Difficulties in Academic Writing in English as a Second/Foreign Language from the Perspective of Undergraduate Students in Higher Education Institutions in Oman

Arij Mustafa  
Tourism and Management Studies Department  
Oman Tourism College, Sultanate of Oman  
Corresponding Author: Email: arij.mustafa@otc.edu.om

Atif Noor Arbab  
Tourism and Management Studies Department  
Oman Tourism College, Sultanate of Oman  
Email: atif.noor-arbab@otc.edu.om

Alaa Ahmed El Sayed  
Department of Foundation Programmes  
Oman Tourism College, Sultanate of Oman  
Email: Alaa.Ahmed-Ali@otc.edu.om

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Abstract:  
The English language is the medium of instruction in Omani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and mastering writing in English has become a requirement for success. This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by the learners at the tertiary level when writing English from learners' perspective and to determine what teaching approach students consider the most effective. A survey was conducted for the purpose of focusing on two main domains, the difficulties faced by them from their perspective, and the strategies they deem helpful. The results show that students’ main challenges are the limited vocabulary and range of grammatical structures, inability to comprehend reading texts, and difficulties in summarizing and paraphrasing. Findings also show that the most helpful strategies, from students’ point of view, are feedback from the teacher, both specific and general, extensive reading about the topic, using a dictionary, examining writing models, and writing multiple drafts.

Keywords: Academic writing, difficulties, foreign/second language, Omani higher education, helpful strategies, undergraduate students

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Introduction

Though English is a compulsory subject at schools in Oman, mastering writing skills in English poses a challenge to students in higher education. English is the medium of instruction, and the ability to write in EFL/ESL is a significant factor in language acquisition and learning. Verbal and written assessments require a specific proficiency in English; therefore, students’ success in higher education depends on their English language proficiency. More specifically, their success at the tertiary level depends on their ability to “access, evaluate, synthesize the words, ideas and opinions of others in order to develop their own academic voice” (Al Fedda, 2012, p.124). It is argued that writing is not a natural activity; it is a cognitive activity characterized by complexity in which the writer must demonstrate control over multiple variables simultaneously (Nunan 1989). Variables include thinking, relevant knowledge, ideas, and vocabulary (Anwar & Ahmed, 2016). Writing components identified by Ampa and Quraisy (2018) are structure, vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics. In addition to the myriad of variables involved, students must observe the writing conventions of the second language. Thus, students need to overcome the complexity to compose correctly. In addition to the linguistic skills involved, the writing process includes steps that students should follow towards the final production of the writing piece, such as generating ideas, organizing, drafting, revising, and editing (Khattar, 2019).

From the teaching perspective, it is not easy to decide on a single strategy to teach writing in English to facilitate learning. Collaborative learning, either in groups or in pairs, has been advocated as an influential factor in facilitating the learning of writing and improving students’ final product (Donato, 1994, Al-Tai, 2015, Khatib & Mehihami, 2015; McDonough et al., 2019, Aldossary 2021; Stroch 2005 and Abbas & Al-Bakri, 2018). Another approach is integrating reading and writing, where proponents argue that extensive reading leads to better writing (Alqouran & Smadi, 2016, Abu Ayyash & Khalaf, 2016 and Mudawy & Mousa, 2017). Researchers in the field stress the role of providing feedback as constructive, and corrective feedback is believed to be an instrumental factor in learning academic writing (Al-Marwani, 2020, Hasan & Karim, 2019 and Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005).

Literature Review

Challenges Associated with Academic Writing in English as a Foreign/Second language

Academic writing differs from other genres. Al-Mansour (2015) describes it as “a host of references, information, and evidence to support it” (p.95). Academic writing is scholarly in its purport, presentation, and its penchant for reasoning and logic (Al-Mansour, 2015). Hayland (2002) stresses the reliance on style, content, and the tangible information and details that protect the formal style that qualifies writing to be academic and thus presented to its specific audience, scholars, and teachers. Therefore, competency in academic writing necessitates cognitive skills in understanding, application, and synthesis of knowledge (Defazio et al. 2010). Characteristics of academic writing also include well-planned paragraphs, perfectly connected ideas, elaborate structures, and a vast range of vocabulary (Hayland, 2002). The ingredients of punctuation and the observation of grammar conventions are highlighted by Sawles (2005) as tools for clarity of content and thought that leave no room for ambiguity.

