

# Arab Learner's Attitudes and Problems in Writing Their CVs in English

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## Abstract

*This study analyzed the errors committed by Arab learners when they write their CVs in English. The errors were classified into three categories: conforming to the correct format of writing a CV, grammatical and spelling errors. The researchers also studied university students' responses towards writing their CVs in English as well as their need to learn how to write their CVs in English as part of the English courses which they take during their study at the university since English language courses are obligatory courses in all the Jordanian universities. The researchers used a questionnaire to investigate whether there are significant differences between the participants' responses that could be attributed to gender or the academic major. The results revealed that there were no significant differences due to the difference in gender but there were some significant differences that could be attributed to the difference in the academic major.*

**Key words:** CV, Jordan, English, Writing, English as a foreign language

## Introduction

English has become the international language for communication around the world. This might be an excellent internal reason for us to learn English. Just about everywhere one goes in the world today, one can find people who speak English and most of the international companies around the world require English for job positions (Brown, 2001, p. 21).

Thus one needs to master some skills in English so that he/ she can compete with the others in order to have the opportunity to have a better job. And one way of improving oneself is by mastering one or more foreign language a matter that opens avenues to overcome competitors. But this mastery of a foreign language is not an easy thing one needs to work hard to achieve this goal. Here comes the role of teachers as facilitators of learning by looking into the needs of their students and try to help them.

In his review of the factors involved in the implementation of CBE programs in ESL, Auerbach (cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 146) pointed out to the fact that there should be a focus on successful functioning of learning a language in a society a matter that enables the learners to cope with the demands of the world that he becomes part of. Moreover, he refers to the focus on life skills, as students are taught the forms and the skills of the foreign or second language which are required by the situations in which they will function.

In teaching a foreign language teachers focus on the four skills to help students communicate successfully with the foreign environment. Writing is one of the four skills that are taught and learned to enhance communication and help one express him/herself. Teachers teach writing by focusing on some issues like generating ideas, organizing them coherently and using cohesive devices so that they convey a clear meaning, as well as using the appropriate grammar to produce a comprehensible product (Brown, 2000, p. 335). We all agree that writing is a complicated task for EFL learners as it is a difficult task for native ones (Brown, 2000, p. 335). Thus, if one is to write well, one needs somebody to guide him/her to the right way and that is the role of English teachers who should help their students adopt and use the right method to reach the desired outcome.

Teachers of foreign languages, especially English, would have to face the question of who their learners are, and why they are learning language (Brown, 2000, p. 86). So English teachers should pay attention to the fact that EFL students want to write in order to fulfill both formal and professional purposes. This can be very stressful if they have never learnt to write in English (Piccolo, 2010, p. 10). Moreover, Hutchinson *et al* (1987: 19), in their work about English for special purposes, claim that “all decisions as to content and methods are based on the learners’ reasons for learning.”

This argument goes in the same vein with the case of Jordan where students learn English for special purposes in their professional lives or academic needs. Jordan’s case in learning English is just the same as Anthony (n.d.) put it in his definition of ESP which is meant to “meet the specific needs of the learners”.

Writing a CV in English is something that students should master as it is the way in which one sells himself to others in his journey in looking for a job. Jordanian people work in different parts of the world where English is needed as it is the international language for business all over the world.

From this point, the present study proceeds by analyzing the CVs of Arab EFL applicants asking them about their opinions in learning how to write their CVs as part of English courses given at college.

### **Statement of the problem**

This study attempts to investigate the problems that Arabs EFL students’ suffer from in writing their CVs in English as many if not all of the CVs presented by job applicants and most of the advertisements calling for jobs in Jordan are written in English. The researchers have conducted a content analysis study of the errors found in the CVs submitted by some job applicants at Al-Huson University College. Those errors were classified into three categories: errors of conforming to the format, spelling errors and grammatical errors.

Furthermore, the researchers did a survey to see to what extent the students at AL-Huson Applied University College are aware of the idea of writing a CV and what language they prefer to write their CVs in.

Thus, such a study sheds the light on both the errors and the attitudes of EFL learners in writing their CVs.

