

A Comparative Study of Academic Writing Errors Among EFL and ESL MA English-Major Students From Arabic-Speaking Backgrounds

Abdullah Alshayban

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—English academic writing reveals an intricate interconnection among linguistic, cultural, and affective challenges for Arabic-speaking postgraduate students who are studying English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL). The theoretical framework of the current study drew on three models, namely Interlanguage Theory, Surface Strategy Taxonomy, and sociocultural theory. The distinct domains of cultural rhetoric, constant error patterns, and academic writing anxiety among Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL postgraduate students were examined in this study via a convergent, parallel mixed-methods design consisting of semi-structured interviews (qualitative approach) combined with descriptive statistics (quantitative approach). The thematic analysis highlighted six overarching themes, namely structural errors, first language (L1) interference, academic anxiety, the utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, responses to evaluations, and cultural-rhetorical gaps. The analysis was based on valuable insights obtained from the interlocking triad in which linguistic fossilization aggravated affective anxiety, which was influenced by rhetorical norms. The distinct yet correlated contextual divergence of EFL versus ESL contexts revealed fossilized grammatical errors, dependency on AI tools, and writing anxiety in an EFL context and difficulty with rhetorical adaptation in an ESL context. In brief, the study's findings suggested a practical framework for academic writing in English supported by scaffolding, writing practice, digital literacy, immersion in rhetoric, and affective support.

Index Terms—cultural-rhetorical patterns, writing, writing anxiety, error analysis, ESL/EFL contexts

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

The pursuit of academic writing is determined by a number of elements, such as cognitive competence, pedagogical instruction, and sociocultural aspects in the contemporary world. However, in the case of Arabic-speaking postgraduate students who are studying English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL), academic writing is mainly influenced by linguistic and cultural-rhetorical factors. The transition from rich, high-context structures in Arabic to the linear and explicit elements creates a major challenge that demands negotiation between cognitive and cultural competence. It extends beyond the syntactical structures of context and is related to the affective filter hypothesis. This filter hypothesis alone can hinder learners' overall proficiency by decreasing their confidence during evaluations and when in competition with native speakers.

Existing instances of linguistic errors in the academic writing of Arabic ESL/EFL learners include the omission of articles, the incorrect use of prepositions and poor lexical choices, as well as long, unclear sentences (Alshayban, 2025; Chaleila et al., 2019); Altukruni (2019) and Waked et al. (2024) also documented writing anxiety in similar cases. In the present study, we combined linguistic, cultural, and affective domains to form a single entity to contribute to the existing literature and to pave the way for valuable research in the future. However, the comparative contexts of ESL and EFL have remained underexplored. Accordingly, we investigated these hidden aspects while addressing the cultural rhetoric, error analysis patterns, and writing anxiety among Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL learners.

B. Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To determine the typical errors that Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL postgraduate students made in academic writing;
2. To investigate how language and cultural differences affected the writing skills of Arabic-speaking students in an academic setting;
3. To compare the writing proficiency of Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL postgraduate students.

C. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What were the typical errors that Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL postgraduate students made in academic writing?
2. How did language and cultural differences affect the writing skills of Arabic-speaking students in an academic setting?
3. What were the differences between EFL and ESL postgraduate students' writing proficiency?

D. Statement of the Problem

Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL learners encounter persistent challenges in English academic writing. First, the linguistic errors that learners make are considered to be failures rather than as legitimate patterns that could be integrated into their "interlanguage." Second, fear of negative feedback from instructors or peers has a profound effect on academic writing, further highlighting the learners' writing anxiety. Thus, the learners tend to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to enhance their formal writing on a temporary basis instead of focusing on long-term proficiency. Anxiety is an active agent that inhibits learning and contributes to the fossilization of errors. Third, the fundamental distinction between the ESL context (English as a medium of instruction) and the EFL context (English as a formal subject) has been blurred. Therefore, the aim in this study was to provide a framework that could mediate the intensity of cultural-rhetorical, linguistic, and affective patterns.

E. Significance of the Study

The study has significant theoretical, pedagogical, and linguistic importance and is justified by the urgent need for a systematic framework that integrates holistic understanding. The theoretical framework was guided by three main theoretical cores: Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory, Dulay et al.'s (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. This triad of theoretical frameworks was applied to document which linguistic system works and how the output revealed why particular patterns persisted within specific socio-educational contexts.

The medium of instruction can be sophisticated within pedagogical fields, as it extends beyond the grammatical errors that both ESL and EFL learners make. Instructors can provide explicit instruction to mitigate the cultural and rhetorical consequences in academic contexts. Students need to diagnose their own frequent errors and correct them to prevent the fossilization of these errors. In addition, teacher-training programs and peer corrections can help to combat the writing anxiety that stems from negative feedback. Furthermore, the integration of AI tools in pedagogical instruction can increase efficiency when used in a balanced way to avoid overreliance on AI tools. In brief, EFL learners need immersive instruction in addition to practical writing tasks, followed by meaningful feedback.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Review of Relevant Literature for the Study

(a). Challenges in English Academic Writing

English academic writing poses various challenges for Arabic-speaking postgraduate students, whose academic writing is influenced by the interference of their first language (L1), rhetorical expressions, and the psychological weight of writing anxiety. The literature review provided in-depth details regarding the interconnection of linguistic, cultural, and affective factors that have an impact on Arabic-speaking ESL and EFL learners. This effect is somewhat similar in both EFL in the Arabic context and in the ESL context at Western universities. The thorough review of the previous literature provided insights that led to the identification of critical gaps and will pave the way for future research.

