way that could help them understand what was required in their particular discipline. This was summed up by the following response:

*Lecturers can show students examples of good writing, either by previous strong students or by themselves. The university can work on a huge collection of examples of writing from different disciplines.*

Another respondent suggested:

*They should show us models of written assignments so we can do the same.*

In addition, responses cited the need for “*giving lots of assignments to enhance my writing skills*” as a way to expose students to more practice of academic writing. Students also highlighted their need for allocating “*more time for teaching academic writing*” and “*more writing practice*” to give students the chance to write before they submit the assessed written work. A similar possibility that was suggested by the respondents was “*offering more academic writing*” and “*academic English*” classes to help NNESSs with the demands of writing. A number of responses mentioned that “*lecturers should use academic English in classes*” so students do the same.

## **6.5 Summary**

This chapter has presented the findings from the questionnaire. Section 6.2 outlined the profiles of the QUS respondents. Section 6.3 presented the results of quantitative analyses run to find answers to the questions raised under each subscale based on a conceptual basis. The qualitative findings from the questionnaire were discussed in Section 6.4. The starting age of learning English was found to be associated with the respondents’ degree of preparation for studying and writing in English, degree of confidence in their ability to write in English, and the IELTS scores. A later age in starting learning English correlated with the lack of preparedness for studying and

writing in English, the lack of confidence in the ability to write in English, and lower IELTS writing and overall scores.

Despite the fact that the QUS respondents were from nine Arabic-speaking countries, the nationality of the respondents was not associated with the degree of their preparedness for the demands of the academic language in New Zealand. However, it should be noted that the ANOVAs might be underpowered to detect differences due to small cell sizes. Data analysis showed that there was a correlation between the respondents' confidence in their ability in English academic writing and their indication that their past scholastic experiences prepared them for writing in English. Moreover, the data showed that the respondents who had studied in an English-speaking country other than New Zealand indicated a higher degree of confidence in being able to write in English. Respondents who had no similar experience indicated a lower level of confidence in their writing ability. However, gender and the qualifications already obtained by the respondents did not seem to have an impact on the degree of respondents' confidence in their ability to write in English. The next chapter presents the findings from the interviews, which follow up some significant findings from the questionnaire.

## **Chapter 7 Qualitative findings – Interviews**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings of the last phase of the study, i.e. interviews (see Appendix J for the interview questions). Conducting the interviews took place in different locations that suited the participants. The interviews took place between 27/07/2017 and 23/11/2017. The length of the interviews varied between 26 and 72 minutes (average 36 for each interview). Twenty interviews were conducted with male and female Arabic-speaking undergraduate students from different tertiary institutions in New Zealand (see Table 11 below). During these interviews, I explored the questions raised in the questionnaire in greater depth. To protect interview (INT) participants' identities a simple code was developed. SF represented a female interviewee while SM was used for a male participant. Each interviewee was assigned a number (e.g. SF1/SM4). Section 7.2 below outlines the profiles of the INT participants. Section 7.3 then presents the themes that emerged from the interviews.

### **7.2 Participants**

For the interviews, participants were the ones who had indicated their willingness to be interviewed when they completed the questionnaire. Twenty three QUS respondents volunteered for an interview but three of them later withdrew for personal reasons.

Table 11 below shows the profiles of the 20 INT participants:

**Table 12: Interviewees' profiles**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
<b>SM1</b>	Male	Science	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM2</b>	Male	Engineering	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM3</b>	Male	Engineering	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM4</b>	Male	Engineering	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM5</b>	Male	Science	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM6</b>	Male	Engineering	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM7</b>	Male	Engineering	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM8</b>	Male	Business	Saudi Arabian
<b>SM9</b>	Male	Engineering	Saudi Arabian
<b>SF1</b>	Female	Engineering	Omani
<b>SF2</b>	Female	Digital Media	Omani
<b>SF3</b>	Female	Optometry	Omani
<b>SF4</b>	Female	Engineering	Omani
<b>SM10</b>	Male	TESOL	Palestinian
<b>SF5</b>	Female	Marketing	Palestinian
<b>SF6</b>	Female	Design	Egyptian
<b>SF7</b>	Female	Business	Egyptian
<b>SF8</b>	Female	Education	Jordanian
<b>SM11</b>	Male	IT	Kuwaiti
<b>SF9</b>	Female	Marketing	Iraqi

### **7.3 Themes emerging from the interviews**

As indicated in the methodology chapter, thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data. The following are the main themes that emerged from the interviews:

- 7.3.1 The fact that a university was situated in an English-speaking country was a key factor in students' decision when selecting a tertiary study destination.
- 7.3.2 The past language learning experiences in public schools do not appear to have prepared students well for the demands of English academic language.
- 7.3.3 The difficulties that the participants encountered with academic English were exacerbated by linguistic differences between Arabic and English.



- 7.3.4 Uncertainty about what constitutes acceptable academic writing in Western universities appears to have a negative impact on students' writing proficiency.
- 7.3.5 While IELTS writing instruction is seen as dedicated to the test, pathway courses seem to better prepare students for the writing demands at university.
- 7.3.6 The reading-writing connection is perceived as an important factor for English proficiency.

In what follows, each theme is discussed in more detail supported by the relevant quotes from the INT participants.

### **7.3.1 Importance of the university being situated in an English-speaking country**

Both female and male participants noted that the decision to come to New Zealand was influenced by the fact that it was an English-speaking country. They referred to a positive attitude towards learning English among Arabic-speaking people. In this context, SF5 stressed her belief that in Saudi Arabia English has become a requirement for anyone regardless of their field of study, stating:

*A company might not ask a prospective employee about their marketing experience but would be very interested in their English proficiency.*

SF5's perception was also echoed in SM10's remarks. He believed that in the last decade English has become necessary for any person in the Arabic-speaking world as its use has become more common than before. SM9 added:

*Nowadays, people have begun to look at English positively because of development and modernity, unlike in the past.*

Having realised the importance of English for their education paths and future careers, the INT participants indicated that they viewed studying in an English-speaking country as the key to attaining a high level of proficiency in English. In the sections below, I present the reasons that influenced the INT participants' decision to study in New Zealand.

As indicated in the literature review chapter, coming to New Zealand from the Expanding Circle, the INT participants appeared to have high expectations of what they could achieve from attending a tertiary institution where English is the dominant language, i.e. the Inner Circle. This expectation was obvious in several INT participants' responses. SM5 said:

*The only chance for me to improve my English skills was through having direct contact with the people who speak it as the L1.*

Since he came from an Arabic-speaking community, English is not heard very often and is taught as a FL. Similarly, SM2 was reluctant to study a tertiary degree in a country where English is not the L1. He stated:

*Of course I would not go to a country where English is not the language of instruction.*

SF2 also refused a place at a local university in Oman preferring study in an English-speaking country.

Studying in New Zealand meant for some INT participants that they would get greater exposure to English from native English-speaking New Zealanders in different settings, whether social or academic. At the social level, exposure to English occurred through interaction with non-Arabic speakers including friends, other students or homestay parents. Exposure to colloquial English took place through interacting with English-

speaking students, support staff, library staff, and administration staff. Academic interaction occurred through attending lectures or seminars. Spoken interaction occurred through discussions, and written interaction took the form of seeking written feedback on writing, or through communication by email. SM1 argued that it was in his best interest to be forced to use English. He said:

*New Zealand has a smaller number of Arabic-speaking students because of the geographical distance between the Arab world and New Zealand. This is good I think because we will use more English.*

SM9 felt that the New Zealand context would enable him “*to use the language more and thus acquire more English.*” He was fortunate in that his government funded two and a half years of English preparatory courses in New Zealand, and a further three months at a high school before he embarked on his undergraduate studies. He justified the period spent at school saying that it allowed him “*to mingle with native-speaking students and practise the language more.*” He noted that when he first arrived in New Zealand, he was only able to “*say a few words in English.*”

To increase his exposure to English and improve his language skills, SM11 chose to live in a homestay with native English-speaking New Zealanders. He added:

*The homestay parents used to help me with English writing. They used to read what I wrote and suggest possible edits.*

For SM11, such a chance would not have been possible if he had chosen to study in the Arab world, or at least in a country where English is not the language of instruction and dominant spoken language. He stated:

*Before coming to New Zealand, I had had the chance to study English for three months back home. Once the English class was finished, the*

*students used to speak in Arabic. Studying in New Zealand helped me improve my language skills because all practice is in English.*

The case of SF6 was slightly different from the other INT participants. She has been in New Zealand for five years. SF6 immigrated to New Zealand with her family and studied English for around four years. Part of the English tuition she received was a requirement for obtaining residency in New Zealand. In addition, she attended a number of other courses to improve her English in preparation for the undergraduate degree she intended to do. SF6 had obtained a bachelor's degree in computer science from Egypt, but her passion for design led to her enrolling in another undergraduate degree in New Zealand. Her choice to come to New Zealand was also supported by her desire to give her children a better chance to learn English since they would be "*immersed in the context.*" After obtaining the required IELTS score, SF6 enrolled in a New Zealand university. She added:

*The context in New Zealand forces one to communicate with other students in English only which is considered beneficial for improving English.*

Student perceptions in this regard are borne out by the literature. Ward and Masgoret (2004) surveyed 3000 international students in New Zealand about the reasons they chose to study in the country. English-speaking environment, education quality and reputation, and safety ranked in the top five of the factors that informed their decision to select New Zealand as a study destination. These reasons were similar to those mentioned by the INT participants of the present study.

#### **7.3.1.1 Reputation for quality of education**

The INT participants mentioned that New Zealand's reputation for providing a high-quality tertiary education was another factor for selecting it as the study destination. The

participants reflected a shared belief that obtaining a degree from ‘Western’ or English-speaking countries is preferred to obtaining a degree from local universities due to the quality of education offered. SF3 mentioned:

*I chose New Zealand because of its quality and world-wide ranking education.*

Similarly, SM1 stated:

*I chose to study in New Zealand because of the reputation it has for good quality of education.*

The INT participants appeared to have heard about the quality of education in New Zealand from friends, relatives or previous students who had studied in the country. As SM9 stated:

*I decided to study in New Zealand because of the good reputation of its education system, which I had heard about from my friends who had studied in the country.*

Similarly, SF2 highlighted the recommendation for the country by friends and stated:

*So many people suggested that I study here. The reputation is excellent.*

Since all the INT participants had finished high school in their home countries and then moved to New Zealand for tertiary education, they did not have the capacity or experience to compare the quality of education in New Zealand to other English-speaking countries. The interviewees’ preference was based on the reasons mentioned above. For example, SF3 stated:

*I finished high school in a public school and came straight to New Zealand, without previous work experience.*

Jupiter et al. (2017) found that international students usually trust the information and support they get from family members or friends, and it strongly affects their individual perceptions. In similar research conducted previously on international students in three Australian universities, Mullins, Quintrell, and Hancock (1995) found that recommendations from other students were amongst the factors that affected students' choice of a study destination and the tertiary institution.

#### **7.3.1.2 Safety of the country**

The female participants were concerned about safety issues when they were living overseas. New Zealand was viewed as a safe place for them, where discrimination based on ethnic backgrounds or appearance is less prevalent than in other English-speaking countries. SF5 mentioned that she had heard from friends that New Zealand is safer than many other European countries, particularly for a female student. SF3 also agreed that New Zealand is safer than many other countries. She stated:

*New Zealand is a safe and peaceful place where you can focus on your study.*

#### **7.3.1.3 Ease of obtaining a visa**

Another important factor for Arabic-speaking students from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, who represent the majority of Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand, was the fact that they were allowed to enter New Zealand on a visitor visa. This type of visa can be obtained upon arrival in New Zealand (Immigration New Zealand, 2019). Compared to other English-speaking countries such as the UK, Canada, Australia or the US, New Zealand seemed much easier to enter for the students from the GCC countries. Even getting a student visa in New Zealand was seen as much easier than the UK or the US.

One participant in the current study mentioned that he had waited for a long time before his US student visa application was declined. The ease of obtaining a visa to New Zealand encouraged some students to visit the country for a short period to experience the life style of the people and education system through attending a short course or meeting with other students with the same background. Xiaoyingk and Abbott (2015) found that easy entry to New Zealand was an encouraging factor to international students to choose to study in the New Zealand universities.

#### **7.3.1.4 Cost of study**

Financially speaking, cost issues, including the cost of tuition fees and living expenses were of importance for self-funding participants who receive no funding or scholarships from their governments. Compared to other English-speaking countries such as Australia, the US, Canada, or the UK, these students are paying lower tuition fees in New Zealand, taking into consideration the difference in the value of the currencies. SM11 said:

*I came to study in New Zealand because the cost of undergraduate study is lower than the cost in the UK. I cannot afford the cost of study in the UK.*

#### **7.3.2 Students did not feel that their prior language learning in public schools had adequately equipped them to study in English.**

Several participants indicated their feeling of being underprepared for the demands of academic study at the tertiary level in New Zealand. This lack of preparedness was attributed to several factors that are related to the participants' prior language learning experiences. Some of these factors were associated with the quality of English tuition received, while others were associated with the quantity of provision schools had offered. Almost all the participants seemed to be aware that what matters is not only the

amount of English tuition a school offers, but also the quality of teaching available as the two aspects are intertwined.

In line with the findings from the focus groups, the INT participants' feelings of being disadvantaged by their past language learning experiences involved comparing two types of schooling – public and private. The INT participants had attended both public and private schools and it is therefore important to examine the influence of both these types of schooling. However, the majority (16 out of 20) of the interviewees had attended public schools. It should be noted that the problem did not seem to lie in the existence of two types of schooling, but rather the problem appeared to be that the English language tuition offered in the public schools did not meet the students' needs. Therefore, the gap between students' levels in English appeared to be as a result of attending public schools. This perspective was summed up by SF6:

*There is one major problem in the Middle East. There are some students who study at private schools and their level of English is much better than those who study at public schools.*

In what follows, I present the factors the INT participants raised during the interviews, highlighting the differences between the two contexts of schooling and how they influenced the degree of their readiness for studying and writing in English.

### **7.3.2.1 Type of school and the English language teaching**

It became apparent during the interviews that the participants who had studied at public schools associated their lack of preparedness for studying and writing in English with the quality and quantity of English tuition they had received at school. Even though the INT participants were from different Arabic-speaking countries, they shared a feeling that the quality of English teaching at public schools in the Arab world is not adequate to equip students with the English skills they need to study in an English-speaking



country. Some referred to the absence of a clear strategy followed in teaching English. SM8 described the teaching of English at schools in Saudi Arabia as “*bad*” and “*random*,” which he later realised to be inadequate for tertiary studies in New Zealand. Similarly, SF2 noted:

*English teaching at public schools in Oman does not prepare students for studying in English at all due to the poor quality of education offered.*

There was an observation by the INT participants that learning English at public schools depended heavily on memorisation. As SF9 stated:

*English teaching focused on memorisation and the aim was to prepare students for exams.*

Likewise, SF1 remarked:

*When I came to New Zealand I had to start learning English from scratch because my previous learning was based on memorisation.*

The comments by SF1 and SF9 seem to indicate that examinations have an impact on the students’ learning style and language proficiency.

On the other hand, the few INT participants who had studied at private schools held a positive belief towards the benefit they got from attending these schools. A number of participants talked of the high quality of English tuition at private schools. They described the latter as strong enough to prepare students for the ability to use English in speaking and writing. SM9 argued:

*Private schools prepare students better in English, especially in writing and speaking.*

There was a consensus among these participants that English tuition at private schools is far better than at public schools based on their personal experiences. SF9 illustrated this perspective, stating:

*The tendency now in my country is to send children to private schools so they receive a good education, particularly English.*

This last argument was supported by SM3. He felt that the past language learning experiences he went through during his private schooling prepared him well for the demands of studying in New Zealand. However, attending private schools is expensive and unaffordable for many people in the Arab world. This concern was obvious in SM10's remarks:

*Private schools are excellent, but the fees are much too high. Not all people can afford to send their children to that type of school.*

Similarly, SF6 expressed her concern about the cost of attending private schools and stated:

*Only private schools can prepare students well in English, but they are very expensive.*

The unaffordable cost of sending her children to study at private schools led SF6 to migrate to New Zealand seeking a better education for her children and herself. She mentioned the personal experiences of her nephews who studied at private schools in Egypt and whose parents paid considerable amounts of money for the privilege. She noted that the teaching system in these schools appeared to better prepare students to use English.

### 7.3.2.2 Starting age of learning English at school

The discussion around the age at which learning English was commenced at school is not a separate issue from the type of school the participants had attended. Starting to learn English at public schools at a later age appeared to be an important factor that contributed to many INT participants' feelings of being inadequately prepared for studying and writing in English. The finding echoes a similar finding from the focus groups and the questionnaire. Based on the discussions with the INT participants and findings from the focus groups, studying at a public school meant that students would have started learning English in the fifth grade in some countries such as Jordan and Oman and in the seventh grade in Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that some countries such as Palestine, Jordan, the UAE and Egypt have recently started introducing English from the first grade, some Arabic-speaking countries such as Saudi Arabia introduce English from the fourth grade (see Table 2 on page 95). However, the majority of the participants in this study represent the cohorts of students who were taught English from a relatively late age.

Several INT participants cited "*12 years old*" or "*13 years old*" as the age at which they started learning English at public schools. They thought that the problems they were experiencing could in part be ascribed to this late start. For example, SM10 mentioned that he started learning English when he was 12 years old. By the time he graduated, he had studied English for only six years. In contrast, studying at a private school meant that students would have started learning English from the first grade, giving them an extended exposure to English by the time they finished school and enrolled at university. Several INT participants believed that students learn languages more easily the younger they start. SM10 stressed the importance of introducing English "*early*" at school, stating:

*The best age for learning languages is the young age. The earlier the better.*

Similarly, SM8 summarised the positive attitude many participants held towards the relationship between receiving English at a young age and the ability to master the language. He stated:

*There is a correlation between young age and learning languages. I have read about this. Children can acquire more than seven languages when they are young. It is easier for children to acquire languages.*

### **7.3.2.3 English teaching staff**

The abilities of English teachers were among the reasons that made many INT participants feel that public schools did not prepare them adequately for the English demands in New Zealand. SM7 referred to the students' lack of confidence in the English teachers' abilities. These teachers were viewed as “*not prepared*” to teach English. As outlined in 3.6.1, English teachers at public schools are mostly locals who have graduated from local universities. SF7 also noted:

*Teachers study at Arab universities. This is problematic.*

In addition, some INT participants reflected a belief that receiving English tuition from Non-native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) has been disadvantageous for them. SM8 mentioned:

*All teachers in public schools are non-native English speakers.*

Similarly, SM6 argued:

*That is the problem. When non-native speakers teach English, students will learn the language used by non-native speakers. This will negatively influence students' language ability.*

In private schools, the case seemed to be different. The INT participants believed that because English teachers are usually NESTs they provided a better quality of tuition. The participants' belief seemed to be that simply because someone speaks English as the L1 that person would be a better teacher of English. Such a perspective was illustrated in SM6's remarks:

*When I reached secondary school, I studied at a private school. There was a very good English teacher. He was a native English-speaking teacher. I still remember what he taught me.*

Even though teachers of English in private schools are not always native speakers, the teaching staff in such schools are perceived by students as more capable of teaching English. The high quality of teaching by NNESTs in private schools is believed to be because private schools are owned and operated by individuals and not the government. These private schools target high-achieving graduates because they realise that providing a quality education makes them attractive to a good number of students. In addition, the teachers' salaries in private schools are better than their counterparts' salaries in public schools. Despite the fact that their role is important and respected in the Arabic-speaking world, public school teachers receive low wages compared with many other jobs (Esseili, 2014). In private schools, teachers usually have "coordinators" who conduct regular visits to the classroom to ensure effective teaching is occurring (Esseili, 2014, p. 105). These coordinators also help the teachers in working on lesson plans.

#### 7.3.2.4 English textbooks and materials at school

The findings also suggest that the English textbooks students used at public schools were not adequate. SF7 stated:

*The textbooks we studied in the past at school did not help us improve our English.*

SF1 studied English only from the intermediate level of school (when she was 13 years old) onwards. She said:

*The content of the English materials was very simple and basic for students at my age.*

In a study investigating the English textbooks used in public schools in an Arabic-speaking country, Al-Issa (2006) found that the textbooks usually lack challenge. In other words, teachers may focus on technical aspects of the language including the alphabet, punctuation, spelling or grammar.

A number of INT participants in the present study raised concerns regarding the lack of technology facilities such as multi-media labs in public schools in many parts of the Arab world, even in some wealthy countries such as Saudi Arabia and Oman. Some INT participants stressed the importance of providing support for students and giving them access to English resources. For example, SM6 recalled that he used to look for resources to enhance his English skills. He stated:

*I used to watch movies in English that were broadcast on the national channel, and these movies were not subtitled. Such an experience enhanced my English skills, especially listening, and increased my vocabulary.*

A previous study (Al-Rihaily, 2011) evaluated the content of English textbooks prepared by the Ministry of Education for public schools in an Arabic-speaking country

and found that these books did not focus on the use of functional English, which could help students improve their skills to use the language in different situations.

In contrast, some INT participants referred to the English teaching textbooks and materials in private schools as being of a better quality. These participants seemed to have enough knowledge of both schooling systems because of personal experience with the two contexts. They noted that many private schools provide supplementary materials in addition to the English textbook prepared by the Ministry of Education. International publishers such as Longman or Oxford published these materials. SF9 noted that private schools provide students with audio-visual resources and activities in English, which allow the use of blended learning in English classes where “*teachers used PowerPoint slides, games, and songs.*” SF9 believed that utilising these resources in class provides variety in the activities that students do and creates an enjoyable atmosphere. Providing students with writing and reading materials in English appeared to be part of the resources private schools offered. SM6 said:

*We had a library at school with many resources. Teachers used to take us to the library and ask us to read and borrow books in English and take them home. Sometimes we wrote stories in English and a summary of what we read.*

### **7.3.2.5 Class environment and the practice of English**

In line with a finding from the focus groups, several INT participants raised the issue of the class size in public schools. The classes were described as jammed since a class accommodated many students and the class itself was not big enough to allow students to mingle and move. SM7 stated:

*Nowadays a class takes around 45-50 students, but because public schools are increasing, the number of students in each class is gradually decreasing, which is good.*

In contrast, the class size in private schools seemed to affect the amount of English practice students get. SM9 referred to the class size in a private school, stating: “*In private schools the student numbers in the classrooms are lower.*” SM6 reported that the number of students in a classroom in private schools ranges between 18-20 students. Having fewer students in a class gives more opportunity for teacher feedback and pair practice among students. In addition, private schools in some contexts in the Arab world cater for students whose L1 is not Arabic but who live with their parents who are employed in the Arab countries, making these schools multinational. English is then necessary as a means of communication. In fact, there was a strong feeling among the INT participants that students have more exposure to English and more opportunities to practice it in private schools than in public schools.

Another advantage of private schools in terms of exposure to English seems to be teachers’ encouragement for students to use English for communication. As SF6 said:

*The use of Arabic is minimal in private schools, where students are encouraged to use English most of the time across all subjects.*

Therefore, the outcome is an increase in students’ exposure to, and practice of, English.

As SM4 noted:

*There is a big difference between the two types of school. Private schools teach all subjects in English except Arabic and Religion.*

This observation is supported by Al-Jarf (2008) who shows that the majority of private schools in many Arabic-speaking countries use English as the medium of instruction in courses such as mathematics, science, and history, starting from the first grade. Some private schools also recruit NESTs to teach subjects other than English, which increases students’ exposure to the language.



