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## 5 Writing Trouble Spots for ESL Students of Arabic

Lina Gomaa-Moulds

Portland State University, [lina.gomaa@gmail.com](mailto:lina.gomaa@gmail.com)

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## 5 Writing Trouble Spots for ESL Students of Arabic

by Lina Gomez



November 10, 2010

Teaching writing to ESL learners has many challenges. Almost everybody knows that students' first language affect their learning of the target language, in this case English. But, not everybody can really realize how far the first language can affect the learner's English writing. ESL teachers must study about other first languages of their students to comprehend why the students are making certain mistakes and repeating them. During teaching English to Arabic speakers, there are five common mistakes they make while writing; no surprise, its due to effect of their first language. I will explore the five of them who I have experienced while teaching and how ESL teachers can

solve these issues.

### 1) Run-on sentences:

Continuously, several students whose first language is Arabic write endless sentences with no periods and infinite commas! You can correct them but still they will repeat this mistake. Run-on sentences in Arabic are accepted and there is no error in writing them. Newspapers, magazines and books have run-on sentences and readers can follow them with no confusion. Thus, the teacher has to make it clear for the students that it is confusing for English readers to have very long sentences, unlike Arabic. Plus, the teacher should give them solutions to over come this problem out like adding periods then starting new sentences and using connectors.

### 2) Redundancy

Similar to run-on sentences, Arabic languages accepts and even welcomes synonyms repeated in one sentences because it shows the eloquence of the writer and stressed the idea. The teachers can work on helping the students with their writing patterns once they grasp that they are changing thinking patterns as well in stead of being frustrated on the repetition of students' mistakes. To minimize the redundancy in writing, students could be given editing exercises to work on generating shorter sentences without repeating words. It should be noticed that the students may have few vocabulary and would repeat words like "good" and "bad" through out the essay for example. In this case, the teacher can provide list of synonyms and ask the students to apply them in their writing. It is very helpful to be concrete in giving writing "directions" to the students.

### 3) Arabish!

When your student writes a sentence like "[flu] infection spreads by peace with hand," how can one do to correct it? The sentence makes perfect sense in Arabic but not in English; the student means here the flu infection is caused by greetings and handshakes. The word "greetings" in Arabic is the same word for peace so the student just used it!

Many students tend to literally translate from their first language to English. This challenge couldn't be solved in one session as the student needs to read a lot, creating an English solid base to express themselves while the teacher can assign readings and at the same time work one on one with the students to assist them with converting Arabish in English!

#### **4) Punctuation**

Several ESL learners with Arabic background struggle with punctuation. Arabic has less limitations in the use of commas and periods than English. Consequently, many students use infinite number of commas in their English running-on sentences. Semi-colons almost have no existence and exclamation marks are very commonly used in their English writing. Thus, there is a great need to teach punctuation in separate sessions and apply the rules in editing exercises until punctuation becomes a second nature to their writing.

#### **5) Writing organization**

Common concepts like “ thesis,” “ Topic sentence,” and “ no new ideas in the conclusion,” are all very foreign to Arabic essay. The circular structure in the English essay is contrasted with a very linear one in Arabic where the conclusion has to bring something new! Obviously, the teachers in this case have to create new patterns in the students’ minds and pinpoint the difference between Arabic writing and English ones.

The five common troubles facing ESL learners whose Arabic is the first language can be minimized and even eliminated with editing exercises, reading English and having a teacher who is understanding of the challenges of writing in a second language.