(b). The Influence of Cultural Rhetoric on Academic Writing

A major source of conflict occurs at the discourse level when Arabic-speaking students encounter cultural-rhetorical patterns. Kaplan (1966) shed light on the conflict between Western academic writing and Arabic rhetorical patterns; this cultural-rhetorical shift may lead to a lack of coherence, focus, and directness for Anglo-American readers. Conversely, in the context of EFL in Saudi Arabia, the conflict is evident in the curriculum itself. Students mainly learn grammatical rules through the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which is a deductive approach. There is insufficient explicit teaching of the rhetorical norms that are used in English academic discourse.

In a study of multilingual Saudi learners, Aldafas (2023) found that students participated actively in making rhetorical choices, but that these choices were heavily influenced by Arabic rhetorical patterns. This showed that the influence of cultural rhetoric was not a passive but an active aspect that could be corrected systematically. Similarly, Baresh (2024) highlighted the key points of ignoring cultural differences while teaching ESL in the Libyan context, which may lead to students being unable to develop international communication skills. ESL postgraduate students who are studying abroad experience additional challenges; for example, they are expected to meet the stereotypical requirements of the department without receiving any proper guidance concerning academic writing in English. Junina (2019) conducted studies in New Zealand and found that such students experienced academic barriers in terms of critical analysis and argumentative structures that met Western expectations. Similarly, Kocatepe (2020) explored female Arab students' perspectives regarding argumentative foundations and rhetorical adjustments, while Samaan

(2020) highlighted this aspect from ESL teachers' points of view. These teachers considered teaching ESL to be a major challenge due to the cultural-rhetorical themes in Western academia.

Cultural-rhetorical effects are an extremely important part of writing. The Arabic writing style has been described as using repeated structures and making circular arguments (Kaplan, 1966). Modern researchers have developed this idea further. For example, Al-Jarf (2022) demonstrated that the conventions of the Arabic language, in which inductive reasoning and high-context communication are emphasized, did not align with the expectations of English academic norms, which are characterized by linearity and the spoken domain. According to Hyland (2019), frequent assertions and the use of hedging have been misinterpreted as incoherence, although they may actually reflect cultural variations in rhetorical styles.

A theory that included the three perspectives was considered to be appropriate for answering the research questions in this study. The taxonomy of Surface Strategy allows one to identify and categorize error patterns with the assistance of interlanguage theory, which describes how such patterns came to exist and why they continue to exist. Sociocultural theory can be applied when describing the error rates and the loss in different learning conditions. This complex framework is consistent with the latest publications in the field, which provide a more detailed view of second language (L2) writing development, and include the works by Mauranen (2022) and by Canagarajah (2024).

(c). The Interference of Syntactic Error Patterns

The persistent error patterns at the discourse level remain a challenge in the Arab-American context. Corder (1974) considered error patterns to be systematic indicators of an evolving "interlanguage" instead of considering them to be mistakes. These error patterns are an opportunity for learners to acquire grammatical patterns more accurately; however, error patterns lead to the fossilization of these patterns among advanced learners who continue to make the same mistakes within their discourse despite having been provided with corrective feedback. Frequent problems occur with the grammatical use of irregular verbs, the incorrect use of articles and prepositions, and incorrect sentence structures.

Adam (2024) highlighted this significant issue in a study of postsecondary EFL learners, in which the author mentioned that the problem centered on the distinct verbal systems of the Arabic and English languages. Chaleila and Garra-Alloush (2019) provided further evidence in a study of Israeli Arab undergraduates; the authors found that the most persistent errors were verb placement, article use, and prepositions. Yaseen et al. (2018) highlighted that the academic challenges that Arab EFL postgraduate students encountered included subject-verb agreement and the omission of articles.

The conversion to an ESL environment does not automatically eliminate grammatical errors, since corrections take time and fossilization can occur. In a study of Arabic students in the United States, the content barriers included grammatical and vocabulary errors that led to anxiety and frustration (Zghyer, 2014), which was further evidence that a change in the environment did not automatically eradicate learners' errors. In a comparative study, Al Fozan (2018) posited that learners encountered linguistic hurdles due to interference from their L1 and developmental factors. Moving beyond grammatical errors, Zbeida (2020) identified issues with lexical choices, collocations, and textual cohesion, while Yousef et al. (2024) also mentioned that ESL learners had difficulty with reading advanced English texts.

(d). The Affective Domain in the Context of Writing Anxiety

Persistent linguistic errors, cultural rhetoric, and reading academic texts can result in learners experiencing anxiety. The affective domain can contribute to a number of factors, such as slowing down the writing process, a lack of motivation, and the overall hindrance of L2 proficiency. This negative impact on Arabic-speaking ESL postgraduates is evident in the existing literature; in this specific population, writing anxiety is mainly the result of negative evaluations and its impact on learners, who may perceive negative evaluations as a hurdle to overall writing competence in the target language.

Altukruni (2019) and Alluhaybi (2017) presented important evidence regarding female Arab learners' writing anxiety, which was linked to their hindered writing performances and beliefs about self-efficacy, as they lack self-confidence in their work. Waked et al. (2024) mentioned the need for culturally adaptable measurement tools for learners. These studies provided proof of how writing anxiety revealed issues with teachers' pedagogical instructions within socio-educational contexts in which the element of gender segregation was also evident. For ESL/EFL learners, the expectation to perform like a native speaker, followed by the requirement for immediate accuracy in the four skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking, generated high levels of anxiety. Anderson's (2025) study of the opposite case, namely non-Arabic speakers at Arabic universities, provided insights into the universal nature of anxiety that is induced by language barriers; the case is similar for Arabic students in Western contexts, as the experience is not felt individually, but socially. As Burka (2020) mentioned, Arabic ESL learners in African countries encountered the challenge of inheriting academic and cultural identities, followed by cultural shocks and academic anxiety.