Considering the salient features of academic writing, producing an accurate, clear, fluent, and organized written text is challenging, leading to one of the most common problems EFL/ESL
learners face: weak written performance. To write academically, students must have the ability to handle words critically as well as the ideas of others to develop their voice, which proves to be a challenging task even for English-speaking students (Mudawy & Mousa, 2017). Tardy (2010) propounded that the challenge students face is multifaceted because they must choose information, evaluate, summarise, report, paraphrase, argue, select grammatical patterns and words, and avoid plagiarism. Al Marwani (2020) identified three categories of challenges encountered by students, which are “language skills, academic writing skills, and source managing skills” (p.114).

Research in the field constantly reveals that the range of challenges pertinent to academic writing encountered by EFL/ESL learners is broad and encompasses most language aspects. The most frequent challenges reported are vocabulary deficiency, First language (L1) interference and confusion in grammatical rules, difficulties in reading, interference in L1 syntax, spelling, punctuation, verb form, word order, spoken expressions, contracted forms, cohesion, and repetition of ideas (Farooq, Uzair-UI-Hassan & Wahid 2012 and Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal, 2016). L1 interference stems from the tendency of learners to compose sentences in their language and then translate them into the target language (Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal, 2016). Mudawy & Mousa (2017) highlighted the complicated punctuation rules in English, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. The focus of Atashian & Al-Bahri (2018) was grammar, and their study that included 200 Omani undergraduate students showed that the most frequent grammar mistakes made by students were in tenses, pronouns, and adverbs. In addition, research suggests that difficulties in academic writing are even persistent with learners living in an English-speaking community. The results of a study in the United States graduate students who speak different first languages: Greek, Japanese, Korean, and Ukrainian, indicated that linguistic difficulty in writing research papers was the most common problem. The lack of proficiency in academic writing in English was a problem for the students, although they had studied and lived in the United States for five years on average at the time of the study (Cho, 2004). Challenges in academic writing are also common among postgraduate students. A survey of postgraduate international students in Australia (Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Omani) revealed that difficulties faced by them were coherence, cohesion, important topics, and relevant references, expressing their voice, paraphrasing, referencing, and citations (Al Badi, 2015).

Challenges Specific to Arab Learners

Arab learners are no exception to the challenges associated with writing in English as a second/foreign language. However, other challenges related to the nature of Arabic as a language add to the perplexity of the writing task. Studies have revealed that writing in English is a complex process for Arab learners (Shukri, 2014) and mastering academic writing in English is a substantial challenge for Arab learners (Mallia, 2015). The difficulties associated with learning a second language add to the complexity of mastering the writing skill (Kroll 1990 as cited in Shukri 2014). Kroll (1990, as cited in Shukri 2014) opines that Arab learners’ writing in English is influenced by Arabic orthography. This was reiterated by the study of Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal (2021), whose results showed that teachers perceived “orthographical differences with the mother tongue as an impediment in the learner’s ability to write well in English” (p.399). Al-Khatib (2017) identified several spelling errors occurring in Arab learners’ writing, the top of which are dealing with vowels that have different sounds, silent letters, and different letters that have one sound. Shukri (2014) identifies two main challenges related to Arab learners and associated with the particularity of the
Arab language, which are the inability of Arab learners to think of different rhetorical approaches, and the diglossia in the Arab speech community, namely the two forms of classical and colloquial. Investigating rhetorical organization as shown in the use of cohesive devices, Phillips (2017, as cited in Al-Khatib 2017) concluded that cohesion differs between the two languages because of the cultural contrast between the two speaking communities. English cohesion is specified, non-additive, change-oriented, and text-based, while Arabic cohesion is generalized, additive, repetition-oriented, and context-based. Concerning grammar, the most frequent error that accounted for 25% of errors in the sample investigated by Al-Khatib (2017) was errors in verb tense, followed by inappropriate addition or omission of articles by 20%. The study also revealed that spelling errors are attributed to the nature of English as a semi-phonetic language. Mistakes made by students reflected their inability to deal with vowels that have different sounds, silent letters, and different letters that have one sound.