### 7.3.2.6 English writing practice at school

Another area of concern for the INT participants who had studied at public schools was the lack of practice of English writing. Several INT participants reported that the lack of English writing resulted in them having a low proficiency level in academic writing. They emphasised their need for learning academic English at school, and particularly writing, so they would be prepared for the demands of tertiary study in an English-medium context. Instead, writing practice, which students did at school, was limited to “*some lines or a short paragraph maximum.*” (SM1). SF5 also noted that the writing she was asked to do at school was “*completely basic – multiple choice, fill in the gaps*” implying no practice of writing at the level of different types of sentence, paragraph or essay and commented that “*even exams did not require students to write.*”

It was obvious from talking to the INT participants who had attended public schools that they were not taught writing in English. When given the chance to write in English, some INT participants indicated they were asked to copy from the textbook as homework, which limited their ability to learn the conventions of English writing. SM6 said:

*We used to copy whatever was written in the book. It was not academic writing.*

SM11 noted:

*In my country, we never learned English academic writing at school.*

In this context, assignments or reports in English were cited as two types of writing that seemed challenging to many INT participants in the tertiary context in New Zealand as they had not practised this kind of writing. SM6 raised his concern, stating:

*I had never heard of academic writing, assignments, or referencing before coming to New Zealand.*

In light of the INT participants' reference to the lack of writing at public schools, the focus in the English class seemed to be mostly on spelling, punctuation or especially grammar. As SF1 stated:

*There was no writing at all. We studied only grammar.*

In addition to the lack of practicing English writing at school, some INT participants mentioned that even in Arabic they did not get enough writing practice. As SM8 stated:

*The lack of practice of writing was in both English and Arabic.*

Furthermore, Arabic-speaking countries seem to place more emphasis on speaking rather than writing skills, and that could prove problematic for students who will be assessed largely through the written word. This was confirmed by Morrow (2017) who noted that "orality is highly valued in Arab culture" (p. 157), meaning that proficiency in spoken Arabic seemed more important for speakers of Arabic than the written form. This finding was illustrated in the perspective of SM5 who argued:

*We prefer verbal communication. We communicate verbally more than in writing. We prefer to convey emotions through speaking. Most of us are weak in writing in English. Writing was not focused on during school. English was viewed as a language for communication in speaking. It was viewed as preparation for work. Writing was marginal. The aim was speaking in English.*

In contrast, a number of INT participants showed how private schools enhance students' English writing through offering them the chance to write inside the classroom through activities and outside the classroom through homework. SM9, who had attended a public school, gave the example of his young sister who attended a private school and

whose English skills are much better than his. He attributed her English ability to the degree of exposure to English she had had at school, where “*she was asked to write daily on different topics and had the chance to speak English.*” SM9 noted that students in private schools are given the opportunity to write in English, stating:

*As far as I know, students in private schools write every week a specific number of words - 200 or 250 words. They start gradually to increase the number of words. This is a good practice, and it is gradual. Students are taught how to write and how to use formal language. Once students reach university, they will have mastered the language and will not encounter challenges with writing.*

This finding echoes Al-Jarf’s (2008) finding, where she notes that writing practice in private schools is more intensive than in public schools. The reasons outlined above indicate how the difference in the type of school the participants had attended contributed to the gap in the degree of their preparedness for the demands of studying in English. The INT participants felt that attending a public school meant that these opportunities were not available for students. In contrast, attending a private school seems to give students the advantage of learning English at a younger age, receiving English tuition from NESTs who used better materials for teaching English. In addition, private schools offered the students the chance of more writing practice.

### **7.3.3 Impact of linguistic differences between Arabic and English on writing proficiency**

In addition to the lack of preparedness for the demands of academic English, the difficulties encountered by many Arabic-speaking students with English writing seem to be exacerbated by some of the linguistic differences between Arabic and English.

The analysis of the data from the interviews shows that some differences between Arabic and English caused challenges for the INT participants at the word, the sentence,

and the paragraph levels when writing in English. It is worth noting that this classification of three levels of challenges does not mean they are mutually exclusive as some of the features discussed below may fall under more than one category of difference.

### **7.3.3.1 At the word level**

It became evident that some of the challenges the INT participants encountered with writing in English could be attributed to the difference between English and Arabic at the word level. These included difficulties with the orthography and spelling.

#### ***Orthography***

Some INT participants indicated that the orthographic differences between Arabic and English resulted in difficulties with the L2 writing. One of the most noticeable differences between the two languages is that Arabic is written from right to left, while English is written from left to right. For example, SF9 referred to the difference in script between the two languages, believing that it had a negative impact on her ability to write in English. She stated:

*Writing from right to left in Arabic influenced my writing ability in English. I used to feel confused when I wrote in English. I guess by practice this became more familiar to me.*

In addition, among the major orthographic differences between Arabic and English writing is the fact that in Arabic there are no capital and small letters, whereas in English, there are upper and lower case letters.

This finding is in line with Abu Rass (2015) who found that the difference between the orthography, style and linguistic systems of Arabic and English are challenging to Arabic-speaking students in English writing. SF7 cited an example of how the difference between Arabic and English from an orthographic perspective poses a

difficulty for Arabic-speaking students in mastering writing in English. This participant gave the example of the word [*a'qd* - عقد] in Arabic. This word among many others could have different meanings when it is used without *ḥarakāt*, which literally means ‘motions’, i.e. the short vowel marks. It has become unusual for Arabic writing to include these *ḥarakāt*, even in academic writing. The following examples show the difference:

**Table 13: Orthographic differences between Arabic and English**

Meaning in English	Word in Arabic (with vowel marks)
- contract; agreement; decade	[ <i>aqd</i> ] عَقْدٌ
- held (~ a meeting/conference); completed (~ a contract)	[ <i>aqada</i> ] عَقَدَ
- necklace	[ <i>eqd</i> ] عَقْدٌ
- joints, complexities	[ <i>oqad</i> ] عَقْدٌ
- to have complicated	[ <i>aqqada</i> ] عَقَّدَ
- was held	[ <i>oqeda</i> ] عَقِدَ
- to be bent	[ <i>aqeda</i> ] عَقِدَ

The examples above indicate how one word in Arabic could have different equivalents in English based on the way it is pronounced. In Arabic writing, the context is the only clue to figure out the meaning of the word in writing if it has no *ḥarakāt*. SF7's reference to this particular example embodies the perplexity Arabic-speaking students may feel when they need to check the meaning of a word in the dictionary and then get various equivalents. This challenge may not be specific to Arabic as students who speak other languages may also select a random word, which may not fit the context.

Therefore, a random selection of a word based on the superficial orthographic form of the word may end up with a very different meaning from the intended one.

### *Spelling*

Research indicates that the differences in the spelling of English and other languages such as French (Walter, 2001), Italian (Duguid, 2001), Spanish (Coe, 2001), and Arabic (Smith, 2001) among others may contribute to transferring some features of L1 in L2 writing. As far as this study is concerned, Arabic spelling seemed to have an impact on the INT participants' proficiency in English writing. Several INT participants attributed the difficulty with spelling to the cross-linguistic difference between Arabic and English. As SM2 stated:

*Spelling rules in English are different from spelling rules in Arabic.*

He referred to the regularity of Arabic spelling in line with the pronunciation of words, comparing it with the non-phonetic nature of spelling in English. He explained:

*In Arabic, we pronounce whatever we write, while in English, pronunciation is different from writing. Some letters in English are silent, which is not the case in Arabic writing.*

In line with the findings from the questionnaire, several INT participants indicated that they identify spelling as a major challenge in English writing. Although many students nowadays use computer software (e.g. Microsoft Word) to type their assignments, it became apparent that many INT participants felt they lack the confidence in their ability to spell in English. While a spellchecker may highlight some misspelled words, some INT participants referred to their inability to determine how a particular word could be spelt correctly. This lack of confidence among the INT participants in their ability to spell many words in English properly could be attributed to the fact that when students correct any misspelled words, they do so without knowing the rule of spelling. A

challenge with spelling could occur with homophones, which have the same sound but are spelt differently. In other words, a spellchecker would not highlight the words meat/meet, sea/see, their/there when they are erroneously used in a given context.

What appeared to be a major issue was that the INT participants place much emphasis on spelling when it is generally accepted that incorrect spelling very rarely leads to confusion as far as meaning is concerned. This mindset appears to affect the participants' confidence and level of engagement and readiness to write academically in English. When asked about the difficulties he faces in academic writing in English, SM9 described spelling as a "*major problem*." Likewise, SF6 stated:

*I have many spelling mistakes. Spelling is one major issue in my writing.*

Similarly, SF9 referred to spelling as a "*main obstacle*" hindering her ability to write confidently in English. SM6 attributed spelling problems to the fact that

*.. in Arabic we write the way we pronounce, which makes it [English spelling] difficult for us.*

Not only did the INT participants view spelling as affecting the quality of their writing, but they also thought that lecturers consider spelling as a major problem when giving feedback on students' writing. This may have also contributed to the INT participants' feeling that spelling is a major issue in writing. As mentioned earlier, although some spelling mistakes may not hinder the message from being understood, some lecturers may comment on the misspellings that students make. This could be attributed to lecturers' feeling irritated by these mistakes as the spelling errors interrupt the flow of the lecturers' reading and lecturers believe that spelling mistakes are easy to remedy.

What seems of importance in the comments of the INT participants is the fact that the feedback they receive is mainly on spelling, which may not necessarily help students' writing. In other words, focusing on spelling means looking at a superficial error instead of the major problems inherent in writing, which may influence the students' perception of the importance of spelling in academic writing.

While some lecturers may penalise students for misspellings and deduct some marks from the total grade when assessing writing, others appear to ignore any spelling errors and focus instead on the content and meaning. SM8 mentioned that he recently sat for an exam. He admitted:

*I am sure I made a lot of spelling mistakes. When I received the exam paper back I found that the lecturer ignored them all.*

In addition to the orthographic and spelling aspects, several INT participants referred to other differences between Arabic and English at the sentence level that may negatively influence how they write in English.

### **7.3.3.2 At the sentence level**

The differences at the sentence level are related to word order, the structure of the relative clause in Arabic, the use of the definite article, and the use of connectors.

#### ***Word order***

One major challenge in English writing is word order, which the INT participants saw as part of the sentence structure. As SF6 argued:

*The structure of a sentence in English is one main problem as well.  
This is a real problem I face.*

Likewise, SF7 noted:

*The sentence structure in English is challenging.*



The varied perspectives of the INT participants during the interviews indicated that grammatical interference might occur when many of them intentionally or unintentionally transfer the Arabic sentence structure into their English writing. The participants may be puzzled whether to transfer the sentence structure from the colloquial Arabic they use for daily communication or from the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) they use for formal writing and speaking. These two forms of Arabic differ in some aspects including vocabulary and grammar. In other words, students may be confused about which word to choose in their English writing, whether the formal or informal words. However, this may be problematic not only for NNESSs but also for NESSs. For example, SM8 attributed the difficulty of mastering the sentence structure in English to his tendency to use the colloquial Arabic, which lacks a specific structure.

*The structure of the language we use daily affects writing in Arabic, let alone writing in English due to the different alphabet and grammatical arrangement of words. English writing by Arabic-speaking students could be easily spotted from the sentence structure they use.*

He thought that he, as an Arabic-speaking student, “*overuse[s] noun phrases when writing in English,*” and he attributed that to the influence of Arabic sentence structure.

This was also summed up by SM7:

*I use the structure of Arabic [sentence] in English. I mean I try to place the Arabic [sentence] structure on English. The feedback I receive from university lecturers on my English writing is mainly associated with the sentence structure I use.*

The participant elaborated on this issue and cited a commonly quoted area of difference between the word order in English and Arabic. He gave the example of an adjective preceding a noun in English, while it follows the noun in Arabic, taking into account

that English script is written and read from left to right, whereas it is written and read from right to left in Arabic as indicated earlier. SM7 gave the following example as an illustration of word order differences:

- ‘A significant (*adj.*) increase (*n.*)’, and its equivalent in Arabic is: زيادة ملحوظة [*Ziyada malhouza* – literally: an increase significant].

The participant also cited another example relating to the compound elements in English, e.g. noun + noun as in the following examples:

- ‘A hospital (*n.*) manager (*n.*)’, and the Arabic equivalent is: مُديرٌ مُستشفى [*Mudeer mustashfa* – literally: a manager hospital].
- ‘A driving (*n.*) licence (*n.*)’, and the Arabic equivalent is: رخصة قيادة [*Rukhsat qiyada* – literally: a licence driving].

Therefore, SM7 thought that these differences in the word order in Arabic and English result in students making mistakes in that aspect when writing in the L2. While SM7 showed awareness of some differences between the word order or sentence structures in Arabic and English, he mentioned that when he writes in English, the outcome “*might seem perfect*” for him, while the lecturer may see his writing as not making sense.

Furthermore, SM7 highlighted the importance of understanding the sentence structure in English for improving writing. He said:

*Had we learnt the difference between the structure of sentence in Arabic and English, we would have been able to write better.*

### ***Relative clause***

Another noticeable area of challenge for the INT participants at the sentence level was the difference in forming a relative clause in Arabic and English. SM1 cited an example that is common among Arabic-speaking students when they write in English. The three

Arabic sentences below are grammatically correct and have the same meaning even though the structure is different. However, if the third sentence is literally transferred into English, it is incorrect.

Table 14: Issues with relative clauses

1. Literally [This is him my friend whom I share with him the project]	1. هذا هو صديقي الذي أشاركه المشروع.
<b>This is my friend whom I share the project with.</b>	
2. Literally [This is my friend whom I share with him the project]	2. هذا صديقي الذي أشاركه المشروع.
<b>This is my friend whom I share the project with.</b>	
3. Literally [This is my friend whom I share the project with him]	3. هذا صديقي الذي أشارك المشروع معه.
<b>This is my friend whom I share the project with him.*</b>	

SM1's reference to the above example in Arabic does not necessarily indicate his awareness of the rule and source of error in the equivalent English sentence. When he mentioned the sentence, SM1 remarked:

*I do not know why when I convey the meaning of such a sentence in English, you know most of the time it is wrong. I always receive feedback on similar sentences that contain the relative pronoun – you know, which, that. I think there is something wrong, but no one told me how to avoid it.*

From a personal experience in teaching L2 writing to undergraduate Palestinian students, I know that the relative clause represented a difficulty for many of them. This

source of error production has long been considered serious for Arabic-speaking students. Interestingly, Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983) describe the kind of error indicated in the sentence (3) above as the “Middle Eastern clause” (p. 618). They argue that such difficulty with writing correct relative clauses is attributed to the presence of a relator in the Arabic relative clause. This relator is a second word or an affix that functions as the subject or object of the clause, referring to the antecedent. When transferred to English, the repetition of referents results in aberrations. In the example (3) above, the relative pronoun is [الذي], means ‘whom (object), who, or that’, and it refers to the antecedent ‘friend.’ The relating word [مع] + the suffix [ـه] both combined mean ‘with him.’ The suffix [ـه] (him) refers to the antecedent ‘friend.’ Therefore, it appears that the source of error is the literal translation from Arabic into English as in sentence (3):

This is	هذا
my friend	صديقي
whom	الذي
I share	أشارك
the project	المشروع
with him	معه

Arabic-speaking students may be taught during schooling how to write a relative clause in English, but the contrastive features between Arabic and English in this regard may be overlooked. This may contribute to the difficulty many students face in understanding the nature of errors they make in writing correct English relative clauses.

### ***Use of the definite article***

Some INT participants felt that they overuse the definite article in English because they are influenced by the grammatical rules in their L1. SF1 cited her way of writing, which is commonly criticised by her lecturers because of using the definite article ‘the’ excessively. In this context, SF1 referred to some abstract nouns in Arabic that are

usually preceded by the definite article ‘الـ’, [al-], which is equivalent to ‘the’ in English. She cited the nouns freedom and democracy. To further elaborate what SF1 meant, the following examples are used:

**Table 15: Use of the definite article in Arabic and English**

* <b>the</b> freedom is a bliss that is only appreciated when one loses it. Instead of <i>freedom</i>	■ الحرية نعمة لا يعلم قيمتها إلا من يفقدها
* <b>the</b> democracy is one form of a nation’s development Instead of <i>democracy</i>	■ الديمقراطية شكل من أشكال تقدم الشعوب
* <b>the</b> justice does not mean <b>the</b> equality Instead of <i>justice; equality</i>	■ العدل ليس هو المساواة
*the concept of <b>the</b> peace is the opposite of the conflicts and wars occurring in the region Instead of <i>peace</i>	■ مفهوم السلام يتنافى مع الصراعات والحروب المحتدمة في المنطقة

The examples above indicate that using the definite article in Arabic is more common than in English. Unlike the nouns in English above, the words in Arabic also show how the definite article is attached to the word. Therefore, Arabic-speaking students may transfer this difference into their L2 writing, incorrectly believing that it may be the same in English as in Arabic. Overuse of the definite article in English may contribute to making students’ writing awkward, especially to lecturers who give feedback. As SM2 added:

*When I write in English, I ask myself several times: does this word take ‘the’ or is it used without ‘the’? A dictionary does not help with this. Sometimes I add ‘the’ and sometimes I leave it out. I mean I do it randomly.*

This finding correlates with Alhaysony (2012) who found that errors due to the addition of the definite article ‘*the*’ were the most frequent in the English writing by Saudi students, and this was attributed to the influence of students’ L1, i.e. Arabic. She points to the difference between Arabic and English in this aspect. She notes that the article system in Arabic differs from that of English. English has three articles, but Arabic has only two, i.e. the definite article ‘*al*’, and the indefinite article (or zero article as it is represented by the absence of the definite article ‘*al*’). She gives the examples of errors caused by the unnecessary addition of ‘*the*’ as in: I love *the* shopping, *the* Cairo, many *the* family members.

In the same context, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) give some examples of the difference between the definite article system in Arabic and English. They note that ‘*al*’ is attached to generic nouns in Arabic, whether singular or plural and abstract nouns more frequently in Arabic than in English.

The use of the definite article in Arabic is not limited to the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is used for formal correspondence and writing. In a probing comment on why this difference between Arabic and English represents a challenge in writing, SF6 argued:

*I think we overuse the definite article ‘al’ [the] in our daily language. Now I am talking to you in colloquial Arabic, and you can see how many times ‘al’ [the] is attached to the words we both use. I guess this influences the way we write, or at least the way I write.*

### ***Use of connectors***

In addition to the use of definite article, the overuse of the connective ‘*wa*’ [wa] in Arabic, the equivalent of ‘and’ in English, was raised by some INT participants. ‘*Wa*’ is used in Arabic as a connector to indicate addition. However, it could also precede other

words including connectors that show contrast. Fareh (1998) notes that a connector may indicate several relationships between sentences, and more than one connector may be used to indicate one particular relationship. SF6 mentioned that words and clauses in Arabic are linked with the connector [*wa*]. She stated:

*I feel that my writing in English is running one sentence after another because I use 'wa' several times to connect sentences.*

This connector seemed to be transferred to English writing through the overuse of the connector 'and' regardless of whether it is needed or not. Added to this difference between Arabic and English is the length and complexity of syntax of Arabic sentence, as well as "the free word order nature of Arabic sentence" in comparison with the English sentence (Othman, Shaalan, & Rafea, 2003, p. 37).

Green and Manning (2010) confirm that instead of starting new topics with punctuation, writers in Arabic utilise connectives such as '*wa*' and '*fa*' [equivalent to 'and' in English] to achieve connection between new elements of the text and the previous clauses and the text as a whole. Therefore, Arabic sentences tend to be relatively long compared to English.

Overuse of the connector 'and' in English by Arabic-speaking students may create parallel sentence structures that could make the text sound awkward. This is evidenced in research by Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983) who show that maturity of style in Arabic writing is measured by the use of coordination while it is measured by the use of subordination in English writing. To show the use of connector '*wa*' in real writing by an Arabic-speaking student, an undergraduate student sent me the following chunk in Arabic, which is part of an assignment he had submitted for a course at university.

Table 16: Use of connectors in Arabic and English

<p>▪ Lit. The issue of prisoners <b>and</b> detainees is currently one of the most haunting issues for people around the world <b>and</b> this is because of injustice <b>and</b> aggression practiced against prisoners, <b>and</b> this study presented a unique case of oppression, <b>and</b> deprivation <b>and</b> injustice inflicted on a defenceless <b>and</b> occupied people.</p>	<p>▪ إن قضية الأسرى والمعتقلين اليوم من أكثر القضايا المؤرقة لشعوب العالم؛ وذلك لما يُلاقيه الأسير من ظلم وعدوان وقع عليه من أسرته، وقد جاءت هذا الدراسة لعرض حالة فريدة من حالات القهر والحرمان والظلم الواقع على شعب أعزل وقع تحت نير الاحتلال.</p>
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A lack of understanding of the difference between Arabic and English in the use of connectors may result in transferring the exact lexis as in the L1, and therefore, affecting the quality of writing.

### 7.3.3.3 At the paragraph level

The difference between Arabic and English at the paragraph level appeared to influence the way the INT participants write paragraphs in English. The outcome of such differences seemed to be interference of the Arabic paragraph style in English writing. Interference from Arabic is expected to cause lack of coherence in students' English writing due to the difference in the way coherence is achieved in the two languages. From the discussions with the INT participants in the current study, it appeared that some participants recognised through lecturers' feedback that they tended to transfer the characteristics of Arabic into their English writing, while others seemed to be already aware that these differences were challenging for them when writing. Some of the text features of Arabic include the use of repetition of the same words or ideas.

### *Repetition*

Since Arabic and English use different cohesive devices, some INT participants indicated that achieving cohesion in the text in English represents a difficulty for them. When Arabic-speaking students think of these cohesive devices in their L1 when writing in English, they may end up translating literally. Al-Hindawi and Abu-Krooz



(2017) note that the lexical cohesion in Arabic is achieved through utilising repetition, which is a basic cohesive device.

In an attempt to enhance coherence to their writing, several INT participants seemed to employ repetition. Views of the participants regarding repetition in their writing ranged between repeating words and repeating ideas. Reference to repeating words in Arabic was exemplified in SM1's comment:

*In Arabic, to describe a happy moment we may use as many words as possible to describe how happy it is. We may write: it is moment of farah [joy], sa'ada [happiness], and suror [pleasure]. I am not sure if in English we use three words at the same time to describe a happy moment.*

At the same time, other INT participants seemed to be unintentionally repeating words in their writing, and they recognised it through the feedback they received from lecturers. This was illustrated in SM6's comments:

*When I receive feedback on my writing, I see many comments like "repeated" "repeated," "you have said this already" by my lecturer. When I read the text again, I feel, yes right, I was just putting my ideas on paper again and again.*

Despite the fact that much of the INT participants' reference to repetition is related to what they would say in spoken Arabic, repetition is also a feature of formal writing in Arabic. At the same time, it is expected that students' writing, whether in their L1 or in English, may be influenced by the spoken language they are used to. Meanwhile, it was obvious that the INT participants had various perspectives towards repetition. Some indicated that they resort to repetition seeking a rhetorical function in the text as they knew that repetition had a function in the Arabic text. As SM2 stated:

*I was taught at school to repeat the same words if I wanted to emphasise an idea.*

Therefore, some participants indicated that they find writing coherent texts in English challenging. SF1 described presenting ideas coherently in English writing as “*the first problem*” she faced when she wrote for her courses at university. She added:

*I was not sure what to include in the introduction of an essay, how and when to move to the body paragraphs and the conclusion. I tended to mix all ideas together.*

Similarly, SM9 mentioned that he finds “*arranging ideas*” in written English challenging. He noted:

*I might start with one topic and then move to another different topic without being aware of this. I feel that my ideas are mixed up in English when writing.*

### **7.3.4 Students’ uncertainty about the conventions of academic writing**

In addition to the challenges encountered by the INT participants from the linguistic perspective, several INT participants expressed a lack of clarity about the conventions of academic writing across the disciplines. They also reported challenges in understanding lecturers’ expectations of writing and spoke of the difficulty they experienced in decoding feedback on their written assignments.

#### **7.3.4.1 The lack of understanding of academic writing conventions**

As the last two themes showed, many Arabic-speaking students experience difficulty in English academic writing due to their past language learning experiences and the linguistic differences between their L1 and English. In addition, several INT participants from different university levels and disciplines mentioned that they still have difficulty in unpacking the conventions of acceptable English academic writing.

This perspective emerged firstly when the INT participants defined academic writing and secondly when they talked about the challenges they encounter in transition to tertiary studies. For example, SM7 referred to his uncertainty about what it means to write academically. He argued:

*Well, I understand that academic writing is formal and not informal, but when I want to put this into practice, it becomes vague and confusing. I think I cannot avoid mixing both [formal and informal] when I write.*

In this context, some INT participants seemed to associate the formality of academic writing mainly with superficial issues in the text, such as using correct punctuation, grammar, and spelling. This is evident in SM8's comment below:

*Academic writing is used in formal settings. It is different from everyday writing. In academic writing we should not use the pronoun 'I' and contractions. We should not also use slang language, which we use in spoken English.*

The second theme highlighted the fact (see 7.3.2) that most of the INT participants who had studied at public schools indicated they had not had enough practice of writing academic English. The feeling of disadvantage by these participants may have contributed to their uncertainty about what constitutes academic writing at the tertiary level in an English-speaking country. However, some INT participants showed more awareness of what they were expected to include when writing in English at a tertiary level. Such an awareness was reflected in SF1's comments:

*Academic writing follows a set of criteria. The vocabulary we use, the way of expressing ideas, the way of argument and analysis, and arranging the text in paragraphs are all different in academic writing from non-academic writing. Citation and referencing are part and*

*parcel of academic writing too. Otherwise, I will be accused of plagiarism.*

Although the comments above by SF1 indicate an understanding of what students at the tertiary level are expected to consider when writing in English, she mentioned that academic writing is a challenging task for undergraduate students, especially when they are required to write within time constraints. Having completed high school in an Arabic-speaking country, SF1 felt that although some schooling contexts in her country may provide students with some theoretical knowledge about the demands of academic language, the practical aspect is still missing. She felt that actual writing practice is the challenge for Arabic-speaking students as they may not get enough practice at school, which results in difficulties with academic writing in the tertiary context. The participant added:

*To be honest, theoretical understanding is easy. I reckon we studied this at school. Anyone can read a book on academic writing, but what is really really tough is the practical application of that theory. I mean students in the undergraduate level can understand that writing requires them to cite, to paraphrase, to summarise and to argue, but how to apply all this in writing is the real dilemma, taking into account that we write most of the time under the stress of deadlines.*

In addition, what seems to add to students' perplexity when writing in English is the gap between their understanding of how to write for the academy and lecturers' assumption that students know about these writing practices.