(e). The Interconnection Between ESL and EFL Contexts

The distinction between two similar yet different contexts, namely ESL and EFL contexts, is essential for understanding in-depth error analyses, cultural rhetoric, and writing anxiety. For example, the EFL contexts in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and the like, are characterized by a lack of natural exposure to the target language. The main hurdles in

these contexts are continuous L1 interference, grammatical inaccuracy, and the learners' rhetorical dilemmas. Strategic communicative competence is particularly hindered because the focus of the instruction is on implicit grammatical rules rather than on the students' oral proficiency. Another major factor is anxiety, which slows down the students' overall academic performance. Aldafas (2025) documented the use of translanguaging techniques within Arabic contexts and found that both teachers and students used translanguaging as a deliberate, pedagogical learning strategy that reduced the learners' anxiety. However, as the excessive use of translanguaging may hinder the learners' overall proficiency, a balanced approach is necessary.

The ESL context includes countries that have standard varieties of English, such as the UK, the U.S., New Zealand, and Australia. Although these countries can provide a rich natural environment in which learners can enhance their overall communicative competence, academic writing, rhetorical expressions, and reduce their grammatical errors, fossilized errors may persist. Furthermore, the environment may increase ESL learners' anxiety due to heightened competition between the learners and native speakers regarding proficiency levels. Learners may be expected to eradicate their errors immediately, leading to academic tension, as shown in the studies by Junina (2019) and by Zghyer (2014) in New Zealand and in the United States, respectively.

Research has revealed that, while immersion situations may increase fluency, they do not necessarily result in high levels of accuracy. Similarly, Ferris (2023) mentioned that foreign-language environments probably prioritized accurate language behavior over communicative competence, which has raised serious concerns about the learning environments in which ESL and EFL were taught. The way in which mistakes were viewed during this time changed dramatically; they were no longer merely seen as linguistic blunders, but also as signs of higher-level culture and thought.

(f). Identification of the Research Gaps

Despite the extensive amount of existing literature, significant research gaps still exist. While existing studies of EFL/ESL contexts have identified different patterns, comparisons involving the Arabic-English context remain limited. Al Fozan (2018) conducted a comparative study of a single nationality that focused on undergraduate students; however, a comparative study of students at the postgraduate level is needed to explore elements such as the rhetorical culture, error analysis, and writing anxiety, as well as to answer questions like "Does a natural environment truly reduce L1 interference, or it is blurred by fluency?" and "Does anxiety occur in all ESL/EFL contexts or it is restricted to the Arabic-English context?"

Furthermore, although the existing literature has shed light on academic writing as a monolithic entity, as mentioned in the studies by Chaleila et al. (2019) and by Yaseen et al. (2018), the existing research has not investigated how the impact of rhetorical patterns, error analysis, and writing anxiety on engineering or science students differs from that of literature or sociology students. Diverse perspectives are lacking in the literature, and the present study is an attempt to fill these gaps. In this study, the focus is on distinct genres such as theoretical papers, laboratory reports, and the like in order to expand the viewpoints in this scenario. Scholarly attention began to shift toward a more contextualized explanation of writing problems at the turn of the 20th century. The role of genre conventions and disciplinary requirements in scholarly writing has been highlighted by scholars such as Hyland (2019), who did not name them explicitly. Scholars explained that Arabic-speaking learners struggled with the linear, thesis-based structure that is typical of academic writing in English. Since L1 writing traditions were recognized as permeating L2 writing, resulting in new characteristics such as circular arguments and excessively complex writing, which revealed a significant need for coordination, the recognition of rhetorical transfer also improved during this time (Al-Jarf, 2022).

Previous studies, like the works by Zbeida (2020) and by Waked et al. (2024), mainly relied on cross-sectional surveys and individual factors such as anxiety and error analysis. In-depth perspectives concerning developmental factors or overall struggles are lacking. A process-oriented approach tracking the proficiency from novice to advanced learners is also missing. Such an approach can provide useful insights into the questions of error production, the development of rhetorical awareness, and fluctuations in anxiety levels in distinct contexts.

Finally, Aldafas (2025) investigated responsive pedagogy and translanguaging, but comprehensive details in pedagogical terms remain. Evolutionary literature has revealed institutional influences on the development of writing. With regard to studies of the use of English as the language taught in Arab universities, Belhiah and Elhami (2015) demonstrated that the way in which curriculum content was designed and how evaluations were performed were likely to covertly contribute to the propagation of error patterns. The prospect of introducing automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems (El-Esery, 2023; Li et al., 2022) appeared to be promising for Arabic-speaking learners, but that the cultural considerations related to the algorithms that generated suggestions and feedback were complex. Evidence provided in a longitudinal study (Storch & Tapper, 2009) demonstrated that error reduction could not be achieved in a single grammar lesson, but required the implementation of long-term, subject-specific interventions.

(g). Key Takeaways From the Literature Review

The literature review provided a clear picture of Arabic-speaking postgraduate students who were caught at the intersection of culturally influenced patterns of rhetoric, linguistic errors, and academic anxiety, all of which influenced their overall competence. Cultural patterns of rhetoric revealed the difficulty that learners encountered in terms of aligning their cultural patterns with those of Western cultures. In addition, the linguistic errors were mainly due to L1 interference, grammatical errors involving verb-subject placement, problems with argumentative reasoning, and the

overall syntactic organization of drafts. Moreover, writing anxiety hindered the learners' strategic competence due to a competitive force driven by comparisons with native speakers. This pressure had a negative impact on the learners' overall academic proficiency. These three elements were distinct in nature yet interconnected in that they had a strong impact on learners' performances and competence.