Lengthier sentences characterize the differences between the two alphabets. The Arabic writing style and metaphoric phrases are also difficulties encountered by Arab learners (Al-Fadda, 2012).

Teaching strategies
Studies have also indicated that teaching approaches influence students’ writing learning (Anwar & Ahmed, 2016). Collaborative learning has been examined in several studies. Donato (1994) argues that writing in groups provides collective scaffolding where learners pool their resources and construct knowledge collectively. Group work was found to yield better results and higher achievement in fluency and task response as compared to individual writing or pair work among Omani female students by Al-Tai (2015). Khatib and Meihami (2015) showed that “collaborative writing has a significant positive effect on improving writing skill of the EFL students” (p.209). They also concluded that students who wrote collaboratively in small groups demonstrated improvement in organization, content, and grammar. McDonough et al. (2019) believed that students could produce more accurate writing, while Zenouzagh concluded that the syntactic complexity of students improved due to group work. Aldossary’s findings (2021) showed that students who were engaged in collaborative writing outperformed others. He attributes that to the active interaction of learners during the sessions. His study also showed that students perceived collaborative learning very positively. The survey of Stroch (2005) displayed that texts written by students in pairs were more grammatically accurate with better language complexity and task achievement. Abbas and Al-Bakri (2018) have found that the pair writing technique has a positive effect on the quality and quantity of students’ writing in addition to its impact on lowering students’ writing anxiety as pair work creates a safe learning environment, enhances their critical thinking skills, and provides them with the opportunity to read and listen critically and then give feedback.

An instructional program in which integrated reading and writing yielded positive results on the students’ overall writing performance and the subskills of organization, focus, and development in the study of Alqouran & Smadi (2016). Through reading, students are exposed to orthography, morphosyntactic features, cohesive devices, words, text structure, and typographical features such as paragraphing, punctuation, and capitalization. The researchers have also concluded that the integration between reading and writing has a positive effect on the students’
attitude toward writing and reading comprehension. This reciprocal effect of reading and writing is also advocated by Abu Ayyash and Khalaf (2016). They agree that improvement in one of the two skills leads to improvement in the other. Mudawy and Mousa (2017) recommended extensive reading as a tool to enhance students’ writing, and so did Abu Ayyash and Khalaf (2016) upon observing noteworthy improvement in the writing of the experimental group in their study.

One crucial source of support is the constructive, scaffolded feedback by lecturers, as stated by Al Marwani (2020), whose study showed that technology (Google classroom in his case) could enhance students’ academic writing. Nonetheless, the intervention by lecturers and their feedback is indispensable. The importance of feedback in learning writing is also stressed by Hasan and Karim (2019, p. 291), who maintain that feedback enables learners to “observe and anchor their errors and become aware of how to progress their writing.” A distinction was made between verbal and written feedback as the results of Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) show that verbal feedback in combination with written feedback had a more significant effect than written feedback alone on improved accuracy over time.

Writing cannot be isolated from reading. Baker (1974, as cited in Maloney 2003) found that 85% of learning in college results from independent reading. However, it has been argued that cultivating reading habits is even more difficult in this era, where the reading culture has almost disappeared due to television, videos, movies, and games (Chokwe, 2013).

Objectives of the study:

1- From the perspective of students, to identify the difficulties encountered by undergraduate students in higher education institutions in Oman.
2- From the students’ perspective, to determine which teaching approaches facilitate achieving proficiency in academic writing.

Research methods:
The data collection method was a questionnaire distributed to a sample of students of both genders in several higher education institutions in Oman. This was done in coordination with English language teachers in the concerned institutions. The number of responses obtained was 97 responses across all the institutions. The questionnaire targeted two main areas, the difficulties that students face in academic writing in English and the strategies they believe to be helpful in their learning process. The challenges investigated fall under the following skills: vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, organization, cohesion, coherence, summarizing, paraphrasing, and referencing. Helpful strategies investigated are specific feedback by the teacher, using a dictionary, extensive reading about the topic, examining good examples of essays written by others, general feedback by the teacher, writing an outline/plan for the essay, writing multiple drafts, working with a peer, and working in groups.