#### **7.3.4.2 The gap between students' understanding and lecturers' expectations**

One reason for problems in student writing might be the gap between lecturers' expectations and students' understanding of what writing involves (Itua, Coffey, Merryweather, Norton, & Foxcroft, 2014; Stierer, 1998). The findings from interviews

show that there seems to be such a gap between some INT participants' understanding and lecturers' expectations of what constitutes English academic writing. This perspective was clearly illustrated in SM4's remarks. He argued:

*I think there is a gap in the expectations. We do not know what they [lecturers] expect us to write.*

The participant further indicated his belief that lecturers may assume that students, regardless of where they are from or what their L1 is, all have the same ability needed to meet the demands of academic writing. Such an assumption could contribute to the gap existing between lecturers and students. However, it should be acknowledged that NNESSs do face bigger challenges in meeting the demands of academic language than their L1 counterparts. SM4 stated:

*The problem is that lecturers assume we [international students] all have the same level of academic writing. Well, you cannot teach a lion, an elephant, a dog, a monkey, a mouse to jump and expect they will all jump. It is impossible. This applies to human beings. We have individual differences.*

Four INT participants mentioned that when they submit assignments, they believe that they have conveyed their ideas well. However, when they get feedback from the lecturers, they recognise that a gap exists between their understanding of what is required and that of lecturers. The lack of understanding of the lectures' expectations regarding student writing seems to contribute to some INT participants' attitude towards academic writing. These participants viewed writing as an unattainable skill since the concept of adequate writing may only reside in the mind of a lecturer. One of these participants was SM6, and he said:

*I think my colleagues share my worry that when we write for the different courses, lecturers usually get back to us and say it clearly: "this is not the way we write." OK how do you write? They do not say. They seem to keep it as a secret. Just go and find out yourself, you are the student, not me. This is how they [lecturers] think.*

As for what lecturers could do to help students across the disciplines overcome the writing challenges, the INT participants reflected their need for academic writing support. In light of the findings from the questionnaire, the INT participants felt that students at the tertiary level need more clarity in lecturers' expectations of writing, feedforward before embarking on writing, and clarity in written feedback by lecturers. In what follows, the forms of support are discussed in more detail.

***The need for clarity in lecturers' expectations of student writing***

It appears that when some lecturers ask students to complete written assignments, they do not clearly state their expectations regarding academic writing. Several INT participants expressed their feeling that most lecturers do not state clearly what they expect of students in terms of writing. There seemed to be a feeling among these participants that most lecturers assume that students already know what they are required to do in the written assignments. For example, SM11 noted:

*Lecturers should be clear in terms of what they expect students to write.*

SM10 mentioned:

*While some lecturers clearly tell students what their expectations [about academic writing] are, others do not.*

Likewise, SM2 added:

*My lecturers usually give main points as guidelines for us to write accordingly.*

Not only did the INT participants find that lecturers had vague expectations about academic writing, but they also thought that lecturers within the same field have different expectations and requirements of writing. SM11 reflected upon his own experience:

*But in fact, they [lecturers] are not clear as they ask for different things. I wrote the same way for two major courses at university in the same term. However, I got a high grade for one course and a low grade for the other. I then had to explain to my lecturer that I wrote using the structure I learned in a given course. The lecturer told me there was a specific way of writing he prefers. If lecturers were clear in what they expect from students, they would really help us.*

### ***The need for feedforward by lecturers***

In line with the findings from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire (see 6.4), the INT participants indicated their need for feedforward (Sadler, 1983) from their lecturers regarding what they should consider before embarking on writing. One of the ways for feedforward several INT participants cited was providing students with writing exemplars, which could be from expert writers or students who had achieved high grades on their assignments. The INT participants viewed this form of feedforward as an aid that could better prepare them psychologically for the demands of academic writing and enable them to raise questions before embarking on the writing process. As SM4 noted:

*Giving students written models could help a lot. Students could then imitate the style followed in these models and clearly understand how they are expected to write in the field of their study.*

The INT participants saw the provision of this type of guidance as helpful. This was illustrated in SM10's comments:

*Since undergraduate students are novice writers, giving them some writing models would help them learn what to include in writing.*

A number of INT participants seemed to share a perception that lecturers are overwhelmed as they have large classes and administrative tasks, and they cannot offer feedforward to help students with the demands of academic writing. Lecturers were seen by some INT participants as busy and unable to handle the large number of students they teach. This was illustrated in SM9's comments:

*Lecturers are mostly busy and they say it is not their job to help me with writing. It is students' responsibility to look for help with writing.*

Likewise, SM2 added:

*Lecturers sometimes have hundreds of students in a class. They find it impossible to help with writing.*

However, it should be acknowledged that providing students with models of writing may have its own problems. While this is an immensely practical way to help students with their difficulties, it may encourage students to try to follow a certain way of writing and thus diminish their agency.

### ***The need for clarity in written feedback by lecturers***

Although the INT participants acknowledged that a gap already exists between lecturers and students, the feedback given by lecturers seemed to distance students from their lecturers even more. The INT participants used adjectives such as 'vague, distancing, and brief' to describe the feedback they receive from lecturers on their writing. SF4



used the word “rude” to describe the feedback she got from one of her lecturers on her writing. She stated:

*One lecturer gave me rude feedback on one assignment. He highlighted a long paragraph and wrote: ‘rubbish’. I think this is very destructive.*

The adjectives that described the feedback by lecturers came in the context when the INT participants outlined the challenges they encounter in understanding how to attend to the comments their lecturers write on their written assignments. As SM1 stated:

*A lecturer seems to think that all undergraduate students have the same level of knowledge and abilities. Students differ considerably. So why do lecturers assume that we know what they mean when they give feedback? What adds insult to injury is that they write brief comments - just one word, a phrase – that’s it.*

It became obvious during the interviews that several INT participants refrain from seeking help or further clarification from discipline lecturers regarding the feedback given on writing. As outlined above, the feeling of some INT participants that lecturers are busy may have contributed to their reluctance to seek help. Another possibility is that the students might be intimidated or reluctant to approach lecturers where the comments they give seem to be dismissive.

While the INT participants indicated that most of the feedback they receive on their writing from discipline lecturers was related to the content and not the language issues, they emphasised their feeling of confusion with the feedback they get. The participants attributed this feeling to lecturers’ assumption that students would understand what the feedback given asks them to do. This perspective was illustrated in SM9’s comments:

*I get lost when I find out that my lecturer has highlighted a whole chunk in my assignment and just left one word for me: "Irrelevant." I feel like, for God's sake, tell me what is relevant.*

Some INT participants, mainly male, referred to the student-lecturer relationship. They mentioned how they may relinquish any sense of agency if they received written feedback from that does not meet their expectations. These participants noted that in their culture arguing with a teacher might indicate a lack of respect; therefore, it would be much safer for them to agree with the feedback given and accept the grade given on an assignment. Although many students would find it challenging to oppose a lecturer, the INT participants noted that they found it difficult to ask a lecturer for an explanation of why they received a certain mark on a written assignment. They seemed to be reluctant to approach lecturers asking about a mark as they felt it is disrespectful. This perspective was summed up by SM5:

*In our culture, it is impolite to argue with a teacher at school. I believe the situation would be the same at university. So we accept what our teachers say. Agree or disagree, it does not matter.*

After he had moved to New Zealand, SM5's perception of how to attend to the feedback given by lecturers on his writing was influenced by other students' suggestions. SM5 seemed to imply that the situation in the New Zealand tertiary context is not different from his home country. The student appeared to think that despite the alleged openness among lecturers, many lecturers may not like to be asked about assignment requirements. He added:

*When I came here, I initially thought that the situation might be different, but my friends advised me to accept any grade I receive on the assignments. Just waste of time to ask for revision, and some lecturers may take it personally.*

A few INT participants raised their concern that they are assessed based on their writing ability. They indicated that had they been given the chance to explain to lecturers orally what they meant by what they had written in their assignments, they would have conveyed the message and achieved better grades. In this context, it seems that an interim step could be allowing students to talk through their assignments with their lecturers. However, it should be noted that lecturers are busy and this option may not be possible with large classes of students. As discussed earlier, this view by some INT participants may indicate the influence of the oral culture on the participants who prefer to communicate verbally. For example, SM2 argued:

*I often feel that I could convince my lecturer that what I had written in my assignment was relevant and correct only if I was given the chance to explain to him what I meant by what I had written.*

To address their uncertainty and confusion about academic writing, the INT participants indicated they had to employ some adaptation strategies including seeking help from friends, seeking help from TLAs, hiring a private tutor, and utilising the available resources. These strategies are presented in the next section based on the extent to which the participants employed each one of them, taking into consideration that some participants resorted to more than one strategy.

#### **7.3.4.3 Adaptation strategies to overcome uncertainty about academic writing**

According to Lea and Street (1998), undergraduate, particularly first-year, students encounter challenges with academic writing if the strategies they had adopted before enrolment at universities do not meet the demands required for university. In what follows, the adaptation strategies the INT participants employed to overcome their uncertainty about academic writing are presented in more detail:

### ***Seeking help from peers***

As discussed earlier, NESSs and NNESSs both face challenges to meet the demands of academic English. However, NNESSs may be unaware that it is possible to seek help. They may also be unclear as to where they should seek help with the demands of academic writing at tertiary level, whether from lecturers, peers, TLAs, or private tutors.

Although the INT participants indicated they are uncertain about the expectations of lecturers about academic writing, many of them indicated that lecturers would not help them with writing. This was summed up in the comments by SM4:

*I ask friends for help with writing and not lecturers. My lecturers suggested that I ask a student who got an 'A' and see how they write.*

SM11 indicated that he was given the same advice:

*When I asked one of my lecturers for help with academic writing, the lecturer told me to go and check with one of my friends.*

The participants indicated that they prefer to seek help from peers. This finding is in line with similar findings from the focus groups and the questionnaire. Such peers could be current international students who are studying the same course or students who have already completed it. Some INT participants mentioned they prefer to ask a native-speaking friend to proofread their writing (SM9, SM2 & SF7), and others indicated they ask friends from the same culture (SM8, SF8, SF2 & SM5) as they feel more comfortable explaining their needs to peers who share the same background.

### ***Seeking help from Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs)***

During the interviews, the majority of the participants (18 out of 20) showed an awareness of the existence of a SLC in their tertiary institutions in New Zealand. They were aware

that the TLAs who work at these SLCs offer free academic support, including academic writing, and workshops, as well as one-to-one meetings.

Forty percent of INT participants (8 out of 20) had consulted a TLA. These eight participants expressed their expectations that talking to someone from the same tertiary institution where they study would clarify much of the ambiguity they had about the criteria of writing an assignment. This expectation was reflected in the comments by SM6:

*I had the feeling that talking to the learning advisor might lessen my concerns about the quality of my writing since he is part of the institution and he knows what acceptable writing is and what is not.*

Some participants found consulting a TLA helpful in improving their writing. This positive position towards the role a TLA was summed up in SM11's comments:

*The learning advisor was available for every student. Although the learning advisor did not have the expertise in my major, he helped with writing. He helped with the strategy of writing an assignment. He told me to follow the steps of writing. How to introduce the topic and support the ideas. These were new to me. These are important skills. I learned them from the learning advisor. He taught me how to make the conclusion concise. I submitted my assignment, and the grade was excellent.*

Although a TLA may highlight the problematic areas in student writing, some INT participants seemed to misunderstand the role of the TLA in helping them with the demands of academic language. They seemed to expect someone to do the task for them instead of outlining how they could improve their writing. This attitude among some INT participants may be attributed to the style of teaching they were accustomed to in their past learning experiences in the Arab world, where much of the English tuition

was based on spoon-feeding students (Abu Ayyash, 2015) with the content they were required to learn. As SF5 noted:

*I visited the learning centre to see a learning advisor. I went there and asked for proofreading. They told me they do not do proofreading. They call it writing support.*

Although more than half of the interviewees (12 out of 20) had not consulted a TLA regarding their writing, much of the discussion with the INT participants showed a common assumption that the writing support offered by the learning centre and TLAs is mostly generic and tailored to fit the needs of all students, regardless of their disciplines. As the following excerpt by SM5 shows:

*I know about them [learning advisors], and I dealt with them twice. But I did not find their support helpful. The advice they offer is available on the internet. They offer general advice that suits everyone.*

The INT participants who had not consulted a TLA seemed to be influenced by their friends' attitudes towards the help the TLAs offer. This perspective is reflected in SM7's comments:

*My friends who went there told me that the feedback given by the learning advisor is mostly on the language and not the content. That is why I feel I do not need it.*

In addition, a number of INT participants mentioned that they felt that approaching TLAs for help with academic writing would show weakness and indicate lack of agency. In other words, the students believed that visiting a learning centre and making an appointment with a TLA indicates a deficit in the student and lack of ability. This feeling by the INT participants may have contributed to some students' preference for

paid tutoring over the free support a TLA offers. In addition, some students may feel that when they pay someone to help with the demands of writing for their courses, they would get customised help that fits their needs.

### ***Hiring a private tutor***

As indicated above, another adaptation strategy some INT participants employed was hiring a private tutor to help with the demands of academic writing. Help from private tutors included proofreading and editing students' written assignments. For example, SM10 noted:

*I usually find it much easier to sit with a private tutor for a couple of hours and finish my work.*

However, the participants seemed to be cautious when talking about the actual help a private tutor would offer in written assignments. What seemed to be alarming was the comment by SM2. Based on his personal experience, he emphasised that students may experience more harm from seeking private tutoring at the tertiary level than good. He argues that many private tutors care more about the money a student pays than actually helping them understand their real needs in writing and the way they could enhance that skill. SM2 said:

*A private tutor is paid on an hourly basis, and I feel when I hire a private tutor I do not get any benefit from them. They seem to spend more time on the assignment just to get more money. And when they know that a student is funded by the government, they become very greedy, and especially when they know that a student has a deadline to submit an assignment.*

In addition, these participants did not seem to consider the extent to which a private tutor would know about the content of their assignment, or the requirements of the tertiary institution as far as academic writing is concerned.

### *Utilising the available resources*

One of the least cited adaptation strategies was looking for materials online and doing self-study. The INT participants seemed to hold the belief that being undergraduate students meant they needed someone to help them with the demands of academic writing, and doing self-study was the final option for them.

A few self-funded participants (2 out of 20) tended to do self-study and use the free services available for them to help them with the challenges of academic writing. The resources the participants utilised included proofreading websites, writing templates, or academic writing textbooks. This preference was illustrated in SM6's comments:

*I find checking a website and reading about how I could improve my writing more comfortable than asking someone else. I use a free proofreading tool to help with any grammar errors or structure problems. It is not perfect, but at least it helps, and it is free.*

Similarly, SF2 remarked:

*Since lecturers in my discipline do not offer writing models and the cost of private tutoring is high, I had to look for some samples online that are related to my major and then follow a similar way of writing. I then ask my lecturer to give me feedback. I then develop my writing based on the feedback I receive from the lecturer.*

One of the most noticeable aspects about this strategy was that the INT participants who were sponsored by their governments to study in New Zealand indicated a greater tendency to use the other strategies, and particularly the ones for which they had to pay. In other words, students who are supported financially by their government such as Saudi Arabian students do not seem to trust services for which they do not have to pay. For instance, SM9 mentioned that he prefers using a paid proofreading website, which gives him the chance to edit the text up to three times. The participant felt that the



proofreading tool enables him to know the potential plagiarism percentage and suggests possible edits. He noted:

*I pay US\$8 for proofreading an assignment. That is very cheap. The website is well known among students and is trusted. It is similar to Turnitin. It shows me the areas that need to be paraphrased, and the areas that seem weak.*

### **7.3.5 The writing content of the IELTS and pathway courses and their relevance to university requirements**

As far as the English language requirements are concerned, students join tertiary institutions via two routes: those who come via the IELTS route and those who come through pathway programmes attached to the tertiary institutions. The FG and INT participants in the present study included students from both routes. This theme will deal with the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches.

Based on the findings from the questionnaire, the majority of the QUS respondents (129 out of 157) sat the IELTS, 8 sat the TOEFL, 3 sat the Pearson Test of English (PTE), and 17 did not report a test they sat. It should be noted that the students who sat the IELTS test and could not achieve the score required by their tertiary institutions opted for a pathway course to secure an unconditional offer of place. All the INT participants had sat the IELTS. Therefore, this discussion focuses on the IELTS usefulness in preparing students for studying and writing in English.

Because acceptance into tertiary institutions in New Zealand is ‘conditional’ upon achieving a score in the IELTS or TOEFL, the INT participants appeared to assume that having achieved that score meant they were now ready for tertiary study at an English-medium university. However, when the INT participants embarked on undergraduate studies and encountered the demands of the academic environment, they realised that the IELTS is just a pre-requisite for admission. Several INT participants indicated that

they had realised that achieving a particular score in the IELTS does not necessarily mean that a student would be ready to adapt to the requirements of university, particularly academic writing. This gave rise to discussion around the similarity and difference between the IELTS writing and university writing. This perspective was evident in SF1's comments:

*There is a major problem .... You know, the major problem is that when I finished the IELTS preparation course and then sat for the test and finally got the required score, I thought I was ready for university, but in fact, it is not the case.*

SM5 commented on the challenges some students encounter when they move to university in spite of achieving the required IELTS score. He said:

*You may find so many students who got high scores in the IELTS, yet they do not have enough ability to meet the demands of the language required at university.*

#### **7.3.5.1 The IELTS writing vs. tertiary writing: different territories?**

As far as this study is concerned, much of the discussion with the INT participants focused on the academic writing demands they encounter at the tertiary level, and to what extent they believed that the IELTS preparation courses helped them in meeting these demands. In this context, and similar to the findings from the focus groups and the questionnaire, several INT participants referred to the lack of relevance between what is tested by the IELTS writing section and what is required by the university. As mentioned in 5.3.2 by the FG participants and in 6.4.1 by the QUS respondents, the IELTS writing did not seem to be similar to the academic writing universities require. The lack of relevance appeared to exist between the writing that a student does in a short writing passage that requires only their opinion and writing for university assignments, which require citation and referencing. Considering this lack of similarity

between the writing in the two contexts, the INT participants argued that the type of writing required for the IELTS is different from what they are required to write for tertiary studies. In other words, students may do well in the IELTS test but because the test is not evaluating the kind of language needed for proper academic study, it may become irrelevant. As SM1 mentioned:

*Writing assignments is completely different from the writing in the IELTS.*

Similarly, SM9 noted:

*They are different [the IELTS writing and university writing]. I see them [the IELTS writing and university writing] as not similar. My writing score was good, but I found things to be different at university.*

Similar to the finding reported by several FG participants in 5.3.2, the INT participants viewed the IELTS writing as one that is mastered through practising, for example, how to report on a chart or a table (as required by the IELTS writing, Task 1), as well as writing a short essay (as required by the IELTS writing, Task 2). This type of writing is usually taught in the IELTS preparation courses. As SM8 stated:

*The IELTS writing is unique, and it is not used in other contexts. The way of writing is different from university writing.*

The findings above are in line with a study by Moore and Morton (2005) where they reported the difference between writing for tertiary courses and writing for the IELTS, particularly in Task 2. The study cited above also found that the type of writing students are required to do across the different courses is greatly diverse, which adds to the students' feeling that the writing they do for university is different from what they had to do in the IELTS. These findings were reflected in SM9's remarks. He mentioned that

when he moved to undergraduate study and embarked on writing assignments, he thought that he could use the same way of writing he had learned during the IELTS preparation course and then did in the test. However, the case at university was different, as was the nature of writing. He said:

*When I started my major I followed the IELTS way of writing, but the lecturer told me: “No do not do that.” The lecturer used to teach IELTS so she knows about the style of writing in the IELTS. She taught me another way of writing that is different from the IELTS and recommended that I use it for university. She said: “The IELTS writing style is not followed at university. Forget it. Follow these new steps.” Therefore, I recognised that the IELTS writing does not work in writing for university.*

Another equally important difference between the IELTS writing and university writing was the amount of writing students are expected to produce in each context. As noted in 3.5, the writing Task 1 in the IELTS requires candidates to report and summarise a chart or a table by writing at least 150 words. For this task, the INT participants reported that students are trained to use a way of writing that employs a particular vocabulary set. Some INT participants noted that they were trained using a model answer, which is readily available in some IELTS coursebooks. In Task 2, candidates are required to write at least 250 words on a given topic, and students are usually trained to write using a specific structure that includes an introduction, body paragraph(s) and a conclusion. Although the nature of the topics is not the same, the INT participants commented that they could follow a generic way of writing the short essay based on the tuition they receive and the practice they do in preparation for the IELTS test.

In a tertiary context, students are expected to produce written assignments with a word count that far exceeds the amount of writing required in the IELTS test. Getting used to

writing a few hundred words in the IELTS context does not help students when they are asked to write one or two thousand words for an assignment at university. In the latter context, students are usually asked to complete it by a deadline. As SM1 noted:

*I was required to write 5000 words for one assignment at university while in the IELTS I was required to write a maximum of 500 words for two tasks.*

Moreover, some INT participants referred to the fact that IELTS writing is not evidence-based since it requires candidates to write based on their own knowledge or opinion. In contrast, academic writing must be substantiated by reference to other sources from the field and supported with evidence (Day, 2018). As SM9 stated:

*In the IELTS, we just did writing, only writing, but now at university things are different; we have to cite. I have to refer the idea to the one who owns it. I should not plagiarize it. There should be evidence on what I write. If I write my own ideas only, my writing will not be accepted. In the IELTS, we just wrote without evidence or references. That is the difference.*

Since there is no introduction to evidence-based writing in the IELTS, students may assume that evidence-based writing is not required for tertiary courses. SF1 had assumed that she would not need to support whatever she writes for university courses. SF1 noted:

*IELTS writing does not require citation. Before starting university, I had expected that I would be doing the same type of writing. But then I discovered that I am totally in a different territory where I have to read, summarise, paraphrase and cite.*

Instead of enhancing writing skills and strategies, several INT participants viewed the IELTS as a test that requires mastery of strategies for the test itself. Students need to

practise these strategies in order to achieve the score they require, utilising tactics including memorising words and expressions that could be used in the writing section and in Task 1 in particular. As SF1 noted:

*The IELTS preparation courses teach only techniques. It is a matter of how to answer the test questions within a specific time. IELTS preparation courses only teach students some tricks and tips for the test to get the required score. The test itself does not prepare students for writing for university.*

Since the nature of writing students experience in the IELTS preparation courses and then in the IELTS test is different from university writing, this may give students concerns as to whether the IELTS prepares them for university. Therefore, some students seek other alternatives to help them with the demands of academic writing at the tertiary level.

### **7.3.5.2 Pathway courses as an alternative**

One way around the challenge tertiary institutions encounter regarding offering students with low English language proficiency a place on degree programmes has been pathway courses (Benzie, 2010). New Zealand tertiary institutions and some Private Tertiary Establishments (PTEs) offer pathway courses, and the grades students receive in these courses are considered by many universities as equivalent to IELTS scores (Mol & Tin, 2008) and offer students a direct entry to tertiary programmes (Benzie, 2010). The analysis of the data shows that one of the most cited alternatives to the IELTS was attending a pathway course that precedes the tertiary degree. The INT participants (14 out of 20) from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman felt that such a course better prepared them for the demands of writing. These participants referred to different types of pre-session courses they had attended at the New Zealand tertiary institutions. Some participants mentioned they attended a “*certificate*” programme that aimed at preparing

them for their particular majors. Other participants noted they attended an “*academic pathway course*,” while still others mentioned a “*foundation course*” as what they opted for. Although the courses have different names and durations, they seem to share the aim of preparing students for the academic language expected of them at university, particularly in writing and reading across the disciplines. Throughout the current discussion the term ‘pathway’ will be used to refer to any pre-session courses (except the IELTS preparation courses) the INT participants had attended before embarking on their undergraduate study in New Zealand. While many international students end up on pathway courses because they have failed to get a high enough score in the IELTS, others voluntarily choose to attend a pathway course.