The distinct EFL and ESL contexts played a major role in this scenario and provided a clear framework for mitigating the impacts of the challenges posed by cultural rhetoric, error analysis, and writing anxiety. These challenges were shaped by different factors in EFL and ESL contexts. However, the framework also provided a structural basis for mitigating the impact of the elements mentioned above and provided robust data for simplifying the complexity of the field. The simplified version of solutions will help Arabic-speaking students and other students in similar contexts to mitigate the consequences of rhetorical patterns, error analysis, and academic anxiety.

The current framework allows for the formulation of specific written pedagogical recommendations by distinguishing between errors that can be explained by the developmental stage and those that can be caused by L1 interference, in addition to other factors that could affect the instructions. For example, the quantitative and qualitative trends, the experiences and the writing products, and the processes of writing all demand a dual approach when analyzing graduate students' writing errors. In addition, more sophisticated contextual information that takes disciplinary, institutional, and individual factors into account should replace the EFL/ESL dichotomy. Moreover, high-quality research on mistakes invariably bridges the assumed divide between the domains of analysis and practice, as well as between scholarship and instruction.

B. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework was based on three main theories:

- Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory,
- Dulay et al.'s (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, and
- Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory.

Interlanguage theory considers error patterns to be legitimate patterns that learners make that contribute to their "interlanguage." Conversely, Surface Strategy Taxonomy helped to transition the study beyond grammatical patterns to form a fundamental framework for the study, which enabled us to trace the L1 interference during the stages of development. Moreover, sociocultural theory highlighted the two main elements of mediation and the zone of proximal development, which refers to factors such as self-efficacy and anxiety. Mediation can be provided by teachers, peers, or on technological platforms, all of which affect the zone of proximal development.

Overall, these three theoretical approaches provided a holistic framework for the present study. This triad of theoretical frameworks was designed based on how linguistic systems work and how the results affected the existence of certain patterns in distinct sociocultural and educational domains.

TABLE 1
GUIDING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972)	Error analysis as legitimate patterns produced by learners that contribute to their "interlanguage."
Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay et al., 1982)	(1) Omissions like missing articles. (2) Additions like unnecessary prepositions. (3) Misformations like incorrect verb forms. (4) Misorderings like incorrect adjective-noun sequences.
Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)	Signifies the social context moving beyond the textual context to a learner's cognitive and affective domains.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The research design entailed a convergent, parallel mixed-methods design to reveal the interplay of patterns of cultural rhetoric, error analysis, and writing anxiety as reflected in the written work of Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL postgraduate students. The design adopted a dual qualitative and quantitative approach to enhance understanding and to provide in-depth viewpoints. The primary method was interviews with 53 postgraduate students; these interviews provided the "how" and "why" answers by documenting rich data pertaining to the learners' diverse perspectives. These interview responses were complemented with a quantitative layer through descriptive statistics to strengthen the analysis of the study. This thematic foundation provided a comprehensive overview of the study across distinct contexts, namely EFL and ESL contexts. This framework provided robust details to create the systematic organization of the data, as shown in Figure 1 below.

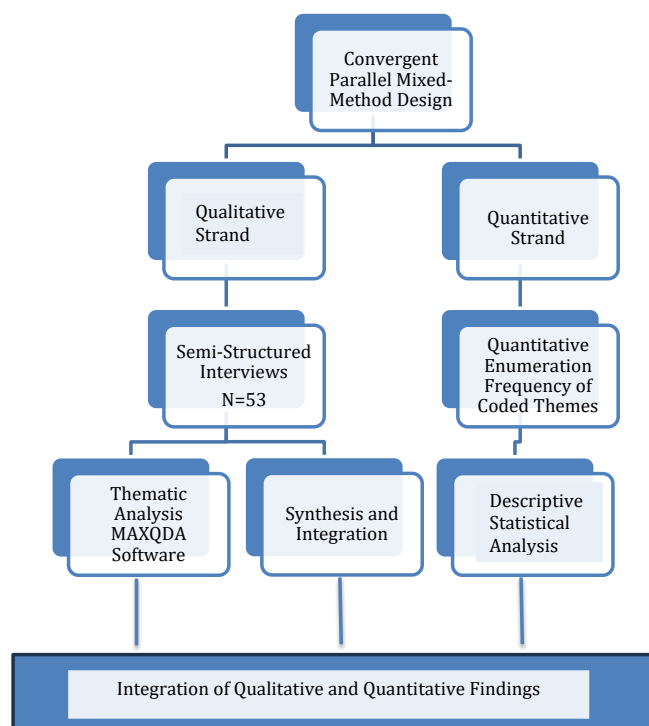


Figure 1. Systematic Organization of Data

B. Population and Sampling Technique

Fifty-three ($N = 53$) Arabic-speaking ESL and EFL postgraduate students who were studying linguistics and/or literature participated in the semi-structured online interviews. A purposive sampling technique was used to conduct the study on the basis of two axes. Moreover, the motive behind selecting purposive sampling was cultural background; all participants selected for the study were Saudi and had the same cultural underpinnings. Additionally, half of the respondents were EFL learners and the other fifty percent were ESL learners.

The contextual axis involved both EFL and ESL contexts; it provided a systematic basis for a comparative study of EFL and ESL learners. The EFL context refers to an environment in which students learn English as a formal language in an academic setting, while an ESL context refers to an environment in which English is the medium of instruction and is spoken daily in a natural environment. The proficiency axis involved the participants' self-rating their overall English proficiency on a four-point scale (Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor). The aim was to obtain insights into the students' rhetorical patterns, error frequency, and writing anxiety.

C. Instrumentation

The primary instrument was semi-structured interviews followed by an open-ended questionnaire to conduct a thematic analysis. The questionnaire involved thematic sections such as those shown in Figure 2 below.