Results
The questionnaire focusses on two areas, the difficulties encountered by the students from their perspective and the strategies they deem effective in learning English academic writing. The first domain is further specified to cover the following skills: vocabulary, grammar and sentence
structure, spelling, punctuation, organization, cohesion, coherence, summarizing, paraphrasing, and referencing.

**General Difficulties**

In the first part, students were required to rate the skills according to the difficulty level, Table 1. Results show that students rated paraphrasing as the most difficult with 34%, followed by summarising with 30.9%. The least difficult was punctuation, as only 12.35% of students thought it very difficult or difficult.

Table 1. Difficulties students face in skills (general)

| Skill                                      | Very Difficult & Difficult (Percentage of responses) |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Paraphrasing                               | 34%                                                  |
| Summarising                                | 30.9%                                                |
| Grammar and sentence structure             | 25.77%                                               |
| Organization, cohesion, and coherence      | 24.74%                                               |
| Referencing                                | 20.6%                                                |
| Vocabulary                                 | 18.5%                                                |
| Spelling                                   | 18.5%                                                |
| Punctuation                                | 12.3%                                                |

**Specific Difficulties**

The general skills are further detailed in more specific areas in the second part of the survey to explore the limitations of students in each area and the challenges they face. In vocabulary, results demonstrate that students’ vocabulary is limited and simple, and they do not possess enough vocabulary items. Only 40% expressed their ability to use new words, while half of them resorted to repetition of words they already know. In the area of spelling, results show that spelling simple words or words known to students is not an issue, while it is challenging for them to spell new or more extended words, 51.5% each. Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Vocabulary

| Statement                                                                 | Strongly agree& Agree (Percentage of responses) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| I use simple words in my writing                                         | 59.7%                                            |
| I have limited vocabulary                                                | 58.7%                                            |
| Writing is difficult for me because I do not have enough vocabulary items| 55.6%                                            |
| I can use different words to express the same meaning in English          | 52.5%                                            |
| I repeat the same words when I write                                     | 50.5%                                            |
| Using proper vocabulary (vocabulary that is related to the topic) is     | 48.4%                                            |
| difficult for me                                                         |                                                  |
| I use new words when I write                                             | 40.2%                                            |

Table 3. Spelling

| Statement                                                                 | Strongly agree& Agree (Percentage of responses) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| I can spell simple words                                                  | 82.4%                                            |
| I can spell words that I already know correctly                           | 97.3%                                            |
| It is difficult for me to write the correct spelling of new words        | 51.5%                                            |
Spelling longer words is difficult for me 51.5%
Having silent letters in some English words make spelling difficult for me 44.3%

In grammar and sentence structure, roughly two-thirds of students use simple sentences most of the time. The percentage of all other responses in this area was below 50%, the highest being 47.4% for using the correct verb tense, followed by 40.2% for using the passive voice. The lowest response, 28.8%, was for writing sentences without verbs. As for organization, cohesion, and coherence, this area does not seem to be challenging as all the responses were under 50%. However, results show that providing supporting sentences (47.4%) and establishing a connection between the paragraphs in an essay (45.3%) are the most challenging, while writing the introduction and conclusion are the least difficult, 36.08% and 32.9%, respectively. As for punctuation, figures generally show that it is not an area of concern, with the highest response being 37.1% representing students who are in the habit of writing long sentences without punctuation. 35.05% of students tend to start sentences without a capital letter.

Table 4. Grammar and sentence structure

| Statement                                         | Strongly agree& Agree (Percentage of responses) |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| I tend to use simple sentences most of the time    | 63.9%                                           |
| It is difficult for me to use the correct verb tense | 47.4%                                           |
| It is difficult for me to use the passive voice    | 40.2%                                           |
| It is difficult for me to use the correct word order in a sentence | 39.1%                                           |
| Articles (a, an & the) are confusing               | 38.1%                                           |
| Pronouns confuse me                                | 37.1%                                           |
| Using prepositions is confusing                    | 35.05%                                          |
| I sometimes write sentences without verbs          | 28.8%                                           |