However, attending a pathway course at an extra cost is not an option for some Arabic-speaking students. While some students (e.g. those who come from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or Oman) might receive funding from their governments to join a pathway course not all students are this fortunate. The INT participants from other Arab nationalities such as Jordan, Egypt and Palestine noted that they had to get the required IELTS score without the benefit of a pathway course as they were mostly self-funded and could not afford the extra cost. They had to fulfil this enrolment condition before coming to New Zealand.

The INT participants who had attended pathway courses believed that what they got from the courses helped them more than the IELTS preparation course. It became obvious that some students enrolled on pathway courses based on the advice of other students. For example, SF2 stated:

*I knew about the pathway course from other students who had done it. They advised me to attend a pathway course as it is essential because it better prepares [students] before starting the university degree. In the beginning of the course, I felt that attending a pathway course was a waste of time, but then I realised it was really for my benefit as a student. If students are interested in working hard for their studies, they should attend a pathway course.*

Although some INT participants from Saudi Arabia had achieved the required IELTS score and they were able to embark on the undergraduate study, they chose to attend a pathway course in order to be better prepared for the demands of academic language. This perception is illustrated in SM9's comments:

*I was given the option of either joining the undergraduate study directly as I already obtained the required IELTS score or starting with the pathway course, I chose to start with the pathway course to get prepared for university.*

The experience of the INT participants who had attended an IELTS preparation course and then a pathway course was different from those who attended an IELTS preparation course only. The INT participants cited various reasons for attending a pathway course. The most noticeable reason was the perception many of them held regarding the benefit they would achieve from such a course compared to the benefit an IELTS preparation course would offer. In addition, pathway courses are often offered in discipline-specific areas. Many students do seem to believe later on reflection that what they got from their pathway courses helped them more than the IELTS preparation courses.

The analysis of the data showed that a number of students preferred to attend a pathway course because of its intensity and the amount of writing it required. This perspective was illustrated in a number of INT participants' comments when they described the



pathway course as both “*intensive*” and “*focused*” on the academic literacy they need for the tertiary study.

Several INT participants highlighted that the content was relevant to what they encountered in the tertiary context and what they are expected to write. They indicated that during the pathway course they were asked to write assignments on different topics, which contributed to preparing them for university. For example, SM2 noted:

*Since I study Engineering, the pathway course I studied covered mathematics, physics, and academic literacies. Lecturers at university level usually give students the main points as a guideline, and the students need to cover these points in what they write. In the pathway course, tutors usually teach students what university lecturers expect of [them] in academic writing so they can meet these expectations.*

In addition, the word count in the written assignments the INT participants had to do for the pathway course seems to be similar to what they are expected to produce for their tertiary courses. Unlike the IELTS writing section, some assignments in the pathway course required students to write 2500 – 3000 words and to include references, a practice that is similar to what is followed at university. This perspective was summed up by SM6:

*When students write 2500 words for one assignment and have to submit by a deadline, I think this is a good practice. The benefit of a pathway course is that it puts a lot of pressure on students so at least they experience the feeling of studying at a university level.*

Unlike the IELTS writing, the writing practice in a pathway course was seen by the INT participants as one that enhances strategies and skills that are required for writing in the tertiary courses. The INT participants felt that the pathway courses offered them the chance to practise conducting presentations and research, summarising and

paraphrasing, and citing other references according to a set of criteria accepted by their field of study. A pathway course seemed to help the INT participants in making their writing more systematic as it taught them the logical steps of English academic writing.

SM1 stated:

*The course taught me how to finish one idea and then move to another and how to use specific connectors when moving from one idea to another.*

Similarly, SM11 described the course as “*excellent*.” He added:

*It offered me the opportunity to learn how to write a paragraph as a first step towards learning the process of writing an essay in academic English.*

In a similar manner, SF9 noted:

*I learned how to find references and do citation during the course. This was the first time I had come across these practices.*

As it is the common practice at the tertiary level, writing necessitates reading from various references, summarising the relevant content, paraphrasing that content, and then citing references. According to SM7, these skills were a main part of the pathway course. He said:

*I found it difficult in the beginning of the course, but after some time, I acquired the skills of referencing and citation. Whenever I find difficulty in referencing, I revisit the notes I got from the pathway course and then cite accordingly.*

In this context, several INT participants raised the importance of reading and the connection between reading and writing.

### 7.3.6 The impact of the reading-writing connection on student writing

Another factor that seems to influence the INT participants' English writing proficiency is the lack of reading practice. Students' reading ability is viewed as critical to academic success (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). It appeared that the INT participants did not read widely, not even in Arabic. The INT participants agreed that their past language learning experiences at school had not encouraged them to read in Arabic. The discussion with the INT participants indicated that many of them did not read for pleasure or to gain knowledge in their area of study. Instead, the focus at school seemed to be on memorisation in preparation for exams. As SF7 stated:

*There was no focus on writing and reading at school. It was very basic.*

Similarly, SM10 noted:

*We really do not read in general, even in Arabic. I lack the practice of reading.*

The lack of reading practice in Arabic seems to have resulted in the lack of development of the habit of reading on a wide range of topics from different fields. Since the INT participants had not developed a habit of reading, it is highly unlikely that they will read extensively in English, a language of which they have a different mastery. Several INT participants mentioned that they found reading in English a challenging task. The lack of reading in English was perceived as a common problem among Arabic-speaking students, which has a negative impact on their overall proficiency in English as a FL. For example, SM1 noted:

*The major problem among Arabic-speaking students is the lack of reading in English. We do not read. This is our problem.*

As far as English reading is concerned, the difficulties encountered by the INT participants seemed to have two main sources: 1) their English vocabulary was limited and 2) many of them still tend to subvocalize words when reading in English, which slows them down considerably and interrupts the flow.

The INT participants felt they were trapped in a vicious circle. They do not read in English because have difficulty understanding what they are reading. Since they do not read they do not improve their vocabulary. As SF5 stated:

*We do not read much in English. We lack vocabulary in English because we do not read much.*

SM3 noted:

*I find it challenging to read in English because for sure I will encounter some vocabulary that is unfamiliar to me. Perhaps because I do not have enough vocabulary in English, I find reading difficult.*

The second factor that seemed to contribute to some INT participants' challenges with reading in English was subvocalization. The participants noted that the level of their motivation to read in English is usually hindered by their tendency to subvocalize words while reading, which slowed down the reading. As SF2 stated:

*The moment I feel I read smoothly, I feel engaged with the text and I continue reading. The moment I start stumbling with the meanings and pronunciation of words, I get discouraged and put the reading material aside.*

As students subvocalize, they worry about the pronunciation of words, which does not normally matter in reading. The above comments by SF2 may be associated with the learning style the participant has developed during her schooling.

### 7.3.6.1 Students' awareness of the importance of reading for writing

In spite of the fact that they did little reading the INT participants recognised that reading could play an important role in enhancing their overall English proficiency, particularly academic writing. The INT participants' reference to reading was not only associated with reading for their majors, but also it seemed to refer to reading for pleasure in their free time. Although the participants indicated that reading for pleasure was missing in their daily activities, they felt that it would positively influence students' level in English in general, and their ability to write in particular. For example, SM5 mentioned that when he had the chance to read in English, he felt that his writing skill improved. He stated:

*When I studied in the USA, I felt my writing improved because I was encouraged to read things that were interesting to me.*

This perspective was also evident in the comments by SF2 recalling her own experience with reading:

*I think reading a lot helped me with the academic vocabulary required for my major. I read on general topics. I think much practice is excellent. Reading a lot helps. Asking students to write and read a lot really helps.*

Since academic writing is evidence-based and it requires some critical skills to synthesise what one has read with what one is writing, a connection between the two skills appears to be essential for the development of either skill. Some INT participants indicated that they were aware of the importance of the read-to-write strategy as writing does not occur in vacuum. This perspective was illustrated in SM9's comment:

*Writing is mastered through reading. Reading helps writing a lot. Once students read, they can imitate the style in their writing. I think both skills are related and they help each other. That is why I would*

*recommend focusing on reading to enhance writing among students whose L1 is not English.*

In addition, SM1 reflected upon his own experiences with how reading helped him improve his ability to write in English. He stated:

*Now through reading I know how to write. Since I have started reading a lot, the way I paraphrase has changed. Reading and writing are intertwined. If you do not read, you cannot learn and write. Read and then you can write.*

## **7.4 Summary**

This chapter has presented the findings from the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 20 Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in New Zealand. The interviews were aimed at identifying the challenges the INT participants encounter with English academic writing in the New Zealand tertiary context. The findings showed that previous learning experiences and the L1 background of the participants contributed to difficulties they encountered in writing. In addition, the INT participants did not seem to be clear about their lecturers' expectations of academic writing across the disciplines. The findings showed the students believed pathway courses were more beneficial for academic writing than IELTS preparation courses. The next chapter discusses the key findings from the three stages of the study and compares them with findings from previous research.

## **Chapter 8 Discussion of findings**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of key research findings, with reference to the research questions. The findings of the study are also discussed in relation to previous empirical research. The first section (8.2.1) discusses the students' expectations of and assumptions about academic writing in English. Section 8.2.2 discusses the impact of the participants' previous language learning experiences on their ability to deal with English academic writing. The third section (8.2.3) presents the participants' experiences with the disciplinary and institutional expectations and requirements of academic writing across disciplines in the New Zealand tertiary context. The last section is a summary of this chapter.

The main aim of this study has been to explore the challenges Arabic-speaking undergraduate students encounter in English academic writing in New Zealand. The study also aimed at understanding the practical ways through which Arabic-speaking students could be better prepared for the demands of studying and writing academically in English.

This study used the academic literacies model as the theoretical framework. As outlined in Chapter 2, the model places the context at the crux of writing practice. It also recognizes that the interactions between the various factors eventually frame the writing experience as a whole. The model moves beyond the limits of the textual analysis of student writing. Therefore, it appears to offer a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with the writing process. The academic literacies model initially focused on home students in the UK universities (Lea & Street, 1998). The present study utilises the model in the New Zealand tertiary context focusing on Arabic-speaking students' challenges with academic writing at the undergraduate level.

## 8.2 Key findings

The overarching question guiding this research investigated how Arabic-speaking students embarking on undergraduate studies at New Zealand tertiary institutions could be better prepared for the demands of English academic writing. Three sub-questions were used to investigate the topic in further detail. These sub-questions have been employed in this section to report the key findings of this research study.

### 8.2.1 What are Arabic-speaking students' expectations of and assumptions about academic writing?

#### 8.2.1.1 A number of students seem to assume that once they have achieved the IELTS score required for their tertiary degrees, they can manage the demands of academic writing.

As indicated in 5.3.2 and 7.3.5, the findings from the focus groups and the interviews show that students found differences between the writing they had learned in the IELTS preparation courses and the writing they do for tertiary courses. The findings from the focus groups and the interviews indicated that when students engaged with the demands of academic writing at tertiary level in New Zealand, they realised that disciplinary writing is different from IELTS writing. The INT participants emphasised that even the Academic IELTS writing does not provide a clear example of what academic writing is, and how students would write for a tertiary level course.

As mentioned in 7.3.5, some INT participants seemed doubtful about their readiness for tertiary study even after obtaining the IELTS writing score required by the tertiary institution in New Zealand. They indicated that when they embarked on studies in New Zealand, they believed that because the IELTS was a pre-requisite, then if they met the level required by their tertiary institution, they would be able to manage the writing demands of their undergraduate studies. However, when these participants were faced with the writing demands at tertiary level, they recognised that the IELTS was only a pre-requisite for university entrance. Therefore, they seemed to challenge the validity of



the test as an entry criterion, and also doubt their initial belief that writing in the Academic Module of the IELTS test equates to the writing required for the tertiary context. The participants referred to the difference in terms of the nature and quantity of writing.

### *Nature of writing*

Some FG and INT participants indicated that when they moved to tertiary level in New Zealand, they wrote the same way they had learnt in the IELTS preparation course and then wrote for the test. However, the participants found that approaching their writing tasks in such a way yielded a negative outcome.

The FG and INT participants mentioned that they were struck by the difference between the writing instruction they received in IELTS preparation courses and the writing they were asked to do at university. In this context, the participants referred to the fact that tertiary writing is evidence-based, while writing for the IELTS was simply based on using their knowledge or opinions about the topic. For tertiary courses, the participants indicated they have to read from different sources, summarise relevant content, paraphrase this content, and then cite whatever they used according to academic criteria accepted within their fields. In contrast, they mentioned that such requirements do not feature in IELTS. This finding echoes results by Daher (2014), in which he investigated the perceptions of Arabic-speaking students of the predictive validity of the IELTS test. He aimed to see if the students who were studying at a British university believed that IELTS writing was similar to the academic demands required in the Western university context. He found that 73% of the respondents disagreed with the concept that writing in the IELTS tests their ability to write academically. These respondents emphasised critical writing as an important skill for their tertiary studies. The sample also indicated the differences between the skills required at university and those included in the IELTS

writing section. In the former context, the students felt that they needed skills such as “summarising, evaluating, and making a stance compared to the skills required in the IELTS writing sub-test” (p. 414).

In this line of inquiry, Section 3.5.1 presented research that tackled the difference between academic writing at tertiary level and the IELTS writing content. For example, Moore and Morton (2005) found that almost all writing tasks for tertiary courses they investigated contained a research component, whereas the IELTS writing Task 2 items were found to be mostly framed around the use of prior knowledge of the candidate. A major rhetorical function that is predominately used in the IELTS writing tasks was hortation (Liu & Stapleton, 2018), which was relatively rare in the university tasks investigated by Moore and Morton (2005). In line with the perception of some INT participants of the similarity between writing the IELTS test and tertiary writing, Moore and Morton (2005) concluded that the writing section in IELTS test resembles non-academic genres, and it should not be considered as similar to the type of writing required of university students.

### ***Quantity of writing***

Not only did the nature of writing in IELTS and the tertiary courses appear to be different, but also the amount of writing both contexts require seems to vary considerably. Several FG and INT participants mentioned that the amount of writing they did during the IELTS preparation course and then for the test held little resemblance to the amount they write for assignments at university. The participants noted that writing some hundred words for the two tasks in the IELTS without the need to cite any reference is different from writing some thousand words for tertiary courses. As outlined in the literature review chapter (see 3.5), the amount of writing the two writing tasks in the IELTS require does not seem to be similar to the amount of writing

students do at the tertiary level. The IELTS writing section asks candidates to write a minimum of 400 words in total for the two tasks. As noted earlier, students are usually trained in the IELTS preparation courses on how to answer this type of writing task, utilising some fixed expressions and jargon, particularly for Task 1 (Pilcher & Richards, 2017). Writing at the tertiary level usually requires students to write assignments with a word count of two or three thousand words. This is evidenced in the study by Knoch, Rouhshad, Oon, and Storch (2015), in which they found that students at the tertiary level who were classified as doing ‘little/no writing’ for their disciplines wrote assignments of a maximum of 1500 words each, which exceeds the number of words required for the two writing tasks in the IELTS.

### ***Washback effect***

While some INT participants had achieved the IELTS score required by their tertiary institution in New Zealand, they still questioned the validity of the score on the writing section in the IELTS as an indicator of their ability to meet the demands of writing at tertiary level. The INT participants mentioned that they felt so because they found the nature of writing different in both contexts. In addition, the participants felt there was a lack of relevance between the IELTS writing instruction and university writing due to the challenges they encountered in the first year at university. As discussed in 3.5.1, students’ feeling that the IELTS writing is not similar to what they write for tertiary courses could be described as the washback effect of the IELTS for academic study (Green, 2007).

On the one hand, the findings from the present study about the students’ feeling about the lack of relevance between the IELTS writing and tertiary writing seem to support previous research (Green, 2006, 2007; Moore & Morton, 2005; Pilcher & Richards, 2017). These studies refer to the controversy about the validity of standardised tests

such as the IELTS or TOEFL in determining students' readiness to embark on academic studies and meet the demands of academic writing. As discussed in 3.5.1, a study in the New Zealand context by Hayes and Read (2004) investigated the Academic IELTS test. The authors compared an IELTS preparation course with an EAP course. The authors found clear evidence of washback effects in the IELTS preparation course. However, such effects did not appear to be the kind of positive effects predicted before conducting the study. In other words, the focus of teacher and students in the IELTS preparation course was on practising the tasks required for the test and not on developing academic language. The general English course was found to cover a range of needs required in academic study and to promote students' language development in general (Hayes & Read, 2004).

On the other hand, the FG and INT participants' perceptions of the effects of an IELTS score and the writing content in the IELTS on their writing ability for tertiary courses do not seem to fully support those by Lewthwaite (2007). As noted in 3.5.1, Lewthwaite (2007) claims that candidates who can adequately respond to the IELTS writing tasks are likely to manage in the university context. In contrast to the findings from the focus groups and interviews in the present study, Lewthwaite (2007) found that teachers and students perceive the IELTS Tasks 1 and 2 as having a positive effect on class-based writing skills and bearing a reasonable relationship with skills needed at faculty level. However, it should be noted that the context where Lewthwaite's study was conducted is an Arab country, which may have resulted in different findings from those of the present study. It is likely that the students in Lewthwaite's study were not familiar with the academic writing demands of English-medium institutions. In addition, Lewthwaite's (2007) study does not state whether any of the teachers had studied at an English-medium institution and experienced the requirements of academic writing across the disciplines. Therefore, the findings from that study may not be particularly

relevant. While referring to the lack of relevance between the two types of writing, the FG and INT participants pointed to the benefit of attending a pathway course, which they considered better preparation for tertiary level as far as academic writing is concerned.

#### **8.2.1.2 A number of students believed that the writing content in pathway courses better prepared them for the demands of writing for university courses.**

As indicated in 2.8, Mol and Tin (2008) point out that many NNESSs who come to study in New Zealand join pathway courses prior to their undergraduate studies. A tertiary institution or a Private Tertiary Establishment (PTE) usually offers these courses, which aim to help students to develop a set of strategies that enhance their autonomy in a tertiary context.

As far as the pathway courses were concerned, the FG and INT participants in the present study were classified into three distinct groups. The first group is students from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman who sat for the IELTS test in New Zealand but did not obtain the required score, and then they attended a pathway course to be able to achieve the entry requirements of their tertiary studies. These participants indicated that they had opted for a pathway course at university upon achieving its entry requirements. They mentioned that their governments funded them to attend a pathway course in New Zealand. The second group is students from Saudi Arabia who sat for the IELTS and obtained the required score, but they opted for a pathway course to be better prepared for the demands of writing at university. These students noted that because they had heard of the benefit their peers obtained from a pathway course, they enrolled in a course despite the fact that they had achieved the IELTS score required by their tertiary institution. These students had paid for the pathway course themselves, as they received no government funding for attending a course. The third group is students from other Arabic-speaking countries such as Jordan, Egypt and Palestine who sat for the IELTS in

their countries and obtained the required score by their tertiary institution in New Zealand. These students did not attend a pathway course. Therefore, they were not able to comment on the benefit of such a course for students at tertiary level. However, several students of the third group agreed that the IELTS writing was not similar to the writing they are doing for the tertiary courses in New Zealand.

The FG and INT participants (7 and 14 respectively) who had attended a pathway course cited two types of the course: generic and discipline-specific. This section will cover the participants' perceptions of these two types.

### ***Generic pathway courses***

A few INT participants indicated that they had attended a pathway course that offered them 'academic English' content, which was not related to a specific discipline. While the content seemed to be generic, the participants felt that the writing practice they did during the course gave them a better understanding of the requirements of academic writing for tertiary courses in terms of the nature and amount of writing they were asked to do during the course.

### ***Nature of writing***

The INT participants felt that being required to write a project to graduate from the pathway course was a beneficial practice that enabled them to practise some of the skills they are required to use at university. These skills included locating relevant references from the library and deciding on relevant content. Furthermore, summarising and paraphrasing the relevant content was part of a pathway course. The participants also referred to the technical skills of referencing and citing other sources according to the criteria accepted by academic disciplines, a practice that did not feature in an IELTS preparation course.

*Amount of writing*

In addition, the participants referred to the amount of writing they were asked to do during the course, which was perceived by them as intensive. They believed that being asked to write assignments of 2000-2500 words was a challenging, but beneficial, practice that prepared them for what to expect at university. The students indicated this amount of writing was far more than the writing they did during an IELTS preparation course and then for the IELTS test.

*Discipline-specific pathway courses*

The findings from the focus groups and the interviews show that students believed that discipline-specific pathway courses helped them with the demands of academic writing in their majors. These courses appear to give students a better understanding of the policy of tertiary disciplines in terms of writing requirements including structure, plagiarism, referencing, and formatting. Such an insight into what is required by a particular institution may help students to develop a better idea of what to expect ahead in their degrees (Trewartha, 2008). Since many tertiary institutions in New Zealand offer pathway courses, students are likely to attend the course at the tertiary institution they intend to join for their undergraduate degree. This was evident in the findings from the interviews with some participants from Saudi Arabia and Oman. They mentioned that they attended the pathway course at the tertiary institution where they wanted to pursue their undergraduate studies.

In this New Zealand context, Holmes (2004) suggests that NNESSs need better preparation for the shock they encounter in the new learning environment. She adds that pathway discipline-specific courses are among the possible ways that could help students to overcome the cultural and learning divide. As shown in 2.8, pathway courses provide valuable cultural, educational, and linguistic knowledge that is not so easily addressed within the IELTS structure, and emphasise the academic criteria accepted in a

particular learning discipline (Holmes, 2004). Students appear to benefit from input that relates to their disciplines and inducts them into what to expect at university courses.

The FG and INT participants who had an IELTS preparation course and then a discipline-specific pathway course emphasised the difference between the two contexts. They indicated that the writing content of the pathway course was more relevant to what they are asked to do for their disciplines than the writing content in the IELTS. They referred to the nature and quantity of writing they were required to do for their courses at university. The sections below present these two areas of difference in terms of nature and amount of writing.

#### *Nature of writing*

The participants felt that the nature of the writing on pathway courses seemed to be similar to the writing required at the tertiary level. In the latter context, students are asked to read, paraphrase, backup their answers, cite references to support their claims, and submit their writing on Turnitin to check plagiarism. The participants indicated that the discipline-specific pathway courses introduced them to these practices. As discussed in 2.7.3, some researchers (Baratta, 2008) argue that since writing classes serve to prepare students for the writing demands in the future, these classes should teach students the type of writing that they will encounter in their tertiary disciplines. Baratta (2008) suggests that writing classes are required to introduce students to discipline-specific writing conventions so they become aware of what constitutes acceptable academic writing.

#### *Amount of writing*

In addition to the nature of the writing, the findings show that the amount of writing students were asked to do during the pathway courses was similar to what they are asked to do for their tertiary courses. Such a similarity appeared to contribute to



students' appreciation of the value of attending a pathway course. Students in pathway courses are usually required to write assignments of 2000-2500 words, which was seen by the FG and INT participants as similar to the common practice of assessment at the tertiary level.

In light of the participants' feeling that there seems to be a lack of relevance between the IELTS writing and the writing for tertiary courses, several FG and INT participants highlighted the importance of attending a pathway course. While pathway courses seem to be a good start before embarking on the tertiary studies, they appear to not be enough. Students at tertiary level need more than pathway courses. In this context, several undergraduate FG and INT participants referred to a challenge they faced later in their discipline study. They indicated that when they embarked on their tertiary studies in New Zealand, they did not understand how to write, as lecturers often did not make their expectations clear.

#### **8.2.1.3 Students do not appear to be sufficiently aware of how linguistic differences between Arabic and English impact on their writing proficiency.**

For speakers of Arabic, English language acquisition may be difficult due to the linguistic differences between Arabic and English (Harrison, 2018). These differences seem to influence Arabic-speaking students' English writing abilities at the tertiary level. Among the challenges many QUS respondents and INT participants cited was their tendency to use some of the features of Arabic writing when writing in English. Using such features may bring about negative outcomes for students' English writing. These features included sentence structure and some stylistics of Arabic such as repetition and coordination. In what follows, I discuss each feature and present the possible reasons that may have caused such transfer from the participants' L1.

### *Prior language learning experiences*

Correlation analysis showed that the more the QUS respondents indicated that their past scholastic experiences prepared them for the demands of English academic writing, the less they tended to translate from Arabic when writing in English. The interviews also revealed that previous language learning experiences of many Arabic-speaking students seem to contribute to their tendency to translate from their L1 when writing in English (see 7.3.2).