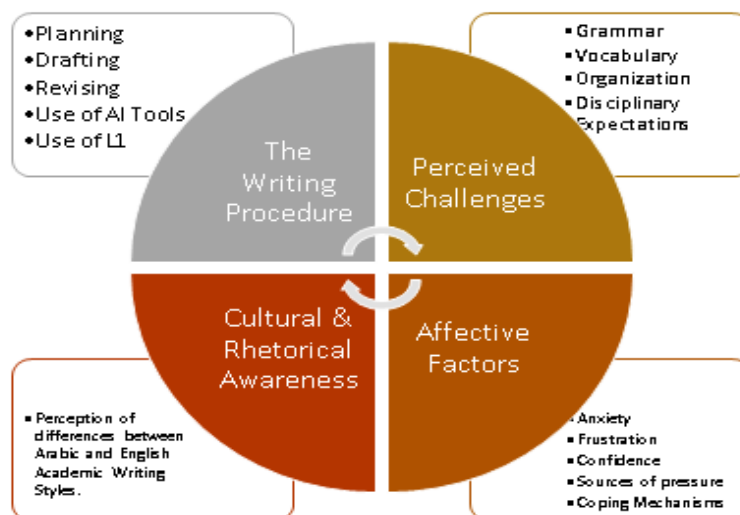


Figure 2

D. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure entailed two phases. The potential participants were contacted through their respective academic departments and were then screened to determine their eligibility. The eligibility criteria were that the participants were Arabic speakers who were enrolled in specific disciplines. The potential participants were required to sign consent forms. The interviews, which were conducted online due to geographical distance, lasted for 25-30 minutes; the interviews were recorded and later transcribed manually. The transcriptions of the audio recordings were anonymized by assigning codes, such as EFL02-good and EFL03-fair, based on the contextual and proficiency information pertaining to the respondents.

E. Data Analysis Framework

The analysis involved a convergent parallel framework consisting of both the qualitative interviews and the quantitative thematic coding. MAXQDA software was used to analyze the transcriptions. The qualitative analysis entailed initial coding by extracting thematic codes directly from the transcribed data; examples were article omission or confusion, circular argumentative patterns, fear of negative evaluations, and so forth. These were further incorporated into themes such as L1 interference, sources of writing anxiety, rhetorical transfer, reliance on feedback, and strategic compensations. A codebook was created for the analysis of the final themes.

The qualitative codebook served as the basis for quantification. MAXQDA software was used to extract the frequency of the coded themes from each participant's data; this allowed for the categorization of challenges across the distinct contexts of EFL and ESL. Finally, the qualitative insights were linked to the insights obtained from the quantitative data to answer the questions of "how," "why," and "what." For example, the analysis could not only reveal that rhetorical transfer was a source of anxiety, but could also capture the students' valuable insights into their experiences in each context.

F. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical considerations. Prior to the study, consent forms were signed and potential respondents were made aware of the purpose of the study. The participants' audio recordings were stored in a password-protected digital storage, and the data will be deleted five years after the completion of the research. The respondents were also provided with a summary of the study's final findings. Furthermore, the research protocol received formal approval from the relevant institutional board.

IV. RESULTS

A. Foundational Quantitative Profile of the Sample

The analysis provided detailed insights into the demographics and a descriptive structure, which was categorized by qualitative themes. Of the 53 Arabic-speaking participants, 43 were male and 10 were female; the gender imbalance was noted. The demographic information revealed the gendered domain of the analysis and enabled the identification of particular variations within the perspectives and experiences of the postgraduate students. Furthermore, the descriptive insights pertained to the students' self-reported proficiency, as shown in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2
WRITING CONFIDENCE: SELF-RATED PROFICIENCY

Proficiency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	14	26.4%
Good	23	43.4%
Fair	15	28.3%
Poor	1	1.9%

Table 2 illustrates the four-point scale indicating the Arabic-speaking postgraduates' self-rated proficiency levels in English. The excellent proficiency level (26.4%) reflected the students' self-confidence and awareness in relation to their affective domain. They were more confident about their academic writing than were those who rated their proficiency levels as fair (28.3%) or poor (1.9%); students who did not consider themselves to be as proficient probably did so due to a lack of self-efficacy. The greatest percentage of students rated their proficiency level as good (43.4%), highlighting the students' self-assurance as they might be excellent but do not consider themselves as such due to writing anxiety.

In terms of the disciplines, only two students were studying English literature, while 19 were enrolled in English linguistics and 31 in the MA English programs. The divisions were further categorized based on the relevance to the respective fields. Linguistics students demonstrated high metalinguistic and cognitive awareness of academic writing, as the discipline mainly focuses on the scientific study of language. Another perspective reflected the use of digital tools. Almost 60% of the students mentioned that they used AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, DeepSeek, and Gemini for academic writing. The awareness of these AI tools sheds light on the students' advanced level of learning as they strategically incorporated the use of technology in their academic writing to produce structured documents.

B. MAXQDA-Based Thematic Coding Analysis

MAXQDA software was used to extract six overarching themes from the participants' data. Each code reflected a significant dimension of academic writing. The frequency and co-occurrence of these themes reflected the interconnectedness and the salient features.