Table 5. Organization, cohesion, and coherence

| Statement                                         | Strongly agree& Agree (Percentage of responses) |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| It is difficult to provide supporting sentences in a paragraph | 47.4%                                           |
| It is difficult for me to establish a connection between the paragraphs in an essay | 45.3%                                           |
| It is difficult for me to connect ideas in the same paragraph | 43.2%                                           |
| It is difficult for me to write a clear topic sentence | 42.2%                                           |
| It is difficult for me to write an introduction to an essay | 36.08%                                          |
| It is difficult for me to write a conclusion to an essay | 32.9%                                           |

Results for the three remaining areas, paraphrasing, summarizing, and referencing, also varied among students. 74.2% of students expressed their ability to paraphrase simple sentences. Though 71.1% believed reading the text more than once helps in understating, it is still difficult for 38.1% of students to paraphrase the text and for 35.05% of them to summarise it even after understanding. In referencing, names of foreign authors confuse 42.2% of students, which can be attributed to cultural differences. In-text referencing is slightly more complicated than writing a list of references, 31.9%, and 29.8%, respectively.
Table 6. Paraphrasing & Summarising

| Statement                                                                 | Strongly agree& Agree (Percentage of responses) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| I can paraphrase simple sentences                                         | 74.2%                                            |
| I understand the text when I read it more than once                       | 71.1%                                            |
| I find long sentences difficult to understand                             | 47.4%                                            |
| It is difficult to paraphrase paragraphs                                  | 45.3%                                            |
| Even after understanding the meaning, I cannot paraphrase the text correctly | 38.1%                                            |
| When paraphrasing, it is difficult for me to understand the original text | 38.1%                                            |
| I cannot differentiate between the main idea and the supporting ideas when I read | 38.1%                                            |
| Even after understanding the text, I find it difficult to summarise       | 35.05%                                           |

Strategies

The second focus of the questionnaire was to investigate the strategies or approaches that students believe to be helpful in their learning of and performance in academic writing, Table 9. The strategies included in the questionnaire were specific feedback by the teacher (feedback only to me), extensive reading about the topic, using a dictionary, examining good examples of essays written by others, general feedback by the teacher, writing an outline/plan for the essay, writing multiple drafts, working with a peer (another student) and working in groups.

From the students’ perspective, the most helpful strategy is receiving specific (individual) feedback from the teacher, with a percentage of responses mounting to 90.7%. 82.4% of students also believe that general feedback given to class is helpful. High responses are also obtained for using dictionaries (89.6%). The high response for the usefulness of using dictionaries explains the low percentage the difficulty of spelling in general Table 1. The percentage of examining good examples of essays written by others is 88.6%. Similarly, reading extensively about the topic is helpful to 88.6% of students.

However, pair work and group work are considered the least useful from the students' point of view. Only 60.8% of them thought that working with a peer is helpful, and 59.7% thought that group work is beneficial. Though these results of areas of collaborative learning are still substantial, collaborative learning is the least helpful from the point of view of students compared to other strategies examined in the questionnaire.

Table 7. Strategies

| Statement                                                      | Strongly agree& Agree (Percentage of responses) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Specific feedback by the teacher (feedback only to me)        | 90.7%                                            |
| Using a dictionary                                           | 89.6%                                            |
| Extensive reading about the topic                            | 88.6%                                            |
| Examining good examples of essays written by others           | 88.6%                                            |
| General feedback by the teacher                              | 82.4%                                            |
| Writing an outline/plan for the essay                        | 81.4%                                            |
| Writing multiple drafts                                      | 75.2%                                            |
| Working with a peer (another student)                         | 60.8%                                            |
| Working in groups                                            | 59.7%                                            |
Discussion