A possibility for the L1 interference could be the lack of explicit instruction in students' past language learning experiences which could have introduced the linguistic differences between Arabic and English to students. Because these differences were not drawn to their attention students probably felt that translating from their L1 was a good strategy. Since students' knowledge of their L1 is readily available for them as a linguistic resource (AbiSamra, 2003) they try to use that knowledge to overcome their learning and communication problems in their L2 (Karim & Nassaji, 2013). For example, if the differences between sentence structures in the two languages have not been brought to students' attention, students might not be sufficiently aware of these differences. When students are asked to write in English but they do not feel confident about their ability in writing, they may generalise a writing feature, which could be acceptable in their L1 but not in English. This last possibility supports the finding by Odlin (1989), who suggested that negative interference occurs when the L1 written form is used in L2 production while it is not part of the L2 norm.

As discussed in 3.7, Mahmoud (2000) found that learners, including Arabic-speaking students, are often misled by the partial similarity between their L1 and the L2 in terms of grammar and vocabulary. In the case of Arabic, this problem of difference between the structure and grammar in English and Arabic is aggravated by the fact that Arabic

has two varieties. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used mainly in formal communication, and mainly in writing, which is similar to academic English. Non-standard Arabic (NSA) is used daily in spoken communication, and it does not follow the same structure in all Arabic-speaking countries. Therefore, the two varieties may add to the confusion of students about whether to transfer the structure of MSA or NSA when writing in English.

It should be acknowledged, however, that challenges associated with L1 interference are not restricted to Arabic-speaking students. As shown in 7.3.3, students from other L1 backgrounds encounter similar difficulties when speaking and writing in English. While previous studies (Crompton, 2011; Hussein & Mohammad, 2011; Iqbal, 2016; Naqvi, Thomas, Agha, & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015; Sabbah, 2016) on the L1 interference in the English writing by Arabic-speaking students offer valid and interesting findings, they do not seem to emphasise the interrelationship between the linguistic aspect and students' past language learning experiences. These studies do not appear to highlight how students' past language learning experiences may contribute to difficulties with English academic writing, particularly in an English-medium institution. Most of these studies analyse the texts written by Arabic-speaking students. The present research project highlighted the linguistic factors through listening to the participants talking about the challenges the linguistic differences between Arabic and English create for them when they write in the medium of English, and how these challenges could be associated with their prior language learning experiences. This reflects the stand taken in the academic literacies approach that frames its position towards the contextualized nature of writing at tertiary level instead of viewing it as a decontextualized skill (Lea, 2008, 2017).

### *Sentence structure*

The findings that emerged from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire (see 6.4.1) show that sentence structure is one of the most challenging aspects for respondents. Several FG and INT participants cited sentence structure as a challenging aspect of English writing. They believed that this difficulty can be attributed to the difference between the structure of a sentence in Arabic and English. This finding is in line with those of Al-Tamimi (2018), in which the author found that Arabic-speaking students perceived that sentence structure is one of the problematic areas in academic writing. Another study by Abdulkareem (2013) showed that most of the errors made in English academic writing by the participants in his study were mainly in sentence structure (see 3.9.2).

In light of the finding above, what seems to be occurring is that many Arabic-speaking students especially at undergraduate level tend to use the structure of the Arabic sentence without paying enough attention to the difference between the structures in the two languages. The findings from the present study seem to lend support to the results of Diab (1997), in acknowledging the difficulty posed by the difference between the two linguistic systems of Arabic and English. As mentioned in 3.8.2, Diab's (1997) study provides interesting findings about the negative impact of L1 interference on Arabic-speaking students' writing in English, and offers possible reasons for the L1 transfer based on the analysis of the errors made by students. She investigated 73 English essays written by Arabic-speaking students from Lebanon attending an intermediate level English course. The analysis of students' writing showed frequent errors in grammar, lexis, semantics, and syntax. The author attributes these errors to students' transfer of Arabic linguistic structures into English. Moreover, the present study supports previous research (Bailey, 2012) in providing more evidence that some of the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter in English writing are attributed to the linguistic

differences between Arabic and English, and the style of academic writing in the two languages.

Another area of interference seemed to be related to coherence and cohesion in writing. Some FG and INT participants mentioned the difference between Arabic and English in terms of the extent each language accepts repetition of words, ideas or similar structures.

### ***Repetition***

As outlined in 7.3.3, among the features that students appeared to borrow from Arabic when writing lengthy essays in English was repetition. Some INT participants mentioned that they used repetition of the same words or phrases as a cohesive device, incorrectly believing that it plays as significant a role in English as it does in Arabic.

The finding that students tend to repeat words and ideas in English writing is consistent with findings by Mohamed and Omer (2000), Al-Jaf (2012), and Hervey et al. (2002). These studies point to repetition of the same word and similar clause structures as one of the most frequently used cohesive devices in Arabic, which creates ‘verbal music’ and contributes to cohesive text building (see 3.7). This tendency to use repetition could also be attributed to orality, which focuses on repetition, clarity, and excessive exaggeration, and avoids unfamiliarity (Amanallah, 2012). As shown earlier in 3.7, research on the role of repetition in Arabic (Al-Jaf, 2012) shows that it is a linguistic phenomenon in Arabic, and it appears in the oldest documents that reached Arabs such as pre-Islam poetry, the Holy Quran, Prophet Muhammed sayings, and the poetry and prose of Arabs.

As noted in 3.7, that the differences in using cohesive devices in Arabic and English are attributed to the cross-cultural differences the two languages exhibit (Mohamed &

Omer, 2000). In this regard, Mohamed and Omer (2000) note that Arabic cohesion is characterised as repetition-based, while English cohesion is change-based. They argue that the difference between Arabic and English as far as repetition is concerned operates at the word and the clause-sentence levels. At the word level, one of the most frequently used cohesive devices in Arabic is the repetition of the same word. In English, this repetition of the same word is replaced by other ways including reference, substitution, ellipsis, or a synonym. At the clause-sentence level, Arabic often repeats clauses or sentences that are similar in their formal or semantic structures. Clauses in English may be repeated, but they usually have a degree of dissimilarity in their structures. While Arabic may allow such a degree of freedom in repeating some words to emphasise a particular aspect in the text, English does not offer a similar flexibility in repetition of the same words to emphasise an idea. Tannen (2007) argues that the repetition of the same words many times in English is judged as both negative and boring.

In addition to the feature of repetition, the findings suggest that students seem to write in English following a parallel structure, resulting in more use of coordination than subordination.

### ***Coordination vs. subordination***

As discussed in 3.7, coordination and subordination are two syntactic features that are used in writing in both English and Arabic (Uthman, 2004). However, the two languages differ in their preference for either syntactic feature. English makes use of more subordination than coordination, while the use of coordination rather than subordination is favoured in Arabic (Alqinai, 2013; Elachachi, 2015). This has been discussed by Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983) who showed that the maturity of style in Arabic writing is measured by the use of coordination while it is measured by

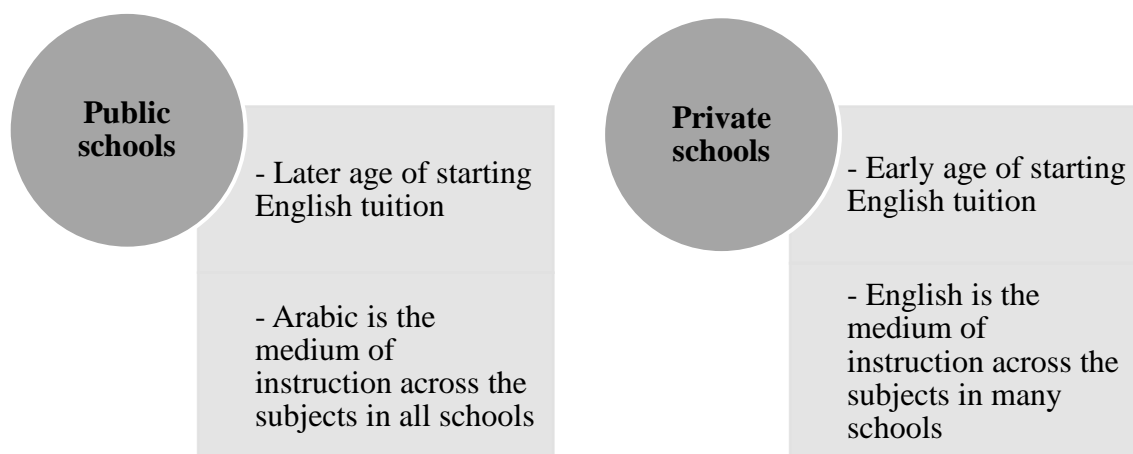
the use of subordination in English writing. Coordination could be a result of translating directly from Arabic, which tends to use more parallel structures than English.

The data highlight Arabic-speaking students' confusion with the linguistic differences between Arabic and English. Several FG and INT participants attributed their difficulties with the L1 interference to their past language learning experiences, which led to the lack of L2 resources, such as vocabulary, and the lack of confidence among the students in their ability to write in English.

## **8.2.2 How have students' past scholastic experiences prepared them for studying and writing in English?**

### **8.2.2.1 English tuition in public schools in many Arabic-speaking countries does not seem to prepare students well for the demands of writing in English at tertiary level.**

The findings suggest that the students who had studied at public schools felt underprepared for studying and writing in English. It appears that participants who had attended private schools were better prepared as far as the use of English is concerned. Despite the fact that the two types of school are situated in a FL context in the Arab world (Keong & Mussa, 2015), some differences seem to exist between public and private schools in terms of the quality and quantity of the English tuition they offer. Based on the findings from the present study, Figure 9 below compares public and private schools in the Arab world as far as learning English is concerned:



**Figure 9: English teaching at public and private schools**

(Source: Author)

In what follows, I discuss each of the factors in the figure above in light of the research questions and previous literature.

### ***Starting age of learning English***

In the opinion of the participants the age at which English tuition is started appears to be an important factor. The findings from the present study show that Arabic-speaking undergraduate students believe that starting English early is an advantage. The questionnaire in this study surveyed the respondents about their age when they started learning English at school. Almost 65% of the students started learning English when they were between 11 and 13. Correlation analysis indicated that the older the students were when they started learning English at school, the less prepared for writing in English they felt. In addition, the analysis indicated that a later start in learning English correlated with a lack of confidence among the questionnaire respondents in their English writing ability. The INT participants believed that gaining mastery of a language at an earlier age increases the level of confidence in a student's ability to use the language both in writing and in speaking.

Several FG and INT participants believed that had English been introduced earlier at school, it would have been easier for them to acquire the necessary language skills and adapt more easily to the demands they were facing in the New Zealand tertiary context.



Since most of the INT participants started learning English at a relatively late age (11-13 years old), several participants felt that they were disadvantaged because they started late.

As indicated in 3.6.2, introducing a FL at a younger age for students plays a significant role in improving the chances for language acquisition since learners get more input (Larson-Hall, 2008). At the time when the participants in the present study went to school, public schools in Saudi Arabia introduced English as a subject at the age of 11-12 (Al-Thubaiti, 2014) and at the age of 8-9 in other Arabic-speaking countries such as Jordan, Oman, and Kuwait. At the same time, in private schools, English was usually introduced as early as year 1, i.e. when a student is 5 or 6 years old (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

However, it should be noted that changes have been made in many public schools in Arabic-speaking countries, and children start learning English at a younger age (see 3.6.2). For example, Saudi Arabia has moved to an earlier start i.e. when students are 8 years old instead of 11-12. Some Arabic-speaking countries such as Jordan, Palestine, UAE or Egypt have also opted for an earlier start in introducing English in public schools (i.e. at the age of 6 instead of 8). In these countries, students will have had at least 12 years of English tuition by the time they leave school (Al-Khatib, 2000), compared to 8 years of English tuition in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, public schools currently are more in line with private schools regarding learning English at a younger age in several Arabic-speaking countries.

Saudi Arabian students made up 53% of the QUS respondents. Since more than half the participants in the present study were from Saudi Arabia, a focus on the situation in this country will add more insight into the INT participants' comments.

As discussed in 3.6.2, one of the possible reasons for a later start of learning English in public schools in Saudi Arabia could be the language policy of the country. At present Saudi Arabian students start learning English at school later than their counterparts in other Arabic-speaking countries. The government of Saudi Arabia was against teaching English at elementary level in public schools believing that introducing English to children at such a young age might affect their learning of Arabic (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). As shown in 3.6.2, most of the participants in Zghyer's (2014) study indicated that their first exposure to English was at a later age at public schools in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, introducing English in Saudi Arabia has been compromised by the belief that English is the language of the 'other' or the 'West' (Elyas, 2008). This view towards English could also be prevalent among some parents. Therefore, they may assume that learning the language of the 'other' may Westernise their children, especially when the society is conservative and resistant to change. This resistance to change seems to extend to the introduction of FLs, English in particular, to children at a younger age (Al-Saraj, 2014). This possibility supports the findings by Al-Seghayer (2014), Al Dameg (2011), Mahboob and Elyas (2014), and Dahan (2015). These studies indicate that some people in the Arab world may associate the wide use of English with the spread of 'foreign' qualities, which might be seen as leading to the erosion of the Arab culture and customs. Such fears could mean that some families question whether offering their children the chance of learning English from a young age is in the children's best interests.

It is worth noting that most of the empirical studies cited in the literature focus on the Saudi Arabian context, which seems to be more conservative than many other Arabic-speaking countries when it comes to introducing a FL to children in schools. This could be attributed to the situation in Saudi Arabia, which is influenced by the religious practices (Elyas & Picard, 2010; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). As pointed out in 3.6.2, Al-

Qahtani and Al Zumor (2016) confirm that the educational system in Saudi Arabia is mainly influenced by religion because Islam is the only religion practiced in the country. They state that the Saudi government “tries to preserve the holiness of the religion, culture, and the Arabic language itself since Arabic is the language of the holy Quran” (p. 21). Other Arabic-speaking contexts may not have the same strongly-held concerns about the dangers of the effect of English on students’ native language.

Therefore, English is introduced in public schools in most of these countries as early as year 1, when students are 5-6 years old (see 3.6.2.1, Table 2). In line with this difference of the starting age, FG and INT participants from Jordan, Palestine and Egypt seemed more confident about their English abilities as they had had more exposure to English than students from Saudi Arabia due to an earlier start in learning English.

As mentioned in 3.6, English is given more importance in the Arab world than other FLs (Dashti, 2015). The importance given to English is attributed to several reasons including the current widespread use of English and the influence of the British colonisation of several countries in the Middle East (Mazrui, 2016).

In contrast to the more conservative section of the Arab-speaking world, some families in the Arab world, including in Saudi Arabia, may prefer to offer their children the chance to learn a FL from a younger age. These families’ preference could be associated with the assumption highlighted earlier that children go through a critical period (Lenneberg, 1967), which is seen as an opportunity for acquiring languages, and parents believe that the younger they start the better their achievements in the language skills will be. While parents may not be particularly aware of the concept of a ‘critical period’ in learning a language, they may accept that learning a language from an early age is an advantage. As indicated above, many parents are probably aware of the importance attached to learning English at a time when it is encroaching on many aspects of life in

the Arab world and gradually gaining more importance in peoples' lives (Dahan, 2015). They would be concerned that their children receive the best English language tuition that they can. Therefore, private schools appear to meet the expectations of these families by making English tuition available from an early stage of schooling.

This finding about the students' perception of the importance of early introduction of English seems to lend support to Myles's (2017) conclusion that beyond the age of 7, the participants in her study seemed to perceive learning a FL as an arduous task which takes a long time. Furthermore, the finding above about students' feeling of disadvantage due to a later start of learning English in public schools echoes other research on age and L2 acquisition, which reports that younger learners tend to have higher motivation towards learning FLs (Donato et al., 2000). A higher motivation might be the result of younger learners' positive attitude towards learning in general as opposed to the rejection of the school system which is typically associated with older learners (Cenoz, 2003). While the results of Al-Thubaiti (2014) provide evidence for the priority of input over the starting age in learning English, the INT participants in the present study believed the starting age of learning English at schools and the input they receive are not isolated from each other.

The language of instruction in public and private schools is another important factor that affects the input students get and ultimately affects their proficiency in the FL.

### ***Language of instruction***

Arabic is the language of instruction across all subjects in public schools in the Arab world, while English is taught as a subject. As mentioned in the section above, public schools are government-run; therefore, they adopt the official language of the country as the language of instruction. As indicated earlier, in Saudi Arabia, for example, education policy stipulates that all levels of education in public schools should be taught

in Arabic. In the Arab world, importance is attached to a person's eloquence in Arabic (see 7.3.2). This importance could be attributed to the importance of religion in the lives of Muslims, who represent the majority in the Arabic-speaking countries.

Several FG and INT participants expressed their concern about the use of Arabic by English teachers in lessons in public schools. While use of the L1 in clarifying some rules of the L2 may be helpful for students, excessive use of the L1 may reduce learners' motivation to practise the target language and appreciate its importance. In addition, the English classroom is one of the only places they can actually both hear and speak the language. This finding about using Arabic in the English classroom in public schools seems to fully support findings by Zghyer (2014) and Al-Khasawneh (2010) cited in 3.6.2. Zghyer (2014) concludes that most Arabic-speaking students learn English within a context where teachers use Arabic during English classes. Al-Khasawneh (2010) cites the use of Arabic in the English classes as one of the environmental reasons behind students' weakness in English writing. In addition, Alrashidi and Phan (2015) conclude that using Arabic to teach English in the Arab world is one of the major reasons for students' weaknesses in English.

As indicated in 3.6.1, English teachers in public schools are usually non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015), which may contribute to students' feeling that there is no compelling need to use the language in school as they might feel that it is only a subject and not as important as Arabic or mathematics, for example. Many of the NESTs teaching in private schools cannot speak Arabic so there is a real need to speak to them in English (Al-Issa, 2006). Therefore, it becomes important that English teachers in public schools are able to maximise students' use of English and practice of writing through utilising various methods and approaches. As indicated in Chapter 7, there seems to be an assumption among the INT participants that

NESTs are the ideal teachers of English simply because English is their L1. This leads to the perception that they must also be better teachers of English than NNESTs (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). While being a native or non-native speaker of the language may not be the most significant measure to judge the ability of the teacher, there seemed to be a belief among the FG and INT participants that having NESTs at schools creates the need to use English as the language of instruction and communication.

As discussed in 3.6.2, scholarly research cites positive and negative attitudes among learners towards both NESTs and NNESTs. Levis et al. (2016) show that NESTs only comprise a quarter of ESL and EFL teachers, but a native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 2013) endorses native speakers as models and ideal teachers (Selvi, 2018).

In contrast to the situation in public schools, English is mostly the language of instruction across the subjects in private schools (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016). As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, the FG and INT participants who had attended private schools mentioned that they had the advantage of learning in the medium of English. The INT participants noted that there seems to be a belief among some parents in the Arab world that it would be advantageous for students to study at a school where English is the language of instruction. The findings about the environment in all the private schools in the Arab world echo results by Alrashidi and Phan (2015). They emphasise that private schools offer a multicultural and multinational context, where English is the medium of instruction, which is seen as beneficial for students' English proficiency. Similarly, the findings by Majul (2001) confirm the belief among some Arab families that attending education institutions where English is the language of instruction is advantageous for their children.

A possible reason for adopting English as the language of instruction in private schools is the diverse student body, who come from different L1 backgrounds (Alrashidi &

Phan, 2015). As indicated in the previous chapter, private schools accommodate expatriate students who do not speak Arabic but live in the Arab world with their families (Al-Hilali, 2014). In addition, private schools usually employ Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) (Al-Issa, 2006) to teach various subjects and not only English. In other words, it appears unlikely that NESTs would teach through the medium of Arabic.

### *Fear of losing the L1*

The desire to receive tuition in English-medium schools is not without fears associated with such tuition. As outlined in 3.6, the spread of English in the Arabic-speaking world is evident at levels of education, from pre-school to university. In addition, English is the language of instruction in most tertiary institutions in the Arabic-speaking world (Mahmoud, 2015). The Arabic-speaking nations can no longer live in isolation from the rest of the world (Mahmoud, 2015). Nevertheless, there is still a need to protect the Islamic and Arab identity. One main challenge in this regard is that the content of most English textbooks is full of Western culture at the expense of Islamic Arab culture. Such textbooks have little or no reference to the Islamic Arab culture, which may create a serious fear of losing religion or identity (Al-Qahtani & Al Zumor, 2016).

However, it should be acknowledged that teaching a language, including English is expected to be accompanied by introducing the culture of that language. Risager (2014) emphasised that language and culture are interrelated. Therefore, it does not seem unusual that the contents of English textbooks reflect the Western culture and traditions. The problem might lie in the fact that since English has become a global language, the cultures and traditions that are being promoted are the Western ones.

As discussed in 3.6.2, Belhiah and Al-hussien (2016) investigated the impact of English as the medium of instruction on students' Arab identity and mastery of Arabic. Students

indicated that they strongly prefer to use English in their daily activities. The findings showed that by being exposed to English more than Arabic at school, through media and the internet, students were gradually becoming more competent in English than Arabic. The study also found that even though the students were aware of the importance of Arabic for their Arab identity, it does not represent a fundamental part of their social identity. The authors, therefore, identify the need to design a bilingual curriculum which uses both Arabic and English as media of instruction in a reasonable manner, so that English does not replace Arabic or erode students' identity.

Another study by Dahan (2015) found that Arabic-speaking students who attended private schools in the UAE felt that their ability to write in English is much better than their ability to write in Arabic. The participants in Dahan's study seemed more confident about their abilities in English than in Arabic. Some participants in Dahan's study acknowledged that they felt that they had lost proficiency in the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and they attributed this loss of proficiency in Arabic to the emphasis on English at school and the extended exposure to the language.

### ***Practice of writing***

The language of instruction factor in the different types of school seems to influence the degree of students' exposure to English and the practice of writing at school. For example, in Saudi Arabia, students in public schools usually receive four lessons a week, and each lesson lasts for 45-55 minutes (Al-Nofaie, 2010). The findings from the present study also show that the students believed that exposure to English was not sufficient to prepare them for the demands of academic English at the tertiary level in New Zealand. Insufficient exposure to English in public schools resulted in a lack of opportunities to practise English writing, which seemed to make some INT participants feel negative about writing in English. The negative attitude of these participants



appeared to be associated with their feeling that they did not have the knowledge required for studying and writing in English. Therefore, it appeared that if the students had had more practice, they might not have been so negative about writing in English. The students might have felt better equipped to face the challenges they encountered at the tertiary level in English-medium institutions.

The findings from the present study about the impact of the participants' past language learning experiences on their perceptions of academic writing are in line with the research of Al Murshidi (2014), in which she investigated the challenges Arabic-speaking students from the UAE and Saudi Arabia face in academic writing in the US context. As shown in 3.9.1, the participants in her study indicated that they faced difficulty in English academic writing as they were not offered the chance to practise the same types of writing in their previous scholastic experiences, and their past tuition overall did not prepare them to write academically in English.

In line with the findings from the present study, Keong and Mussa (2015) provide reasons for Arabic-speaking students' difficulties with writing in English, which include a lack of courses focused on writing and the lack of writing practice. Similarly, Al-Khasawneh (2010) found that the lack of practice of English writing was among the reasons for difficulties with academic writing among Arabic-speaking students in the Malaysian context.

In addition, due to the lack of diversity of the student body in public schools, English is not used outside the classroom in these schools because there is little opportunity to do so. Therefore, students may feel that English, including writing, is merely a subject studied at school that has no actual relevance to daily life situations, which might be justified because English is usually not practised inside and outside education settings.

Among the reasons for such a lack of writing practice was the classroom environment in public schools. As illustrated in 3.6.2, class size, mixed abilities, and the language of instruction enforced by the institution may create hindrances in teaching English writing in the Arabic-speaking world (Harrison, 2018). Class sizes are often large (35-45 students in each classroom), where students may have mixed abilities in English (Al-Issa, 2006). Having such a large number of students in one single class would probably make it difficult for teachers to provide feedback to students individually.

In addition, having students of mixed abilities in the same class may make meeting the literacy needs of individual students a challenging task for teachers (Abdo & Breen, 2010), especially in EFL writing classes (Harrison, 2018). As indicated in 3.6.2, Jordan's policy of passing students regardless of the proficiency means that teachers might well be teaching classes where differences in English proficiency are very great.