The extended interpretation of the themes according to the participants' characteristics is presented below:

1. **Structural Errors:** The data revealed syntactical errors in the students' academic writing. Categorized according to Surface Strategy Taxonomy, the major errors were omissions (missing definite/indefinite articles) and misformations (incorrect verb tenses and lexical choices). One of the EFL participants misused the article "the" and produced incoherent sentences that usually ran on aimlessly. These instances were often considered to be "run-ons" by the instructors.
2. **L1 Interference:** One of the ESL respondents reported the use of Arabic idiomatic expressions in the target language and stated that they brainstormed in Arabic first and then translated their thoughts into English. This process automatically followed the patterns of L1 transfer and interference; it could also exacerbate the cultural and rhetorical gaps, as the rhetorical patterns were indulged in the formal writing because the postgraduate learners lack metalinguistic awareness.
3. **Academic Pressure:** The two subtypes of writing anxiety are cognitive and social evaluative anxiety. Cognitive anxiety revolves around grammatical errors, while social anxiety pertains to instructors' and peers' negative evaluations. The aspects of competition and expectations linked to performing like native speakers were also a factor in social anxiety. One female participant mentioned, "I feel scared every time I submit a paper, I'm sure there are mistakes which make me look incapable" (EFL11-fair). This correlated with the occurrence of structural errors, as the participant complained about their level of proficiency in academic writing.
4. **Utilization of AI Tools:** The students with lower proficiency admitted to using AI tools, which often led to dependence and overreliance on these tools, as the users lack creativity. By contrast, the high-proficiency students used the tools to assist them with proofreading rather than relying on them completely. As one of the participants mentioned, "Grammarly helps with grammar, but it misses bigger problems with cohesion and flow." This example also indicated the drawbacks of AI, as it may never compete with the overall strategic competence and cognitive capability of humans.
5. **Evaluation Response:** A contextual comparison between ESL and EFL was evident. In the ESL context, constant feedback led to transformative and positive learning. Conversely, the EFL learners often received summative feedback that was focused on errors, which led to the learners evaluating their academic writing negatively. According to sociocultural theory, which includes the zone of proximal development, such negative evaluations will hinder the students' overall proficiency levels.
6. **Gap in the Cultural Rhetoric:** The Arabic participants mainly complained about vagueness in English academic writing, as the sense-for-sense or even the literal translation of literary texts was not fully accomplished. This was due to the vast vocabulary in the Arabic language, while English has limited lexical choices regarding the words that were used in the literature. The EFL learners were mainly frustrated because the patterns of cultural rhetoric in English are completely different from those in the Arabic language.

TABLE 3
THEMATIC CODING OF CORE WRITING CHALLENGES

Themes	Coding	Frequency	Reference (Data)
Structural Errors	Misuse of articles, prepositions, run-ons	31	"I often misuse 'the' and write long unclear sentences."
L1 Transfer	Arabic idioms, indirect structure, repetition	28	"I translate from Arabic and it becomes too long-winded."
Confidence & Anxiety	Fear of making grammatical mistakes, low self-efficacy	34	"I still feel insecure, even after revisions."
Tool Usage	Grammarly, outlines, peer feedback	26	"Grammarly helps but misses cohesion problems."
Feedback Response	Instructor and peer feedback improves clarity	21	"Feedback helps me to see my vague expressions and improve."
Cultural & Rhetorical Gap	Politeness versus directness, "flowery" language	19	"In Arabic, we value politeness, not direct argument."

Graph 4.1 further illustrates the thematic coding of the core writing challenges.

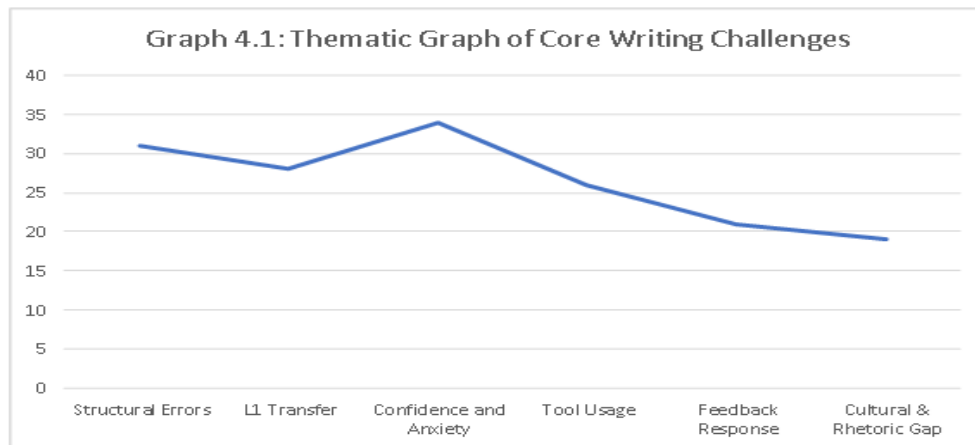


Figure 3. Graphic Illustration of Thematic Coding of the Core Writing Challenges

C. Contextual Cross-Analysis of EFL Versus ESL Domains

Structural errors and L1 interference were found most frequently in EFL contexts, whereas fossilized errors and the subconscious use of the L1 were evident in ESL contexts. The ESL learners exhibited greater metacognitive awareness of common linguistic patterns, while the EFL learners were unable to reach the same level of proficiency due to a number of factors, such as the lack of a natural environment and negative evaluations by instructors and peers. With regard to academic anxiety, the EFL learners experienced the drawbacks of overreliance on AI tools, which further led to a lack of creativity. By contrast, the ESL learners used the AI tools for proofreading and treated these tools as providing assistance instead of depending on them entirely. The ESL learners received rich feedback, which provided them with positive insights for a transitional layout. However, the cultural and rhetorical gaps were evident in both the EFL and the ESL contexts. The EFL learners were constantly aware of the need to learn and adjust to the rhetorical patterns in the texts, but the ESL learners lack explicit instruction in these cultural and rhetorical patterns.

V. DISCUSSION

Instances of rhetorical patterns, error analysis, and writing anxiety among Arabic-speaking postgraduate students were investigated in this study. The data analysis incorporated the novel dimensions of the study by revealing the influence of these three elements on L2 learners in distinct contexts while directly addressing the gaps in the existing literature. The results demonstrated the interrelated combination of

- structural errors,
- L1 interference, and
- writing anxiety.