Results show that undergraduate students in higher education institutions in Oman face difficulties in academic writing in English as a second/foreign language but in different degrees. Out of the eight general skills investigated in the survey, paraphrasing was rated by students as the most challenging. This is attributed to several factors, as revealed in the latter parts of the survey. These include their failure to comprehend texts and complex sentences, which in turn means the inability to handle the ideas of others, as maintained by Mudawy and Mousa (2017). Consequently, students find it challenging to evaluate and paraphrase information correctly (Tardy, 2010). Another contributing factor is students’ limited vocabulary and grammatical structures, which makes students resort to using and repeating the same vocabulary items, and grammatical structures, which adversely affects the final writing product. Students are also more comfortable with spelling familiar, simple words than new, longer ones. This adds to the limitations of vocabulary. Though Storch (2005) considered silent letters an issue leading to spelling mistakes, it is thought to be the least challenging by students responding to the questionnaire. Verb tenses are an issue for students in addition to the difficulty of using passive voice, which is an essential feature of academic writing. This might be traced to the differences between Arabic and English and interference of the first language.

Students deemed receiving specific (individual) feedback from the teacher and general feedback given to the class as the most helpful strategies. These high responses concur with Al-Marwani (2020), Hasan & Karim (2019), and Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005), who all stressed the importance of feedback in improving the students’ academic writing in the second/foreign language. This is connected to students’ high response concerning writing multiple drafts since the production of multiple drafts is usually based on receiving feedback from teachers. High responses are also obtained about the usefulness of using dictionaries which explains the low percentage the difficulty of spelling in general. Students also rated highly examining good examples of essays written by others and reading extensively about the topic. Such results confirm the effectiveness of reading to write as advocated by researchers in the field, Alqouran & Smadi (2016), Abu Ayyash and Khalaf (2016) and Mudawy & Mousa 2017. However, pair work and group work are considered the least helpful from the students’ point of view. Although collaborative learning is thought to be the least beneficial from the point of view of students compared to other strategies examined in the questionnaire, the percentages are still substantial, which does not negate the findings of Donato,1994, Al-Tai, 2015, Khatib & Meihami, 2015, McDonough et al. 2019, Aldossary 2021, Storch 2005 and Abbas & Al-Bakri, 2018

Conclusion

Academic writing in a foreign language requires mastering a myriad of language skills. Hence it is a challenging task for students in higher education institutions in Oman. Findings obtained using a survey and presented in this paper show that the main difficulties students in higher education in Oman face in Academic writing, from the students’ perspective, are attributed to limited vocabulary, reliance only on simple grammatical structures, incorrect spelling of new or long words, inability to understand reading texts and comprehend long, complex sentences and consequently the failure to paraphrase or summarise them. Findings also show that the most helpful strategies from their point of view (ordered top-down) are the teacher’s specific feedback delivered individually, using a dictionary, reading extensively about the topic, examining good examples of
essays by others, general feedback by the teacher, writing outline and writing multiple drafts. Collaborative learning is the least helpful compared to others.

**Recommendations**

Examination of results shows that students in higher education in Oman face challenges in academic writing because of the limited and simple store of vocabulary and grammatical structures, in addition to difficulties in comprehending texts. Students highly rate the teacher feedback, the usefulness of using dictionaries, practice through writing drafts, and extensive reading before embarking on writing. Hence, teachers are recommended to adopt the approach of reading to write and to encourage students to read extensively to expose them to a broader range of vocabulary, structures, and styles. It is also highly recommended to provide individual feedback to students on their writing drafts, a task that demands time and effort from the teachers. Consequently, educational institutions are strongly recommended when planning their resources to consider the highly demanding nature of the tasks of writing teachers.

**About the authors:**

**Arij Mustafa** is a senior lecturer at Oman Tourism College, Oman. She holds an MA in Translation from Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. She has a substantial experience in teaching English in the tertiary level. Her research interests are in English language teaching and translation. [https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9324-6656](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9324-6656)

**Atif Noor Arbab** is a Senior lecturer of English at Oman Tourism College. He has an MA in English Language and Literature from University of Peshawar. He has more than 18 years of experience in teaching ESP, ESL and EFL in Oman and Pakistan. He is interested both in qualitative and quantitative research approaches. [https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3279-7096](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3279-7096)

**Alaa Ahmed El Sayed** is a lecturer of English at Oman Tourism College. He has an MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from the University of Leicester. He has more than 25 years of experience in teaching English to EFL learners in Oman and Egypt. His research interests focus principally on the influence of L1 on the acquisition of the target language. [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9825-453X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9825-453X)

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