The possible reasons behind the lack of exposure to English and practice of writing in public schools are not in isolation from the starting age of learning the language. As indicated in 3.6.2, the instruction and exposure to English in the Arab world occurs only in formal settings and at a later age for the majority of students (Zghyer, 2014). The findings from the questionnaire showed that a later start in learning English at public schools correlated with a limited amount of exposure to the English instruction that students received. Since public schools introduce English at a later age than private schools, students ultimately end up receiving a limited amount of English tuition. Therefore, exposure to, and practice of, the language are limited. If a student starts learning English at the age of 11, i.e. the seventh grade, they will have studied it as a subject for 6 years and only for four hours a week upon leaving school. As has been outlined in 3.6.2, exposure to the language learnt plays a considerable role in improving the students' chances to master the language (Larson-Hall, 2008).

It should be noted that the findings from the questionnaire showed that there were some QUS respondents who indicated that they had enjoyed more exposure to English and more practice of writing. A follow-up investigation in the interviews showed that students who had attended private schools had the chance to write essays in English and get feedback from teachers on a regular basis.

In addition, private schools may provide greater resources for teachers to use in teaching English, which include both print and electronic resources (Esseili, 2014). The provision of such resources could also bring benefits for other subjects that students study at private schools. As pointed out in 3.6.2, Al-Issa (2006) points to the greater opportunities created in private schools in an Arab country, Oman, for students to utilise. Such opportunities appear to be similar to the ones mentioned by the FG and INT participants in this study, and they include imported study materials from international publishers such as Oxford or Cambridge which include a student's book, a workbook, a teacher's book, and audio-visual materials (Al-Issa, 2006).

Overall, the findings about the impact of past scholastic experiences on the students' writing abilities in English seem to support Al-Badwawi's (2011) acknowledgement of the influence of students' prior learning experiences on their perceptions of academic writing at the tertiary level. As mentioned in 1.1, students at the tertiary level bring with them their identities and personal histories, past learning experiences and knowledge of what constitutes writing (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019). Furthermore, the findings lend support to Ellis et al.'s (2007) study, in which they found that when students developed a positive perception of the important role writing plays in learning a given subject, this led to higher achievements in writing (see 2.10.1).

The findings illustrated above justify the choice of the academic literacies model as the theoretical framework, as this model views student writing as the product of the

interaction between several factors relating to students and other factors such as lecturers at the tertiary level and the culture of the tertiary institution, as well as the society as whole. As outlined in Chapter 2, the academic literacies model acknowledges this multi-layered nature of students' writing at the tertiary level and the impact of many factors on students' literacy practices. Lea and Stierer (2000a) argue that the academic literacies model is a "powerful tool for understanding the experience of students and teaching staff, and for locating that experience in the wider context of higher education" (p. 3). In other words, students' background is one of the factors that seems to affect their writing proficiency.

### ***Lack of reading practice***

It appeared that many students did not read widely, not even in Arabic. The INT participants agreed that their past language learning experiences in public schools had not encouraged them to read in Arabic. The discussion with the INT participants indicates that many of them did not read for pleasure or to gain knowledge in their area of study. Instead, the focus at school seemed to be on memorisation in preparation for exams. The lack of reading practice in Arabic seems to have resulted in the lack of development of the habit of reading on a wide range of topics. Since the INT participants had not developed a habit of reading, it is highly unlikely that they will read extensively in English. The lack of reading in English was perceived as a common problem among Arabic-speaking students, which has a negative impact on their proficiency in English writing.

This connection between reading and writing has been widely discussed in the literature (Belcher & Hirvela, 2001; Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Hirvela, 2004). Historically, reading and writing were taught independently as two separate skills. Reading was considered a receptive skill that is associated with understanding an author's message and writing as

a productive skill that is linked to delivering one's messages to others (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). In the 1980s, the focus of research shifted to the interrelation between the two skills, suggesting that the cognitive sub-processes involved in reading and writing are interrelated and strongly correlated (Berninger, Cartwright, Yates, Swanson, & Abbott, 1994; Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). Tierney and Pearson (1983) argue that reading and writing involve similar mental processes of meaning construction. Writers put an aim for writing and make use of planning to decide what to write, and readers plan their reading through establishing a purpose and activating relevant schemata to make meaning of the text (Tierney & Pearson, 1983).

Empirically, a study by Lee and Schallert (2016) showed that extensive reading had a significant impact on the writing of an experimental group of middle school students learning a new language. The study also found that the reading comprehension of the students improved over time. The authors suggest that it is possible that students could learn writing from reading and vice versa as the two skills involve similar sub-processes.

In line with the current findings from the present study, in the context of Arabic-speaking countries, Fareh (2010) notes that as a result of the lack of pedagogical preparation of teachers of English, the latter hold a belief that teaching language is better if it occurs as a number of disconnected instead of integrated skills. He gives the example of teaching grammar independently of reading and writing, and writing independently of reading. Almalki and Soomro (2017) interviewed English teachers in Saudi Arabia to explore their practices in teaching English writing. Most of the teachers interviewed indicated that they taught English writing as a separate skill.

In addition to the students' prior learning experiences and backgrounds, the findings suggest there are other factors that affect students' writing such as the linguistic

differences between Arabic and English, which appear to contribute to the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter with English academic writing.

### ***Lack of L2 vocabulary***

Students' feeling of being underprepared for the demands of writing in English is probably exacerbated by the fact that they may have a limited vocabulary in the L2 lacking both academic and non-academic vocabulary. For example, as far as this study is concerned, the INT participants believed that they had an insufficient range of academic vocabulary that they could use for their fields of study in English. As pointed out in 3.9.2, Abdulkareem (2013) showed that the lack of vocabulary is one of the important causes for the errors made in English academic writing by the participants in his study. As mentioned in 2.10.2, insufficient knowledge of English vocabulary has often been cited as a major challenge that students encounter in using academic language (Durrant, 2016). As outlined in 3.8.2, Abdel Latif (2014) found that Arabic-speaking EFL writers who have insufficient linguistic resources tend to translate directly from their L1 as opposed to working out the concepts in their L1 and then translating these concepts into the L2. The outcome is usually an emphasis on syntactic and lexical features of English writing instead of higher-level rhetorical planning and composing aspects in writing. In contrast, when EFL writers have adequate linguistic resources in their L2, they do not find challenges in "translating prelinguistic ideas into linguistic messages" as they are not worried about the syntactic and lexical retrieving (Abdel Latif, 2014). Therefore, they can pay more attention to the text production process.

The findings from the questionnaire in the present study show students' lack of academic vocabulary correlated with their tendency to translate words and phrases from their L1 when writing in English. The lack of vocabulary could extend to their repetition

of the words they know. Such a repetition may result in students' feeling that they should translate words from Arabic into English to add variety to their writing. Unfortunately, the words may not serve the purpose of writing or convey the intended meaning.

In addition, students often make use of a thesaurus, and the words they select, quite often at random, might not fit the context. If students lack vocabulary in the FL, they are less likely to use academic vocabulary that would serve the purpose of their writing in English. Therefore, students may resort to using some non-academic vocabulary that they know from daily communication in English, and the outcome in writing is using vocabulary that may be inappropriate for the task. This reason is in line with Karim and Nassaji's (2013) study, in which they showed that L2 students make use of their L1 as a composing strategy to overcome the lack of their proficiency in their L2, and as a tool to facilitate their writing process in the target language. Because of their limited vocabulary, students may lack confidence in their ability to directly compose essays in the L2.

### ***Lack of confidence in L2***

The findings show that previous language learning experiences of the QUS respondents influenced the degree of their confidence in their ability to write in their L2. Such a lack of confidence could be attributed to their prior learning experiences that may have caused the lack of L2 linguistic resources.

### **8.2.3 To what extent are the disciplinary and institutional expectations of academic writing challenging for Arabic-speaking students?**

#### **8.2.3.1 Arabic-speaking undergraduate students seem to find difficulty in understanding lecturers' expectations of the English academic writing process across disciplines in New Zealand.**

The analysis of the data shows the difficulty many students face in understanding what acceptable or adequate academic writing in English is from the perspective of their lecturers in the different disciplines.

#### ***Lack of clarity about writing***

As shown in 7.3.4.2, the INT participants seemed to hold an assumption that what is considered to be 'good' academic writing in English depends on the individual preferences of the teaching staff. Not only did the participants feel that writing requirements mostly reside in their lecturers' minds, but also they indicated that lecturers within the same discipline sometimes have different expectations of writing.

A possible reason for students' confusion about their lecturers' expectations of academic writing could be the gap between students and the teaching staff across the disciplines. Such a gap may be caused by an assumption by many lecturers that their students, regardless of where they come from, should already be equipped with the level of literacy required for writing academically (Göpferich, 2016; Pilcher & Richards, 2017).

The finding from the present study about the students' feeling that there is a lack of consistency among academic staff regarding what counts as acceptable academic writing is evidenced in previous research (Hardy & Clughen, 2012). As discussed in 2.7.1, Hardy and Clughen (2012) argue that this difference among academics in their expectations of student writing makes each task of writing result in "a unique set of particular expectations" (p. 26). Ultimately, students would find difficulty in determining what lecturers expect of them in each writing task.



The findings above also lend support to the results of Arkoudis and Tran (2010), in which they demonstrate the challenges students had in attempting to unpack the hidden rules which govern the nature and content of academic writing. In this context, Tran (2008) refers to the struggle international students encounter in their attempts to respond to the institutional “ritual activities” that would enable them to understand their discipline community writing practices (p. 247). This also echoes Bartholomae (2005) in emphasising the concept of ‘inventing’ the university for the moment by students when they write for the different disciplines.

Moreover, the finding about the students’ beliefs that writing expectations differ from one discipline to another echoes the remarks of Lea and Street (2009) where they argue that the difference in the writing requirements of the degree programmes caused students to do what they called ‘course switching.’ In course switching, students find themselves forced to interpret the writing requirements of different fields. As illustrated in 2.7.1, such switching does not just involve switching between different surface-level requirements of the course, but also switching between how to negotiate and represent knowledge in a specific discipline (Eriksson & Carlsson, 2013). Course switching occurs at the level of epistemology, which seems difficult for students. However, this may not be evident for teaching staff who may assume that students might be lacking basic skills (Bailey, 2010).

As indicated in 2.7.3, an argument has been made that discipline lecturers are ‘insiders’ of the discourse community in their field of study (Monroe, 2006). Discipline lecturers are seen as being in the best position to induct students into the literacy practices expected of them in their discipline (Bailey, 2010; Wingate et al., 2011). This argument is in line with the research that has identified a difference between students’ and lecturers’ understanding of the requirements of academic writing at the tertiary level

(Lea & Street, 1998). It appears that those who assess writing, namely the discipline lecturers, can best bridge such a difference through the explicit teaching of writing in their discipline in cooperation with writing experts such as TLAs.

The difficulty in understanding the requirements of writing could be attributed to the lack of confidence and autonomy among some Arabic-speaking undergraduate students. Because some Arabic-speaking students appear to lack autonomy, they may depend on others to make information available for them instead of working themselves and finding the information they are looking for. This could be a result of the teaching style in many contexts in the Arab world where learners depend heavily on their teachers as the main source of knowledge (Alkubaidi, 2014). This last possibility is evidenced in previous studies (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Meleis, 1982), which point to the lack of autonomy among many Arabic-speaking students.

A similar reason could be the power relation factor. This reason may be a result of the learning style in many Arab countries. In the Arab world, the teacher, both in schools and tertiary institutions, is seen as a person who has authority in class and is the decision-maker. Alrabai (2014) shows that teachers in the Arab world are viewed as authoritative persons who dominate the learning process. In such contexts, most of the class time is spent in teacher talk, and students are given little chance to talk or ask questions (Fareh, 2010). This factor seems important as it may contribute to students' attitudes towards approaching teachers for further help or clarification, and they may avoid asking lecturers for help with the demands of academic writing.

The findings from the present study suggest that inducting Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in the practices of the academic community in their disciplines could be easier if lecturers facilitated the students' attempts to understand what is required in the assignments they write. In particular, students may benefit from learning

about the kind of language that is appropriate in their fields. This finding is in line with previous research (Al-Badwawi, 2011). Therefore, greater clarity about lecturers' expectations would be very useful to students. Such clarity could also help NESSs since NESSs and NNESSs may similarly find challenges in dealing with the demands of academic language (Hyland, 2016a; Jenkins, 2014) which is a FL for everyone, since it has “disciplinary dialects” (Doyle et al., 2018, p. 7).

### ***Challenges in understanding the written feedback***

Several FG and INT participants also indicated that understanding and attending to the feedback given by lecturers on their writing is challenging. Some participants viewed the feedback of discipline lecturers as confusing and vague. As explained in Chapter 7 (see 7.3.4), several INT participants mentioned that when they write in English, their writing might sound acceptable to them and make perfect sense, and they believe that they have conveyed their ideas clearly. However, when receiving feedback on their writing, they recognise that their expectations differ from those of lecturers as far as writing is concerned.

The finding about the difficulty that students encounter in understanding the feedback given by their discipline lecturers on their writing seems to be consistent with the results of Handley and Williams (2011), in which they argue that students may not be able to comprehend the written feedback given to them. Therefore, students may view much of that feedback as irrelevant to assignments they may do later. In addition, the finding from the present study seems to echo that of Nicol (2008), in which he points to students' need to understand the context for the feedback they get, i.e. the assessment criteria, so they can fully understand and “decode” the feedback (p. 1). Otherwise, students will not be able to make progress in writing.

Another study by Chanock (2000) explored the problem students encounter in understanding the feedback given by tutors on their assignments. The study asked students and tutors how they interpreted a common marking comment ‘too much description; not enough analysis.’ The findings of the study show varied understandings. Almost half the students interpreted the comment differently from what their tutors had meant. The author argues that such a difference could be partly attributed to the varied requirements of the different disciplines and partly to the fact that undergraduate students “are not insiders to the disciplines they study” (p. 97).

The findings from the present study indicate that some INT participants do not seek further clarification from lecturers regarding feedback when they have concerns. Instead, the participants refer to their friends for help with the demands of writing. In light of the participants’ feeling that lecturers are not clear in what they expect of them in academic writing as well as the challenges students encounter in understanding the feedback by lecturers, several INT participants emphasised their need for more help from lecturers, and that help could be in the form of feedforward before embarking on writing.

#### *The need for feedforward*

A number of FG and INT participants noted their need for disciplinary writing exemplars from their discipline lecturers. Models are an important tool for clarifying expected requirements of work, in terms of quality and standards (Newlyn & Spencer, 2010). The participants seemed to view writing exemplars as highly valuable. This finding echoes previous research (Handley & Williams, 2011), which reports that students view writing models as a helpful instrument that scaffolds learning because they provide an example of a desired response to a writing task (Bruno & Santos, 2010; Carter, Salamonson, Ramjan, & Halcomb, 2018). However, it should be acknowledged

that providing students with models of writing may have its own problems. While this is a practical way to help students with their difficulties, it may encourage students to try to follow a certain way of writing and thus diminish their agency.

The INT participants felt that such a form of feedforward could help them to improve their writing and know what and how their discipline expects them to write. A feedforward approach utilising written models gives students the chance to understand the feedback and how it could be used to improve academic writing (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010; Rae & Cochrane, 2008). Feedforward approaches have previously been discussed in the literature (Duncan, 2007; Robson, Leat, Wall, & Lofthouse, 2013; Scoles, Huxham, & McArthur, 2013).

### ***Help-seeking strategies***

As discussed in 2.9, research indicates that help-seeking is an important strategy that positively affects student learning (Karabenick & Sharma, 1994). One type of help seeking is adaptive help seeking which takes place when students encounter academic challenges and actively seek help to meet the academic demands (Williams & Takaku, 2011). As presented in 5.3.4 and 7.3.4.3, several FG and INT participants indicated that they ask other international students who are studying the same course or students who have already completed the course when they need help with the demands of academic writing. This finding is supported by results from the questionnaire, where seeking help from friends to address challenges with academic writing featured at the top of the list of strategies the respondents chose (see Figure 8 on page 181). In addition, some participants indicated that they sought help from private tutors. However, they did not seem to consider the extent to which a private tutor would know about the content of their assignment, or the requirements of the tertiary institution as far as academic writing is concerned.

Several FG and INT participants believed that lecturers are busy and that it is not their job to help students with writing. Therefore, they abstained from asking them for clarification about what they expect of their students when it comes to writing requirements. In light of massification of tertiary education, there is a possibility that lecturers may be unwilling to engage in this kind of help. Consequently, even if students approach their lecturers they may not be willing to help. In this context, Tuck (2017) points to the consequences of the unprecedented increase in student numbers, which results in academics' feeling that it is not their job to teach writing. Since students felt that lecturers were busy and it was not their job to help with writing demands, they indicated that asking friends for help seemed more practical for them.

In addition, a number of INT participants mentioned that they felt that approaching the lecturer for help with the demands of academic writing would indicate weakness on the part of the student. In other words, the participants believed that seeking help from lecturers or TLAs to have their writing 'fixed' may indicate that they are incapable of fixing it themselves and dependent. This finding is in line with research that reports that adult students tend to intentionally avoid seeking help with their academic demands (Ryan et al., 2001). Nevertheless, Volet and Karabenick (2006) found that help-seeking does not necessarily indicate dependency, instead it indicates that students who seek help when they encounter challenges become less rather than more dependent on others when they face challenges in the future.

However, it should be noted that whether students seek help from friends or avoid help-seeking at all seems problematic. In other words, when they seek help from peers who are not able to judge whether the content may meet the expectations of the lecturer, students seem to disadvantage themselves. When avoiding seeking help at all, students deprive themselves of access to help that is available for them free of charge and that is

meant to help them succeed. This echoes research by Strauss and Grant (2018), where they report cases of students who were reluctant to seek help from lecturers, and instead resorted to friends to help them with writing. One of the participants in their research mentioned that his friends had told him that his sentences were too short. The student said:

I was like are you serious? I don't know how to expand. They are like just add all these linking words, and I go okay, randomly chuck them in there (p. 7).

The INT participants mentioned that while lecturers are not clear about what constitutes acceptable academic writing, the writing support offered by the SLCs in their tertiary institution seemed generic and not discipline-specific.

### ***Generic writing support***

The findings from the present study seem to suggest that the writing support available for students in the tertiary institutions in New Zealand is mostly based on the perspectives of the study-skills model, whereby writing is perceived as a generic skill that once learned can then be applied to writing in the disciplines. Several FG and INT participants believed that the writing support that SLCs in New Zealand tertiary institutions offer focuses on the surface features of language and not on the deeper issues involved in writing. The participants felt that such support could be obtained through using a website or software package designed for this purpose. As outlined in 2.7.3.2, generic writing support usually takes the form of attending writing workshops or an individual meeting with a TLA. Such support focuses on the features of academic writing in general, regardless of the specific requirements of the different disciplines (Göpferich, 2016). While the questionnaire showed that some respondents felt that the writing support offered by TLAs in the New Zealand tertiary context was helpful, most INT participants appeared to view the writing support as detached from their

disciplines. They felt that such support is not focused on them or their examples of writing and offers little to develop their writing skills. The students seemed to prefer discipline-specific writing support that could facilitate their understanding of the requirements of their disciplines in terms of academic writing and the content their lecturers expect. Writing support staff are not experts in every academic discipline. They may not feel comfortable interpreting what a discipline lecturer might want to see in the students' writing.

As shown in 2.7.3.2, generic writing support has been criticised based on the suggestion that the abilities it aims to enhance may not always be transferrable to students' further studies (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005). Students may not see the relevance of the support they receive to their tertiary studies (Butler, 2013). Therefore, students' motivation to engage in any serious way with such support may be low.

### **8.3 Summary**

This chapter has summarised the present study's findings and discussed them in relation to the research questions and relevant literature. Results from this study point to several factors that the participants perceived as being important in influencing their ability in English academic writing in the tertiary context in New Zealand.

The study confirms the impact of prior language learning experiences on Arabic-speaking students' ability to write academically in the tertiary context in New Zealand. It suggests that students who finish schooling at public schools in many Arabic-speaking countries feel disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in private schools as far as communicating in English is concerned. The study supports the claims that L1 interference is seen as a hindering factor for students when writing in English. Due to the differences between the linguistic systems of Arabic and English, students felt their tendency to translate from their L1 often yields negative outcomes in L2 writing. In



addition, the study supports claims in the literature that the IELTS writing component does not seem to sufficiently prepare students for the writing demands at the tertiary level. While they are not perfect in terms of the specific requirements of various disciplines, pathway courses seemed to better prepare students for the writing demands at tertiary level. The findings from the study also provide evidence for the difficulty Arabic-speaking undergraduate students encounter in unpacking their lecturers' expectations of academic writing in English.

The next chapter concludes the study by restating the aims and methodological approach of the study. It also summarises the key findings discussed above, evaluates the study contribution to the research questions, theory building, new empirical knowledge, and practice, and identifies the limitations of the present study and areas for future research.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion

### 9.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter presents the aims and methodological approach of the study (9.2). The key findings from the study are summarised (9.3), followed by a consideration of the implications of the findings for empirical knowledge (9.4), theoretical understanding (9.5), methodological insights (9.6) and practice (9.7). Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are then presented in 9.8 and 9.9 respectively. Some concluding remarks are offered at the end of the chapter.

### 9.2 Aims and methodological approach

The primary aim of this study was to explore the challenges Arabic-speaking undergraduate students in the New Zealand context encounter with English academic writing. In addition, the study aimed to identify some practical ways through which Arabic-speaking students could be better prepared for the demands of studying and writing in English. To achieve these aims, this thesis sought to address the following research question:

- How can Arabic-speaking students embarking on undergraduate studies at New Zealand tertiary institutions be better prepared for the demands of English academic writing?

In addition to the main research question, the sub-questions below were used to guide this study:

1. What are Arabic-speaking students' expectations of and assumptions about academic writing?
2. How have students' past scholastic experiences prepared them for studying and writing in English?

3. To what extent are the disciplinary and institutional expectations of academic writing challenging for Arabic-speaking students?

Theoretically, the study was informed by the academic literacies model and built on previous academic writing research. The model places the context at the crux of writing practice. Therefore, it appears to offer a more comprehensive understanding of student writing practice, and it moves beyond the limits of the textual analysis of student writing. A triangulated approach was adopted in this study to collect data by means of three methods – focus groups, an online questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews.

The analysis and integration of the findings from the present study resulted in some key findings, which are summarised in 9.3 below.

### **9.3 Summary of key findings**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the following are the four key findings that have been identified:

- 9.3.1 English tuition in public schools in many Arabic-speaking countries does not seem to prepare students well for the demands of writing in English at the tertiary level.
- 9.3.2 The linguistic differences between Arabic and English appear to impact on students' English writing proficiency.
- 9.3.3 The writing content in pathway courses seems to better prepare students for the demands of academic writing at the tertiary level than writing in the IELTS preparation courses.

9.3.4 Arabic-speaking undergraduate students seem to be mostly unaware of lecturers' expectations of the English academic writing process across the disciplines in New Zealand.

## 9.4 Contribution to empirical knowledge

Research into academic writing in the tertiary context has been expanding in recent years at a time when increasing numbers of international students join tertiary institutions in English-speaking countries (Flowerdew, 2016). Much of the empirical research conducted on NNESSs investigates the difficulties these students encounter when they move to study in an English-speaking country. However, a significant gap in research is the cause behind the struggle of NNESSs, particularly Arabic-speaking students, with the demands of academic language at the tertiary level. In addition, research on the challenges NNESSs face in academic writing usually focuses on the written texts these students produce. Little evidence is available on writing as a social practice, particularly in the New Zealand context from the perspective of the academic literacies model.

This research project aimed to contribute to bridging this gap in empirical studies by presenting authentic narratives by Arabic-speaking students in the New Zealand tertiary context about the challenges they encounter in meeting the demands of academic writing. Furthermore, the study explored the causes behind these challenges. This study posited several factors that influenced students' writing proficiency from the perspective of students, as outlined in the previous chapter.

The data were analysed in light of the academic literacies model. Therefore, the findings from the study have provided the field with new insights into the experiences of Arabic-speaking students with academic writing. In line with Al-Badwawi (2011), the current study found that previous language learning experiences of many Arabic-speaking

students impede their ability to write in English due to the lack of practice of English writing in public schools. According to Ezza (2010), a general assumption among academics and researchers is that Arabic-speaking students are the ones to blame for their weakness in English writing, whereas criticism is not usually levelled at educational policies. The present study has reached a finding that educational policies, particularly in public schools, seem to play a role in Arabic-speaking students' challenges with writing in English.

The findings also lend support to previous research by Lea and Street (1998) regarding the inconsistency in the writing rules in terms of expectations, requirements, and feedback across the different disciplines and courses as well as among lecturers. Furthermore, the study echoes previous research (Bailey, 2012) in providing more evidence that some of the challenges Arabic-speaking students encounter in English writing are caused by the linguistic differences between Arabic and English, and the style of academic writing in the two languages.