These were not separate problems, but a triad that revealed diverse perspectives.

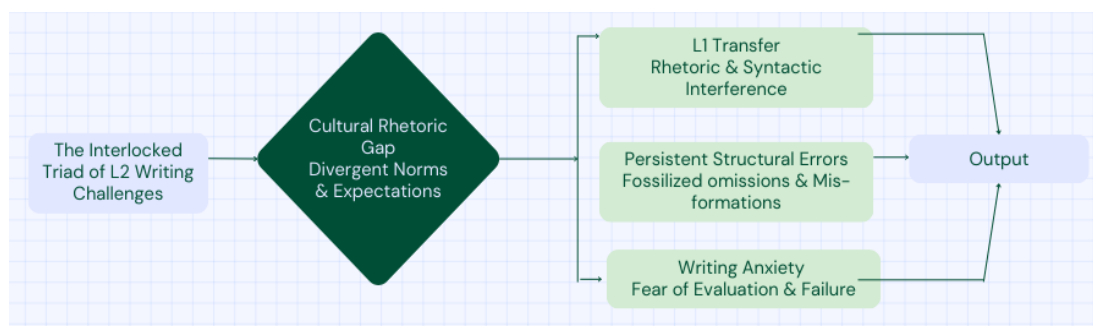


Figure 4. Diagrammatic Illustration of Key Research Findings

The flowchart in Figure 4 provides a composite picture of the research findings. It shows that the structural errors were not linguistic, but were influenced by L1 interference. Writing anxiety, which occurred due to the fear of negative evaluations and cultural-rhetorical gaps, functioned as an overarching amplifier that illustrated the learners' lack of awareness about important rhetorical structures.

The study has clarified the research gaps in the previous literature. The comparison of ESL and EFL contexts revealed that ESL learners developed within the natural environment of Standard English and acquired significant skills through essential feedback. However, the EFL learners experienced writing anxiety and made syntactic errors due to the lack of inductive instruction and receiving negative feedback, which raised the learners' affective filter. Another

significant finding was the linguistic students' metalinguistic awareness. A gender-based analysis revealed that the instances of writing anxiety were mainly reported by the female participants, while the male participants mainly reported syntactic issues.

In addition, the findings aligned with the theoretical framework mentioned in the methodological design section. Syntactic issues fell under interlanguage theory, while the omissions and misformations formed part of Surface Strategic Taxonomy, and the writing anxiety and the feedback responses that the EFL participants reported fell under sociocultural theory. This viewpoint demonstrates the importance of social factors in conjunction with the cognitive domains within socio-educational contexts. Hence, the more supportive and scaffolded the social environment, the more effectively the mediation can counter anxiety and promote the learners' overall development.

Pedagogically, instruction can become multifaceted by moving beyond a simple focus on the grammatical errors that ESL and EFL learners make. Instructors' explicit instructions help to mitigate the consequences of a lack of cultural and rhetorical awareness. Students need to diagnose their frequent errors in academic writing and correct them to prevent the fossilization of errors. Teacher-training programs and peer corrections can help to alleviate the effects of harsh evaluations and can lead to increased confidence and self-efficacy. Furthermore, the integration of AI tools and pedagogical instruction can increase efficiency, but requires a balanced approach to avoid overreliance on AI tools. In summary, EFL learners need immersive instruction in conjunction with practical writing tasks, followed by meaningful feedback. ESL learners need explicit instruction regarding the use of cultural and rhetorical patterns in formal writing.

In summary, this study has provided the systematic organization of proficient writing techniques to assist Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL postgraduate students and other students in similar contexts. This overview was based on the interrelationship of distinct perspectives on mind, language, and cultural rhetoric. It has provided a holistic understanding of patterns of rhetoric, error analysis, and writing anxiety that the learners experienced in both ESL and EFL contexts, together with solutions involving the pedagogical approach to enhance academic writing techniques.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this study, we documented the interconnected challenges that characterized the academic writing experiences of Arabic-speaking EFL and ESL postgraduate students. The findings confirmed that proficiency in academic writing was influenced by cognitive, rhetorical, and affective domains. This perspective extends beyond lexical acquisition and grammatical accuracy in different contexts. The data analysis provided insights revealing that the structural errors were not linguistic, but were influenced by L1 interference, and that writing anxiety was due to the fear of negative evaluations. In addition, the cultural-rhetorical gap acted as a significant amplifier that revealed the learners' lack of awareness about important rhetorical structures.

The comparative contexts of ESL and EFL were discussed: While the ESL learners developed within the natural environment of Standard English and acquired significant skills through essential feedback, the EFL learners experienced writing anxiety and made syntactic errors due to the lack of inductive instruction and having received negative feedback, which raised the learners' affective filter. Furthermore, the findings aligned with the theoretical framework mentioned in the methodological design section. From a pedagogical perspective, instruction can become multifaceted by moving beyond a simple focus on the grammatical errors that ESL or EFL students make. Lastly, this study has provided a fundamental overview of proficient writing techniques to assist Arabic-speaking and other postgraduate students.