The sample in the three phases of the present study represented a variety of student backgrounds as the participants come from nine Arabic-speaking countries, and they are majoring in different fields in New Zealand. The findings from the present study could offer an empirical point of departure for teaching academic writing to Arabic-speaking students at the tertiary level both in Arabic-speaking and English-speaking countries. Teachers of writing are recommended to consider students' previous language learning experiences, L1 background and its impact on L2 writing, and expectations of writing in English.

## **9.5 Contribution to theoretical understanding**

The findings from this study contributed to the theoretical framework, the academic literacies model, by confirming that writing is not an isolated or decontextualized skill,

which once learned in one context can be applied to other contexts without any problem. From the perspective of academic literacies, the meaning-maker is the main object of investigation.

Instead of tackling the issue from an EAP perspective that focuses on the texts written by students, the findings from the present study were related to deeper issues of academic writing as a social practice. These issues frame the Arabic-speaking students' writing in an English-medium context. They include the previous language learning histories of the students, the impact of the L1 on L2 writing, the institutional requirements of academic writing, power relations in the tertiary context, and lecturers' expectations of academic writing. Moreover, the findings from this study corroborated suggestions in the literature that adopting the study-skills model may not be sufficient to uncover the challenges that surround the practice of academic writing. The lack of sufficiency of the study skills approach may be partly attributed to the fact that the expectations of writing differ from one discipline to another. In addition, since the academic socialisation approach proposes that students are inducted into the institution through learning the conventions of discourse, the approach fails to address the issues of ideologies embedded in the conventions of discourse practices (Tran, 2014). Therefore, exploring writing issues using the lens of the academic literacies approach seems to yield more relevant and revealing findings than using either the study-skills or the academic socialisation approach only.

The academic literacies model has mostly been applied to contexts of home students (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998). The current study contributes to a trend of expanding research in adopting the model in investigating the academic writing process at the tertiary level by focusing on Arabic-speaking students in the New Zealand context. The study traced the experiences of Arabic-speaking students with academic writing in

different stages. These stages were related to the students' experiences in their home countries, followed by any pre-tertiary tuition they received in New Zealand, and ultimately at the tertiary level.

## **9.6 Contribution to methodological insights**

This study has contributed to the methodological orientation towards using mixed methods in conducting research. Combining qualitative and quantitative instruments proved to be thorough and robust as the findings from one phase informed the other, and this is expected to contribute to the compatibility thesis (see 4.2). In other words, the data analysis procedures and findings seem to support the hypothesis that combining and integrating qualitative and quantitative data is possible and revealing. The three instruments used in data collection provided a smooth transition during the research project, and they offered answers to the research questions. The mixed methods mode employed in the present study was valuable not only for the rich data gathered in the research process, but also because it validated the use of the questionnaire as a method for examining the previous histories of the participants and their impact on other variables as far as academic writing is concerned. Furthermore, the methods employed seemed to offer an insight into research questions that are related to writing as a social practice by listening to individuals about their perceptions of the writing process, instead of investigating their writing only.

In terms of the philosophical worldview, this study adopted the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm as I aimed at finding how students co-construct their knowledge (Lincoln et al., 2011). This paradigm enabled me to seek insights into the perspectives of the students regarding the writing process in the New Zealand context. As indicated earlier, in this study I viewed reality as complex and multiple, and not as simple and single. In the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews, I tried to

examine how the participants view the concept of English academic writing, and how they develop their understanding of the writing process at the tertiary level. Since I aimed at getting insights from students from different Arabic-speaking countries, I listened to varied realities and histories. Therefore, the findings from this study contribute to the methodological understanding through using the constructivist-interpretive research paradigm.

## **9.7 Contribution to practice**

The findings that emerged from the study provide helpful insights for EAP educators, university lecturers, TLAs, English educators and educational policy makers in the Arab world. The practical contribution of this study is that it provided personal narratives about Arabic-speaking students' writing experiences. Therefore, in an attempt to answer the overarching research question of the present research project: *How can Arabic-speaking students embarking on undergraduate studies at New Zealand tertiary institutions be better prepared for the demands of English academic writing?*, the following areas need to be borne in mind:

### **9.7.1 The role of past language learning experiences in shaping students' understanding of academic writing in English**

The findings suggest that the students who had attended public schools felt disadvantaged by the late start in learning English, i.e. 11-13 years old because of insufficient exposure to English and the lack of practice of writing. Because the majority of the students in the study were from Saudi Arabia, there seems to be a need for reconsidering the age at which English is introduced in public schools there.

Since previous research proves the benefit of early introduction of FL teaching, the issue requires serious consideration by the education policy makers to better equip students with the linguistic skills they need and enhance their motivation for learning



the language. This could bridge the gap that currently exists between Arabic-speaking students and their counterparts from other L1 backgrounds in terms of FL capability making them more competitive on the global market in various fields. However, it should be noted that the English tuition should be of good quality, which necessitates considering various factors including textbooks, classroom environment, teaching methodologies, as well as teacher training and professional development.

The FG and INT participants indicated that the content they studied at public schools was simple and superficial. While public schools usually teach from textbooks developed by the Ministry of Education, content that enhances the different skills of English may not be fully covered by teachers. Therefore, it is suggested that English teaching practices at schools be scrutinised to find out more about the approaches teachers adopt. In addition, English textbooks adopted in public schools could be examined to identify whether they provide a good balance of skills and language practice that is relevant to the students' culture and background. A particular reference here could be made to the need for enhancing Arabic-speaking students' writing in English. As noted in 2.2, the Arab culture tends to value orality over literacy. Consequently, a balance could be made through exposing students to English and offering them extensive practice of writing in an attempt to prepare them for academic writing in English, which is mostly used for assessment in the tertiary context.

As indicated in Chapter 3, English writing pedagogy in the Arabic-speaking world should account for some challenges in terms of culture, linguistics and instruction challenges to ensure effective EFL teaching (Harrison, 2018). In such contexts, development of suitable teaching strategies and designing curricula require mutual effort by teachers, institutions, and learners. While the Western culture would have some influence on the students, educationalists and curriculum designers in the Arabic-

speaking countries should realise the importance of students' culture and that it could be incorporated in EFL textbooks prescribed for Arabic-speaking students (Mahmoud, 2015).

It appears that emphasising the writing skill at school may greatly support students later at tertiary level. Students would encounter and practise different genres of writing before entering university. Although writing practice at school is not expected to reflect the writing students would encounter at tertiary level, with more exposure to writing and feedback by teachers, students' writing proficiency could be enhanced by the time they reach tertiary level. In addition, students' motivation to write and their attitudes towards writing in English could be enhanced as their awareness of the importance of writing increases.

In addition, one of the practical recommendations arising from this finding is the need for offering teacher-training programmes that mainly target English teachers in public schools. While such English teacher training could be better attained through despatching teachers to English-medium institutions, it may not be equally feasible for all Arabic-speaking countries due to the financial burden associated with it.

Alternatively, experienced teacher trainers could be recruited to deliver in-house training to equip teachers with the skills of teaching English communicatively.

Similarly, a suggestion can be made here for the addition of English teacher education programmes in the tertiary institutions in Arab world. It is suggested that such programmes focus on the skills graduates need to be prepared for teaching at schools so that they are able to prepare students for what to expect in an English tertiary context.

It should be noted that issues with the quality of English tuition in some wealthy countries in the Arab world such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait could be sooner and better attended to. These countries could provide resources for schools to utilise.

Such resources may include provision of teacher training in English-speaking countries, up-to-date curricula, audio-visual facilities, and more schools so that each classroom accommodates a smaller number of students to create the chance for more communicative English classes, more practice of writing and more opportunity for teachers to give feedback.

### **9.7.2 The need for making linguistic differences between Arabic and English explicit to students**

The INT participants indicated that they seem to use the writing features of Arabic when writing in English, including the word order, sentence structure, grammar, cohesion and coherence. This study adopts the perspective that teachers' familiarity with some of the contrasting features of written discourse in Arabic and English could be valuable in addressing the writing weaknesses associated with Arabic-speaking students. Then teachers could explicitly highlight these differences between Arabic and English to students at a younger age. Explicit instruction of the linguistic differences between Arabic and English could increase students' sensitivity to any negative transfer from L1 to L2, which may result in linguistic violations when writing in English. Actual academic writing examples in Arabic and English could be provided to students to draw their attention to the difference each language exhibits in conveying ideas and negotiating knowledge. Using such a practical approach is expected to raise students' awareness of the areas highlighted in the findings including the difference in sentence structure between English and Arabic, the extent to which each language accepts repetition, and the different deployment of subordination and coordination.

In addition, awareness of TLAs and lecturers of some of the L1 interference issues may guide the support and the feedback they offer to Arabic-speaking students.

### **9.7.3 The need for highlighting the difference between IELTS writing and disciplinary writing at university**

It appeared from the interviews that most students found differences between the nature and amount of writing required for university courses and IELTS. Some INT participants indicated that when they moved to the tertiary level in New Zealand, they wrote the same way they had learned in the IELTS preparation course and then had written for the test. However, the participants ultimately found out that their attempts to write this way for a university assignment yielded a negative outcome. This echoes findings of previous research (Lea & Street, 1998) in which evidence shows that if students simply take ways of knowing and of writing as solid constructs from one context to another, they often find that their attempts yield negative outcomes.

Therefore, it is suggested that the IELTS teachers highlight for students the differences between the nature and amount of writing required for IELTS and for tertiary courses. Although the IELTS teachers may not have the disciplinary expertise or knowledge of the requirements of academic writing in each field, they can emphasise the different characteristics of academic writing as compared to the IELTS writing. Such characteristics may include style of writing, referencing, citing references, avoiding plagiarism, paraphrasing, and hedging. Of importance is the need to highlight to students that IELTS writing is not evidence-based, whereas writing for university courses is invariably evidence-based. This difference in the nature of writing in the two contexts may confuse students once they embark on their tertiary studies and give rise to feelings that the tuition they had received in the IELTS preparation courses is irrelevant. The IELTS teachers could also refer students to materials that could help them with academic writing so students notice the differences in the two types of writing. However, it should be acknowledged that IELTS teachers may see that their job

is not to teach students academic writing, but rather their job is to help students get entry into university.

#### **9.7.4 The benefit of attending a pathway course before embarking on the undergraduate studies**

The findings provide evidence for the benefit students get from pathway courses. There seemed to be agreement among the FG and INT participants mainly from Saudi Arabia that the writing content of the pathway courses better prepares students for the academic writing expected of them at university than the IELTS. Therefore, the finding relating to the writing content of pathway courses could provide new insights into the benefit students get from these courses, and the value they could offer to students before embarking on the undergraduate studies. For this reason, pathway courses could be recommended for all NNESSs in English-medium institutions as a pre-entry requirement. A pathway course could be made compulsory for students whose IELTS scores are borderline, and it could be optional, but strongly encouraged, for students who achieve the required IELTS score by their tertiary institution. Therefore, it is suggested that including funding to attend pathway courses as part of the sponsored Arabic-speaking students' scholarships will be a worthwhile investment for students' tertiary study. In addition, host institutions could consider subsidising pathway course fees so that students from specific countries could afford the cost of additional tuition.

Pathway courses could be generic in nature if the students represent heterogeneous disciplines. If the number of students allows, discipline-specific pathway courses could be offered to equip students with the specific requirements, mainly writing, of their majors at university.

Pathway courses could also be run in conjunction with students' own studies. In other words, this might be an alternative for students who are unable to attend pathway

courses run before they enrol for their preferred qualifications. These pathway courses could be operated so as to induct students into the kind of writing and reading skills their major requires. A pathway course might last for a semester, and it could also embed content that is directly related to the students' disciplines. Assessment in these courses could be more flexible than the disciplinary courses. In other words, students could be given the chance to resubmit assignments or have tutorials with a tutorial assistant, who can work closely with the discipline lecturer, for further questions about the nature of writing they are asked to do. This is expected to enhance students' performance, taking into consideration that they are making a transition from the schooling system in their home countries to a significantly different study environment in a different language and country.

#### **9.7.5 The need for cooperation between TLAs and discipline lecturers to facilitate writing support**

In line with findings by previous research (Göpferich, 2016; Lea & Street, 1998), the present study found that students felt that academic writing across the disciplines was different in terms of the nature of writing and expectations of lecturers. In the last two decades, tertiary institutions have tended to offer language support where literacy is embedded within disciplines.

In this regard, some INT participants referred to the generic writing support their tertiary institutions in New Zealand offer. SLCs in many New Zealand tertiary institutions run workshops that focus on enhancing the academic literacies of students. Part of the support is meeting with a TLA who could recommend possible support provided by the tertiary institution. Such support may include attending the add-on writing workshops, seminars, or one-to-one sessions with a TLA. During a meeting with a TLA, students usually seek feedback on how to improve their writing to meet the demands of their discipline. However, the findings suggest that some Arabic-speaking

students seemed to misunderstand the role of a TLA. Students appeared to confuse what they need in terms of writing support with what they want. Some FG participants mentioned that the language support a TLA offers could be obtained through proofreading websites or software. The writing support offered by the TLA was viewed as generic and not related to a specific discipline. It seemed that the role of the TLA was not made clear to students. A TLAs' job is not to proofread students' writing, but rather to teach students how to correct their mistakes so they can correct them themselves next time.

Given the high cost of offering discipline-specific writing support, a possible recommendation that comes out of this study is that students could be encouraged to consult a lecturer on the content of writing and a TLA on their writing mechanics and technical issues. Greater interaction between TLAs and discipline lecturers is expected to better facilitate offering writing support to students across the disciplines. TLAs and discipline lecturers could work together to develop writing support materials and approaches that facilitate students' attempts to meet the demands of disciplinary writing. Discipline lecturers are expected to contribute to shaping the way writing support could better inform students about the requirements of each discipline. TLAs may help students understand how to overcome the problematic aspects they encounter in English academic writing.

#### **9.7.6 The need for agreement on the standards of acceptable academic writing within disciplines**

As outlined in 7.3.4, the findings show that students felt that a gap exists between their understanding and lecturers' expectations of academic writing in English. This gap was also reported in previous research (Lea & Street, 1998). The INT participants noted that they find challenges in understanding what lecturers expect of them when they write their assignments, and they prefer having clear guidelines or an exemplar of writing

they could follow. They pointed out that lecturers within the same discipline sometimes differ in their requirements of writing, which may cause students further confusion. This finding echoes the remarks of Lea and Street (2009) where they argued that the difference in the writing requirements of the degree programmes caused students to do ‘course switching.’ In course switching, students find themselves forced to interpret the writing requirements of different fields.

Therefore, there seems to be a need for agreement among lecturers within each discipline in an institution about the standards of acceptable and adequate academic writing. Students need to be made aware of these standards at the beginning of their tertiary journey. In this context, lecturers could provide clear guidelines about the written assignments and rubrics for assessment of writing. In addition, students may need to understand what makes writing ‘academically acceptable.’ There seems to be a need for attaching more importance to ‘understanding’ than ‘correctness’ of language in student writing as a first step.

Hence, it could be claimed that lecturers’ agreement on what counts as acceptable academic writing for a particular discipline and making this clear to all students will help mitigate the challenges students face when moving across courses within the same discipline. These practices, which are unique to disciplines, are challenging to students who are embarking on their studies. Consequently, they need to be inducted into these practices so they can acquire and utilise them in their disciplines (Nallaya, 2018). Lea (1999) notes that effective learning happens when students are able to acquire the practices they are required to master to be active participants in the academic community.

One of the ways that seemed to be helpful from the perspective of the participants is providing feedforward, which could take the form of a writing model. As discussed in



Chapter 7, while giving written models is a practical way to help students with their difficulties, it may encourage students to follow a certain way of writing. Therefore, a practical way could be giving students more than one writing model so that they realise that there is more than one way of writing that is acceptable.

Furthermore, the difference in power relations between students and lecturers is probably one of the reasons that students are reluctant to approach lecturers about their writing concerns. Therefore, encouraging undergraduate students to raise their concerns about any ambiguity in the feedback they receive on their writing would be helpful. Encouraging open discussion with students is also expected to help them make a successful and smooth transition from the schooling mindset to the tertiary mindset, especially when tertiary study is in an English-speaking country.

To summarise, preparing Arabic-speaking students for the demands of writing in English could occur in three stages: 1) when students are in their home countries; 2) when students receive pre-tertiary education in New Zealand; 3) when students embark on tertiary study.

As far as preparation of students before they depart from their home countries is concerned, writing skills should be emphasised in public schools to provide students with more practice and exposure to different types and examples of writing. The number of weekly hours allocated for English in public schools should also be increased to allow more exposure and use of the language in school. In addition, teachers of English in the Arab world should build upon students' strength in speaking (orality) to improve their writing skills (literacy) with the aim to prepare them for a context where assessment is mostly based on writing. For example, this can be done by allowing students to talk about what they intend to write about, and possibly drawing up an outline after the discussion, to serve as a guide to their writing.

English teachers could also raise students' awareness of the importance of reading extensively in English on various topics from different fields to increase their vocabulary, which could be used in writing. Furthermore, explicitly highlighting the linguistic differences between Arabic and English through using actual models of writing in the two languages could be useful for students. As the students reach higher schooling levels, of importance is the need for raising students' awareness of what academic writing in English is, and how it may differ in Arabic and English.

The second stage, i.e. when students move to an English-speaking country, and in the case of the present study New Zealand, should play an important role in shaping students' understanding of what to expect in the university courses as far as academic writing is concerned. Therefore, the period that precedes students' enrolment on a university programme should be utilised for the benefit of the students. The IELTS tuition students receive during this period should aim to raise students' awareness of the difference between the IELTS writing content which relies simply on the untested opinions of the test candidates and writing for university courses which is invariably evidence-based and requires students to read from other sources, paraphrase, summarise, and cite whatever they use from the literature. In addition, providing students, especially the ones who are sponsored by the governments of their home countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman, with more funding to attend pathway courses seems to be a worthwhile investment to better prepare them for the nature of writing they are expected to produce for university courses. Tertiary institutions in New Zealand should also consider the option of subsidising pathway courses for undergraduate students who are self-funded.

Once students have embarked on their tertiary study, more induction is needed to make students more aware of the role of Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs) and the type of

support they could offer to students. Clarity on what the TLAs offer could better inform the students about actual benefit they can get from visiting the Student Learning Centre (SLC). Greater interaction between TLAs and discipline lecturers could better guide and facilitate the writing support provided to students because such interaction will be informed by the expectations and requirements of the different disciplines, which could reduce the confusion the students encounter when they are asked to write assignments. In addition, agreement on the standards of acceptable academic writing within disciplines could contribute to the interaction between lecturers and TLAs and students' clarity on what and how to write. Providing students with clear guidelines about how and what to write for their assignments is expected to help them in their attempt to meet the demands of their tertiary study. Similarly, providing students with actual writing models written by high achieving students could help students understand the nature and standards of writing their discipline expects of them. Such provision could take the form of electronic database of writing models that can be provided to students in the beginning of their study journey. Alternatively, a number of workshops could be held during the term targeting students from particular disciplines. Facilitators of such workshops can go through some writing models with the students. Once students have started writing their actual assignments, they should be encouraged to seek guidance and feedback from TLAs before they submit the final draft of the assignment to their discipline lecturers. Figure 10 below summarises these three stages and suggestions.

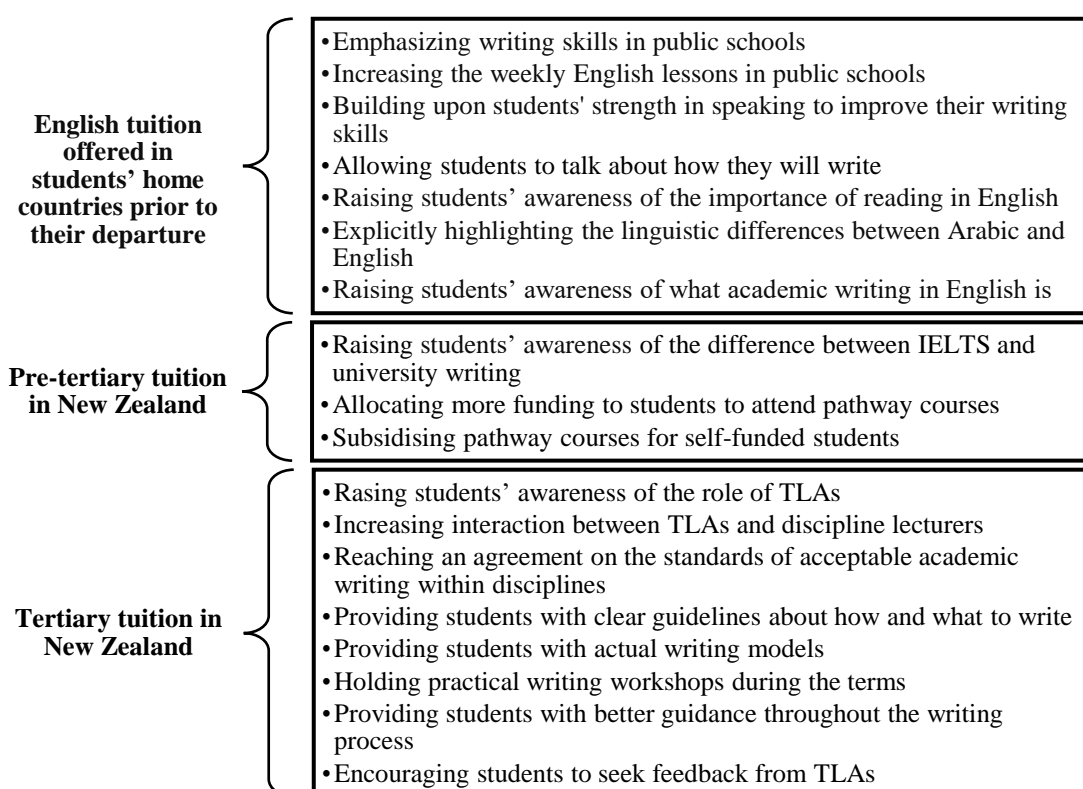


Figure 10: A suggested model for better preparation of Arabic-speaking students for English academic writing

## 9.8 Limitations of the study

While this research project provided an original empirical contribution to the field of academic literacies, it is not without some methodological limitations (see 9.8.1) and scope limitations (see 9.8.2). Limitations raise the need for further research into the challenges facing Arabic-speaking students in meeting the demands of English academic language, particularly in academic writing at tertiary level.

### 9.8.1 Methodological limitations

- Although the questionnaire covered the key themes that emerged from the focus groups, it did not explicitly ask the respondents about the type of schooling they had attended in their home countries. While the age at which the respondents started learning English at school indicates the type of school they had attended in the Arab world, lack of reference to the type of school is one of the limitations of the questionnaire.

- A theme referring to the benefit of pathway courses did not emerge from the focus groups. In addition, the relevant literature does not seem to provide sufficient findings about Arabic-speaking students' experiences with pathway courses in New Zealand. Therefore, the questionnaire did not include a question about pathway courses, which turned out to be a limitation.

### **9.8.2 Scope limitations**

- Although the sample of this study represented nine Arabic-speaking countries, they are unlikely to be fully representative of the population. The findings from this study may not be the same for another sample in another English-speaking country. However, listening to 14 FG participants, surveying 157 respondents, and further interviewing 20 students, both male and female, could offer validity for the findings and mitigate any potential bias. As indicated in the methodology chapter, utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods was meant to triangulate the findings from the different phases of the study so that the shortcoming of one instrument could be overcome by the advantages of another.
- Due to the limitation of time, I could only listen to students without interviewing lecturers who deal with Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand tertiary institutions. Similarly, I could not interview TLAs in the tertiary institutions to get more insights into their experiences with offering writing support to Arabic-speaking students.

## **9.9 Recommendations for future research**

In light of the findings and limitations presented earlier, some suggestions for future scholarly research can be made, and these are as follows:

- Many students had real concerns about their lack of preparedness for the demands of studying and writing in English, which they attributed to the quality and quantity of

English tuition they had received previously in public schools. For this reason, more research is needed to explore the different aspects of English teaching at the school level in Arabic-speaking countries, particularly at public schools. An in-depth analysis of the quality and quantity of English textbooks and materials employed is expected to add useful insights into what needs to be done to improve the experiences of students. A special focus on writing is expected to yield useful findings. Such research could explore whether writing skills are emphasised in the textbooks taught at schools. In addition, an investigation of English teachers' qualifications and prospects for professional development and teacher training could shed some light on the teachers' abilities to help students with the demands of studying and writing in English. In this research, a comparative study could be conducted to compare and contrast the English content taught at private and public schools.

- A major finding has been some students' tendency to transfer some features from Arabic writing to English writing. Texts written by Arabic-speaking students could be analysed from the perspective of the academic literacies model to reveal the subject-discipline practices. An observation of the practices surrounding the production of texts by Arabic-speaking students could also be an interesting topic to explore as it represents the crux of the academic literacies model.
- Developing academic writing skills is a lengthy process that takes time, and students will need time to attain the necessary knowledge to be able to write texts as per the expectations of their disciplines. Therefore, more longitudinal studies are needed to yield more insights into the writing experience of Arabic-speaking undergraduate students during a whole programme of study.
- More research is needed to explore the pathway courses offered by the tertiary institutions in New Zealand or elsewhere to assess the benefits they offer for

international students as far as academic writing is concerned. The materials adopted in pathway courses could be explored to obtain a comprehensive understanding of why the participants felt the course benefited them more in terms of the academic writing demands than the writing in the IELTS preparation courses.

- Since this study investigated the assumptions and expectations of Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand, other studies could be conducted in other English-medium contexts to test the transferability of the findings from the present study to other similar contexts.
- Listening to Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand about the challenges they encounter in English academic writing is one part of the issue. A similar study could investigate the difficulties lecturers encounter in dealing with Arabic-speaking students' academic writing in English. Similarly, a study could explore TLAs' perspectives of the issues that feature in English academic writing by Arabic-speaking students.

## **9.10 Concluding remarks**

My personal journey in writing this PhD thesis matches the topic of the study – academic writing. Bringing with me some years of experience in teaching academic writing at the tertiary level, I identified with many of the challenges the participants in this study raised. As an EFL/ESOL teacher and now a PhD student, I felt that many of the areas that represent challenges to Arabic-speaking students in academic writing can be attributed to the lack of training on a similar type of writing in their previous learning contexts. Although I wrote an MA dissertation in English, I believe that writing a PhD thesis has been a different experience. This experience has been enriching and informative for me in two aspects: professionally and personally.

Firstly, on the professional level, I believe I have gained first-hand knowledge on the topic through scrutinising the relevant literature, constant discussion with my supervisors, and receiving timely feedback on all aspects of the thesis. In addition, the findings I have reached from this study have enabled me to gain deeper insights into the experiences of Arabic-speaking students when they write in English. The findings are expected to better inform my teaching and research practices in the field of academic literacies.

Secondly, I have personally learned from the experience of writing a PhD thesis. This journey has not been without its difficulties. I had times of stress, worry, and disappointment. The journey taught me how to be more patient, meet strict deadlines and manage my time between my study, my family, and my work. I have also learned how to set targets, and most importantly how to achieve them.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the experience of writing this PhD thesis will be of benefit for other researchers in terms of building on the academic literacies research and further utilising mixed methods to study academic writing as a social practice. Future research is expected to cover some of the limitations of the present study.



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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet – Focus groups



Appendix A– Information Sheet – Focus group discussion

### Participant Information Sheet - Focus groups

**Date Information Sheet Produced:**

31 /01/2017

**Project Title**

An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency.

**An Invitation**

My name is Ahmed Junina. I am a PhD candidate at Auckland University of Technology. I am inviting you to participate in my research which will form the basis of a PhD thesis. I am investigating the impact of Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their proficiency in English writing. I would like to learn about your experiences in this regard. No potential conflict of interest is expected due to your participation in this research project. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

**What is the purpose of this research?**

This research project aims to investigate the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions around academic writing on their ability to write in English in the NZ context. In particular, the purpose of this study is three-fold: 1) to explore the participants' expectations and assumptions around writing in English; 2) to see whether Arabic-speaking students' past scholastic experiences prepared them for writing in English or not; 3) to see if the discourse and institutional expectations regarding academic writing are challenging to Arabic-speaking students in NZ tertiary institutions. I hope this research project will help us reach a better understanding of how to prepare Arabic-speaking students for the demands of academic writing in an English-speaking country. This research project is the basis for a PhD qualification. The expected outcomes of this study are a PhD thesis, conference presentations, and journal articles.

**How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

You have seen a recruitment poster about this study at your tertiary institution or on the social media pages and have contacted me and showed willingness to participate. This invitation aims to give you more information about the research project. You are a potential participant because you speak Arabic as your first language and are a student in NZ. You are in no way obligated to participate, your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

**How do I agree to participate in this research?**

If you agree to participate in this research, please sign the Consent Form I sent to you along with this Information Sheet, and send it back to me by email. You will find my email address in the bottom of this invitation. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

**What will happen in this research?**

Your participation in the research project will be in the form of a focus group discussion which will take about 1 to 2 hours of your time. The discussion will be recorded and transcribed by me, and then returned to you for 'member-checking'. If you are not happy with anything in the written transcripts, it can be removed. At this stage, you can decide that you do not want to participate in the research. Based on the discussion with the participants of the focus group and readings of literature, I will format a questionnaire on the topic of the study. Then you will be given an opportunity to trial the questionnaire and comment on it.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

You might feel uncomfortable sharing your personal beliefs. I would like to point out that this research project is only concerned with the challenges Arabic-speaking students face in academic writing to present a description of how these students' previous scholastic experiences prepared them for the demands of academic writing. I wish to focus on the patterns and trends that

emerge from the interviews rather than making any personal judgements. The recordings will be used only for the purpose of this research.

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

Only limited confidentiality can be offered because of the nature of the discussion which includes several participants at the same time. However, in the data analysis and discussion, there will be no mention of your real name or your institution's name. You will only be identified by a pseudonym.

**What are the benefits?**

If you agree to take part in this research project, you will be helping me to find out more about the challenges facing Arabic-speaking students in academic writing for the undergraduate level in the NZ context. This study might also help lecturers and academic support staff at NZ tertiary institutions who deal with Arabic-speaking students. The main output of this research is a PhD qualification. I also hope to publish the research findings of this study in language journals.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Due to the nature of a focus group discussion which involves the participants sharing thoughts in front of others, limited confidentiality can be offered. However, you will be identified in the research by a pseudonym and your institution will not be named.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

In total, you will be asked to spend approximately 2 hours of your time.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You have received this information sheet because you contacted me. Please will you contact me within a week if you are interested in participating in a focus group?

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Yes. A summary of the research findings will be given to all participants who indicate their interest on the Consent Form. Moreover, any relevant journal article published will also be forwarded to you by email.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the project supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Pat Strauss, [pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz](mailto:pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz), 9 921 9999 ext. 6847

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext. 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**RESEARCHER CONTACT DETAILS:**

Ahmed Junina  
[ahmedjunina@hotmail.com](mailto:ahmedjunina@hotmail.com) Contact number: +642040776177

**PROJECT SUPERVISOR CONTACT DETAILS:**

Associate Professor Pat Strauss  
Faculty of Culture and Society  
AUT University  
Phone: 64 9 921 9999 ext. 6847  
Email: [pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz](mailto:pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz)

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 27/02/2017, AUTC Reference number 17/19.



## Appendix B: Consent Form – Focus groups



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Consent Form – Focus group

# Consent Form

**Project title:** An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency.

**Project Supervisors:** Assoc. Prof. Pat Strauss, Dr Lynn Grant

**Researcher:** Ahmed Junina

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 31/01/2017.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group discussion, and that the discussion will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that I will be talking in front of other participants in the discussion, and I will respect what others say.
- ☐ I understand that I may withdraw myself at any time, and I may withdraw the information/data I have provided for this project at any time prior to the commencement of data analysis, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ If I withdraw prior to the commencement of data analysis, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one):      Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:.....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 27/02/2017 AUTEK Reference number 17/19**

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

## Appendix C: Indicative questions for the focus groups



Indicative Questions for the focus groups

*These questions will be sent to the participants prior to the focus group discussions*

**Project title:** An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency.

1. Can you tell me about yourself? Where are you from? What studying had you done before coming to NZ? What are you studying here in NZ? Why did you choose to do this programme in particular? Why did you decide to come to NZ?
2. What was your age when you started learning English as a Foreign Language?
3. How have you found the ways of studying here compared to the ways in which you studied before? What is similar? What is different?
4. How much writing does your degree require? (Approximately)
5. Is there a genre of writing that you do more than others (reports/essays/lab reports)?
6. How do you go about writing an essay? Tell me about your writing process.
7. Do you know of the Learning Centre in your tertiary institution?
8. How often do you make an appointment with an academic adviser to seek help with English academic writing?
9. Do you get help from others (friends, lecturers, writing centre)? If so, do you think it helped you progress in your writing?
10. How do you feel about writing? In English? In your native language?
11. What difficulties do/did you face in the writing you do/have done for your undergraduate course?
12. Do you think your previous learning experiences prepared you for the demands of writing in English in the NZ context?
13. Did you usually receive feedback from your school teachers on your writing? If so, do you think it was helpful in developing your writing abilities?
14. What measures do you apply to help you overcome the difficulties you face in writing?
15. Do you think you are equipped enough with the academic vocabulary needed for your discipline?
16. Do you think your previous learning experience in school helped you increase your academic vocabulary reservoir?
17. Have you heard of the most commonly used academic vocabulary or the Academic Vocabulary List?
18. Do you use words/expressions from the text that you read for your course when writing an assignment?
19. Do you use more formal words when you are writing an essay in English than when you are speaking to your friends?
20. Is there anything you wish to say about academic writing?



## Appendix D: AUTC Ethics Approval for conducting focus groups



### AUTC Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, WU406 Level 4 WU Building City Campus  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

27 February 2017

Pat Strauss  
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Pat

Re Ethics Application: **17/19 An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 27 February 2020.

As part of the ethics approval process, you are required to submit the following to AUTC:

- A brief annual progress report using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>. When necessary this form may also be used to request an extension of the approval at least one month prior to its expiry on 27 February 2020;
- A brief report on the status of the project using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>. This report is to be submitted either when the approval expires on 27 February 2020 or on completion of the project.

It is a condition of approval that AUTC is notified of any adverse events or if the research does not commence. AUTC approval needs to be sought for any alteration to the research, including any alteration of or addition to any documents that are provided to participants. You are responsible for ensuring that research undertaken under this approval occurs within the parameters outlined in the approved application.

AUTC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval from an institution or organisation for your research, then you will need to obtain this.

To enable us to provide you with efficient service, please use the application number and study title in all correspondence with us. If you have any enquiries about this application, or anything else, please do contact us at [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz).

All the very best with your research,

Kate O'Connor  
Executive Secretary  
**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee**

Cc: [ahmedjunina@hotmail.com](mailto:ahmedjunina@hotmail.com); Lynn Grant

## Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet – Questionnaire



### Participant Information Sheet – Online Questionnaire

Date Information Sheet Produced:

19/05/2017

#### Project Title

An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency.

#### An Invitation

My name is Ahmed Junina. I am a PhD candidate at Auckland University of Technology. I am inviting you to participate in my research which will form the basis of a PhD thesis. I am investigating the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their proficiency in English writing. I would like to learn about your experiences in this regard. Your participation in this research is voluntary and anonymous.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

This research project aims to investigate the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions around academic writing on their ability to write in English in the NZ academic context. In particular, the purpose of this study is three-fold: 1) to explore the participants' expectations and assumptions around writing in English at tertiary level; 2) to see whether Arabic-speaking students' past scholastic experiences prepared them for writing in English; 3) to see if the discourse and institutional expectations regarding academic writing are challenging to Arabic-speaking students in NZ tertiary institutions. I hope this research project will help us reach a better understanding of how to prepare Arabic-speaking students for the demands of academic writing in higher education institutions, and how to better help them with their writing when they are enrolled for UG studies. This research project is the basis for a PhD qualification. The expected outcomes of this study are a PhD thesis, conference presentations, and journal articles.

#### How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have seen an advertisement about this study at your tertiary institution or on social media pages and have agreed to complete an anonymous questionnaire. This Information Sheet aims to give you more information about the research project. You are a potential respondent because you speak Arabic as your first language and are an undergraduate student in NZ. You are in no way obligated to participate, your participation is anonymous and voluntary.

#### How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree to participate in this research, please proceed to complete the questionnaire. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. However, if you choose to participate it will be not be possible to withdraw since the data is anonymous.

#### What will happen in this research?

Your participation in the research project will be in the form of completing an online anonymous questionnaire which will take about 10-15 minutes. When completing the questionnaire you will be asked if you are willing to participate in a semi-structured interview to further discuss the topic. Participation in the interviews is also voluntary.

#### What are the discomforts and risks?

No discomforts or risks are expected. Your participation in this questionnaire is anonymous. I would like to point out that this research project is only concerned with the challenges undergraduate Arabic-speaking students face in academic writing. I will not be focussing on individual opinions but rather looking to find patterns and trends in the data.

#### How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

No discomforts or risks are expected as the questionnaire is anonymous.

**What are the benefits?**

There are unlikely to be direct benefits for you but if you agree to take part in this research project, you will be helping me to find out more about the challenges facing Arabic-speaking students in academic writing for the undergraduate level in the NZ context. This may help Arabic-speaking students in the future. This study is expected to help lecturers and academic support staff at NZ tertiary institutions who deal with Arabic-speaking students. The main output of this research is a PhD qualification. I also hope to publish the research findings of this study in language journals.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

No names or personal details will be mentioned in the thesis. The questionnaire is anonymous.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

You will be asked to spend approximately 10-15 minutes of your time for the questionnaire

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You have accessed this Information Sheet because you have seen the advertisement about the questionnaire. You may answer the questionnaire at a time that suits you. The questionnaire will be available online until 1 August 2017.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Because I do not know who you are, I will not be able to send you the results.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the project supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Pat Strauss, [pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz](mailto:pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz), 9 921 9999 ext. 6847 6847 or Dr Lynn Grant, [lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz](mailto:lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz), 9 921 9999 ext. 6826.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext. 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**RESEARCHER CONTACT DETAILS:**

Ahmed Junina  
[dxs6791@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:dxs6791@autuni.ac.nz)

**PROJECT SUPERVISOR CONTACT DETAILS:**

Associate Professor Pat Strauss  
Faculty of Culture and Society  
AUT University  
Phone: 64 9 921 9999 ext. 6847  
Email: [pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz](mailto:pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz)

Dr Lynn Grant  
Faculty of Culture and Society  
AUT University  
Phone: 64 9 921 9999 ext. 6826  
Email: [lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz](mailto:lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz)

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 25/05/2017, AUTC Reference number 17/19.

I am a PhD candidate at the Auckland University of Technology. I am investigating Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing at undergraduate level in New Zealand tertiary institutions. I would like to know about the challenges you face in academic writing. I would like to invite you to participate in the research project by completing this questionnaire. This should take about 10-15 minutes. Please note that completing the questionnaire is voluntary. Your participation will be anonymous. I would also appreciate it if you would forward this link to other Arabic-speaking undergraduate students. I would like to hear from as many of them as possible. By completing this questionnaire, you are consenting to take part in this study.

### ❖ Demographic information

- Gender           ☐Male         ☐Female      ☐ I would prefer not to say
- Age             ☐18-20       ☐21-25      ☐26-29      ☐30+
- Nationality .....
- Highest academic qualification already gained  
   ☐ Bachelor   ☐ Diploma   ☐ High school   ☐ Other .....
- Have you sat for any international standardised English language test? Yes  
   No  
   ☐IELTS   ☐TOEFL   ☐Other .....
- IELTS score .....
- TOEFL score .....
- Other, score .....
- IELTS/TOEFL/Other writing score .....
- Time spent in New Zealand (e.g. months ...../..... years)
- Have you ever studied any qualification/course in an English-speaking country other than New Zealand?
- What is that country?
- If yes, how long did you stay in that country?
- How old were you when you started learning English? .....
- Tertiary institution in NZ .....
- Major .....
- University year .....

	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>NDA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
1. English writing skills were emphasised in my school study					
2. The amount of English instruction at school did not equip me with the ability to write in English					
3. I received feedback from my school teachers on my English writing					
4. Overall, I think my previous study in my home country did not prepare me for the language of the academic environment in NZ					
5. When I write I find it easier to think in Arabic and then translate into English					
6. In my writing I focus on grammar, spelling, and punctuation more than content					
7. I do not feel confident that I can express my ideas clearly in English					
8. I do not feel confident about paraphrasing what someone else has written in English					
9. It does not bother me if I have to write under time constraints					
10. When I write I feel confident using the academic vocabulary required in my field					
11. I always edit my own writing					
12. I am not confident that I am able to cite references correctly					
13. If I do not understand a comment when getting feedback, I ask the lecturer to explain it to me					
14. When I write I look at my previous marked assignments so I do not keep making the same types of errors					
15. I know about the Learning Centre at my tertiary institution in NZ					
16. I do not find consulting the Learning Advisors at my university about my writing helpful					

17. I prefer paid private tutoring to free writing support offered by the Learning Centre					
18. I feel my academic English writing improved during the first year at university					

❖ **What kind of difficulties do you experience in academic writing in English?**

.....

.....

.....

❖ **What actions do you take to address these difficulties (*check as many as apply*)**

- ☐ No action
- ☐ I seek help from my lecturer/tutor
- ☐ I seek help from a fellow student
- ☐ I get a native speaker of English to edit my work
- ☐ I ask for an extension of time for my assignment
- ☐ I pay a private tutor to help me
- ☐ Other (*please specify*)

.....

.....

.....

❖ **What do you think lecturers could do to help you improve your assignments?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

❖ **Would you like to add anything else about academic writing?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

❖ **Are you willing to participate in a 30-minute interview for further discussion on this topic?**

- ☐ Yes (Please contact me at: [dxs6791@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:dxs6791@autuni.ac.nz), and I will tell you more about the interview)
- ☐ No (Thank you for completing the survey)

## Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet – Interviews



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI  
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

### Participant Information Sheet – interviews

#### Date Information Sheet Produced:

19/05/2017

#### Project Title

An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency.

#### An Invitation

My name is Ahmed Junina. I am a PhD candidate at Auckland University of Technology. I am inviting you to participate in my research which will form the basis of a PhD thesis. I am investigating the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their proficiency in English writing. I would like to learn about your experiences in this regard. Your participation in this research is voluntary and anonymous and you can withdraw at any time.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

This research project aims to investigate the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions around academic writing on their ability to write in English in the NZ academic context. In particular, the purpose of this study is three-fold: 1) to explore the participants' expectations and assumptions around writing in English at tertiary level; 2) to see whether Arabic-speaking students' past scholastic experiences prepared them for writing in English; 3) to see if the discourse and institutional expectations regarding academic writing are challenging to Arabic-speaking students in NZ tertiary institutions. I hope this research project will help us reach a better understanding of how to prepare Arabic-speaking students for the demands of academic writing in higher education institution, and how to better help them with their writing when they are enrolled for UG studies. This research project is the basis for a PhD qualification. The expected outcomes of this study are a PhD thesis, conference presentations, and journal articles.

#### How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have seen an advertisement about this study at your tertiary institution or on social media pages and have completed an anonymous questionnaire where you indicated your willingness to take part in an interview. This Information Sheet aims to give you more information about the research project. You are a potential interviewee because you speak Arabic as your first language and are an undergraduate student in NZ. You are in no way obligated to participate in the interview, your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

#### How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree to participate in this research, please contact me so I can send you the Consent Form. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

#### What will happen in this research?

Your participation in the research project will be in the form of attending a semi-structured interview which will take about 30 minutes. Participation in the interviews is also voluntary. Once I have finished the interview, I will transcribe it and send you the transcript for member checking. You will be given the chance to edit your responses as you wish. At this time you will be able to decide whether you want to withdraw from the study or keep the transcript to be used.

#### What are the discomforts and risks?

No discomforts or risks are expected. I would like to point out that this research project is only concerned with the challenges undergraduate Arabic-speaking students face in academic writing. I will not be focussing on individual opinions but rather looking to find patterns and trends in the data.



**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

No discomforts or risks are expected. If you agree to participate in an interview, a code (e.g. ST4) will be used to conceal your identity. In the data analysis and discussion, there will be no mention of your real name or your institution's name. A transcript of the interview will also be returned to you to be checked. At that stage, you can make any changes you like or you may decide to withdraw the interview.

**What are the benefits?**

There are unlikely to be direct benefits for you but if you agree to take part in this research project, you will be helping me to find out more about the challenges facing Arabic-speaking students in academic writing for the undergraduate level in the NZ context. This may help Arabic-speaking students in the future. This study is expected to help lecturers and academic support staff at NZ tertiary institutions who deal with Arabic-speaking students. The main output of this research is a PhD qualification. I also hope to publish the research findings of this study in language journals.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

No names or personal details will be used in the thesis. However, you will be identified in the research by a code.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

You will be asked to spend approximately 30 minutes of your time for the interview. You will also need approximately 15 -20 minutes to check the interview transcript.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You have been sent this Information Sheet because you contacted me showing interest to participate in an interview following completing a questionnaire. You have two weeks to consider this invitation.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Yes, I will send a summary of the research findings to the participants who wish me to do so.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the project supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Pat Strauss, [pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz](mailto:pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz), 9 921 9999 ext. 6847 or Dr Lynn Grant, [lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz](mailto:lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz), 9 921 9999 ext. 6826.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), 921 9999 ext. 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**RESEARCHER CONTACT DETAILS:**

Ahmed Junina  
[dxs6791@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:dxs6791@autuni.ac.nz)

**PROJECT SUPERVISOR CONTACT DETAILS:**

Associate Professor Pat Strauss  
Faculty of Culture and Society  
AUT University  
Phone: 64 9 921 9999 ext. 6847  
Email: [pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz](mailto:pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz)

Dr Lynn Grant  
Faculty of Culture and Society  
AUT University  
Phone: 64 9 921 9999 ext. 6826  
Email: [lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz](mailto:lynn.grant@aut.ac.nz)

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 25/05/2017, AUTC Reference number 17/19.



## Appendix H: Consent Form – Interviews



## Consent Form

**Project title:** An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency.

**Project Supervisors:** Assoc. Prof. Pat Strauss, Dr Lynn Grant

**Researcher:** Ahmed Junina

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 19/05/2017
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that the discussion will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that I may withdraw myself at any time, and I may withdraw the information/data I have provided for this project at any time prior to the commencement of data analysis, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ If I withdraw prior to the commencement of data analysis, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
 .....  
 .....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 25/05/2017 AUTEK  
 Reference number 17/19**

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

## Appendix I: AUTECH Ethics Approval for the questionnaire and interviews



### AUTECH Secretariat

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, WU406 Level 4 WU Building City Campus  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

25 May 2017

Pat Strauss  
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Pat

Re: Ethics Application: **17/19 An investigation of the impact of undergraduate Arabic-speaking students' expectations and assumptions about academic writing on their English writing proficiency**

Thank you for your request for approval of amendments to your ethics application.

I have approved minor amendments to your ethics application allowing additional questionnaire and interview stages of your research to proceed.

I remind you of the Standard Conditions of Approval.

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.

### Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTECH grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. If the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all locality legal and ethical obligations and requirements.

For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K O'Connor'.

Kate O'Connor  
Executive Manager  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: , [ahmedjunina@hotmail.com](mailto:ahmedjunina@hotmail.com); Lynn Grant

**Appendix J: Indicative questions for interviews**

**Indicative Questions for Interviews**

- Tell me about yourself. What do you study in NZ? What university year? Why did you choose to study this major?
- Why did you choose to study in New Zealand?
- What did you study/work before coming to New Zealand?
- Tell me about your learning experiences before starting your current course in New Zealand. Tell me about any writing instruction you had before coming? What sort of writing did you do before coming here? Do you think it prepared you for your current study in NZ?
- Tell me about any challenges you currently face in English academic writing.
- What do you do to overcome these challenges?
- Do you think these challenges became less when you progressed in the years of your degree? If yes, why?
- How do you get help with English academic writing?
- Do you ever visit the learning centre and see the learning advisor for help with academic writing? Do you know what kind of help they can give? Do you know the cost of using the learning centre at your university?
- Tell me about your education in your own country – tell me about your experiences learning English – In your previous learning experience back home, did you get feedback from English language teachers? If yes, was it helpful? IELTS specifically.
- In your current study, do you get feedback on your writing? If yes, do you find it helpful? Help from whom? What kind of help? How regular is it? Rank on a scale of 1-10 how useful.
- What aspects do you think the feedback covers in your writing?
- Tell me about proofreading – do you ever get someone to proofread your writing (for errors) before you give it to your lecturer?
- Tell me about your readiness to use academic vocabulary in your writing in English. How would you explain academic writing in English? How does it differ from the other writing you do in English?
- Who do you think is responsible for helping you improve your academic writing in English?
- What things do you think lecturers can do to help students with English academic writing?
- In general, how would you define (or describe?) academic writing?
- Would you like to add anything about academic writing in English, either related to your study before you came here or related to your study here?