The study's results led to the following recommendations:

- Explicit and inductive instruction regarding the immersion of cultural and rhetorical patterns in academic writing will provide essential information for both ESL and EFL learners.
- Meaningful feedback can lead to a positive transition and can mitigate EFL students' fossilized errors.
- EFL learners can use a step-by-step scaffolding technique to enhance the zone of proximal development via efficient mediation, which is also linked to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis.
- The integration of technology and pedagogical techniques requires a balanced approach to avoid total dependency; the focus should be on enhancing the learners' strategic cognitive competence through creative writing tasks.
- Policy makers can play an essential role by transforming the curriculum policy and incorporating the abovementioned aspects to ensure that students have a high level of proficiency in academic writing.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adam, M. H. (2024). *Postsecondary Arabic-speaking English as a foreign language learners' perceptions of learning English sentence structure* [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University].
- [2] Aldafas, A. H. (2023). *Saudi Arabian multilingual learners' utilization of their linguistic repertoires to make rhetorical choices in English writing* [Doctoral dissertation, Washington State University].
- [3] Aldafas, A. H. (2025). Perceptions and practices of translanguaging in academic writing: Insights from Saudi multilingual learners and their instructor. *Cogent Education*, 12(1), Article 2551898. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2551898>
- [4] Al Fozan, I. M. A. (2018). *An investigation of the strategies that Saudi university students use when writing in English and the linguistic challenges they encounter: A comparative and correlational study* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham].

- [5] Alluhaybi, M. (2017). *Psychology, gender and EFL writing: A study of the relationship between Saudi students' writing performance and their attitudes, apprehension and self-efficacy* [Doctoral dissertation, University of St Andrews].
- [6] Al-Jarf, R. (2022). Learning vocabulary in the App Store by EFL college students. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, 5(1), 216–225. <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v5-i1-30>
- [7] Alshayban, A. (2025). Unpacking the grammar in English as a foreign language academic writing: Error patterns and categorization in research thesis proposals. *Journal of Arabic Sciences & Humanities*, 18(4), 436–456.
- [8] Altukruni, R. (2019). *English writing anxiety in Saudi undergraduate female students* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee].
- [9] Anderson, K. (2025). *Language barriers and academic writing challenges: Perspectives of non-Arabic speaking graduate students in Arab universities*. ResearchGate. Retrieved June 15, 2026, from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388190258>
- [10] Baresh, E. F. (2024). Incorporating cultural background in teaching EFL writing in Libyan: A critical literature review. *Al-Lisan: Jurnal Bahasa*, 9(1), 1–16.
- [11] Belhiah, H., & Elhami, M. (2015). English as a medium of instruction in the Gulf: When students and teachers speak. *Language Policy*, 14(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-014-9336-9>
- [12] Burka, T. B. A. (2020). *Reading and writing across cultures: Using a social literacies approach to account for the experiences of Libyan students in South African higher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape].
- [13] Canagarajah, S. (2024). Decolonizing academic writing pedagogies for multilingual students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 58(1), 280–306. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3231>
- [14] Chaleila, W., & Garra-Alloush, I. (2019). The most frequent errors in academic writing: A case of EFL undergraduate Arab students in Israel. *English Language Teaching*, 12(7), 120–128. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n7p120>
- [15] Corder, S. P. (1974). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 5(4), 161–170. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1967.5.1-4.161>
- [16] Dulay, H., Burt, M., & Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Language two*. Newbury House.
- [17] El-Esery, A. M. (2023). Implementing virtual literature circles for developing English learners' vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 12(2), 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.55493/5019.v12i2.4723>
- [18] Ferris, D. R., & Hedgcock, J. S. (2023). *Teaching L2 composition: Purpose, process, and practice*. Routledge.
- [19] Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing*. Cambridge University Press.
- [20] Junina, A. K. (2019). *Investigating academic literacy challenges on undergraduate programmes: A focus on Arabic-speaking students in New Zealand* [Doctoral dissertation, Auckland University of Technology]. Retrieved June 15, 2026, from <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/handle/10292/13035>
- [21] Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16(1–2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1966.tb00804.x>
- [22] Kocatepe, M. (2020). A phenomenographic exploration of female Arab second language writers' experiences with information in an EAP writing course. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 50(4), 220–243.
- [23] Mauranen, A. (2022). Where is spoken interaction in LSP? *Ibérica*, 44(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.17398/2340-2784.44.7>
- [24] Samaan, A. (2020). *ESL instructors' perceptions of teaching English writing to Arabic-speaking students* [Doctoral dissertation, Azusa Pacific University].
- [25] Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(3), 209–231. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1972.10.1-4.209>
- [26] Storch, N., & Tapper, J. (2009). The impact of an EAP course on postgraduate writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 8(3), 207–223.
- [27] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- [28] Waked, A. N., El-Moussa, O., Pilotti, M. A. E., Al-Mulhem, H., El Alaoui, K., & Ahmed, R. (2024). Cultural considerations for the second language writing anxiety inventory: Saudi Arabian female university students. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, Article 1288611. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1288611>
- [29] Yaseen, A. A., Ismail, K., & Yasin, M. S. M. (2018). Syntactic errors in an Arab EFL postgraduate student's spoken English during a thesis supervision session. *Arab World English Journal*, 9(4), 392–406.
- [30] Yousef, D. A., & Hapgood, S. (2024). Native Arabic-speaking graduate students' strategic reading activity with advanced English texts from two disciplines. *Electronic Interdisciplinary Miscellaneous Journal*, 75(9), 1–38.
- [31] Zbeida, A. (2020). *A linguistic and textual analysis of Arab first language speakers' academic writing skills in English in Cape Town* [Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape].
- [32] Zghyer, R. N. A. (2014). *Arab students' difficulties with English writing during their transition to the United States: An exploratory study* [Doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale].

Abdullah Alshayban is an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. He has a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from the University of Memphis in Tennessee, USA. He earned his MA in TESL/TEFL from Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, USA. His interests include language and vocabulary acquisition, grammar, syntax, semantics, research methodology, and Computer-Assisted Language Learning. He can be reached at: ashieban@qu.edu.sa <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3620-1977>

1. Exploring the Use and Challenges of Phrasal Verbs among EFL Arabic Medical Students. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n8p186>
2. A Comparative Study of Non-English Major Saudi Students' Perceptions Toward Using Arabic in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i8.9675>