### **Hypotheses of the study**

This study is intended to test the following hypotheses:

1. There are no statically significant differences ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) between students’ responses to the questionnaire questions due to the difference in gender.
2. There are no statically significant differences ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) between students’ responses to the questionnaire question due to the difference in their academic major at college.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants of the study**

The participants of the study were randomly chosen from the students registered in the second semester of the academic year 2011 / 2012 in English 102, a course given at AL-Huson University College. There were seventy-five participants both male and female who answered the questions of the questionnaire. There were twenty-nine male students, and forty-six female students.

#### **Data collection and analysis**

The data consist of 30 CVs written in English. The CVs were checked and attention was given to three categories namely, spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes and the conformation to the correct format of the CV which was adopted from English Advanced dictionary (R.52) . The researchers who are an assistant professor and an instructor of English both checked the CVs for this respect.

#### **Statistical analysis**

The researchers prepared a questionnaire to measure students’ attitudes towards writing their CVs in English and to what extent do they appreciate the role of their CVs in having a better chance in the job that they apply for. The questionnaire consisted of thirteen questions.

The researchers computed the total average mean scores and the standard deviations of the student's responses on the questionnaire questions. The mean of both male and female students were paired using Anova -t- test for equality to determine if there were any significant differences between students' responses on the questionnaire that could be attributed to gender or the academic major.

### Limitations of the study

This study deals only with the CV presented for job applications at AL-Huson University College. More diversified sample from different universities or other places could have been more representative. Besides, the present study is confined to the students registered in the second semester in the English language course, E102, a larger sample would give more reliable results.

### Findings and discussion

In this part the researchers will discuss the results of the error analysis that they did on the CVs presented to the college for the sake of getting jobs in the different departments.

The researchers studied and analysed thirty CVs in respect of the following categories: format, grammar and spelling mistake.

The researchers adopted the format of American CVs which is documented in Oxford Advanced Dictionary (R. 52).

From the thirty CVs under study, there were seventeen which conformed to the adopted format while the rest of the CVs didn't conform to the format.

It's worth mentioning here that the CVs submitted from students who had graduated from western or foreign universities such as UK, USA, India, Pakistan and Malaysia were more conformed to the format described in the dictionary. This might be due to the fact that English is the dominant language in these countries and the students who study there must use English properly as it is the only common language in that atmosphere.

On the other hand, CVs submitted by students who graduated from Jordanian universities came next in their conformation to the format used in this respect. The least conformed are those submitted from students who graduated from Jordanian national (private) universities.

As for the other respect which dealt with grammatical mistakes, CVs showed that the students committed several grammatical mistakes. Those mistakes could be classified into some categories too. The first one comes from the fact that students resorted to literal translation of their CVs from Arabic to English a matter that creates fatal mistakes on the sentence structure such as the subject – verb agreement or the place of the adjective in accordance to the noun. The following are some examples on this point:

- Team work – (*work team*)
- Foreign language – (*different language*)
- Bachelor – (*Baccalaurate*)

Beside grammatical mistakes there were some spelling mistakes too, but the researchers noticed that the spelling mistakes are few and here are some examples to illustrate those mistakes: (*prenciples*), for principles, (*privit*), for private, and (*manege*) for manager.

The low rate of spelling mistakes could be due to use of computers in typing a matter that helps in getting the correct spelling. This use of computers in typing cuts both ways, as it helps in correcting the spelling mistakes, but it is also used in translating a matter that gives incorrect sentences in respect of structure and the appropriate vocabulary. Mills (2011) concluded that "poor spelling is the quickest way of getting a rejection" while the aim of submitting a CV is simply to make you attractive, interesting and worth considering getting the job.

Moreover, the analysis of the CVs showed that the abbreviations of certain vocabulary as the names of the certificate of bachelor or master degrees in different fields are incorrect as most of them use MA or BA degrees for all the fields while the correct thing is to use MA or BA only for those in art not in science, accounting or engineering. These errors show that our sample reflects the need of teaching certain vocabulary items which are vital to use English correctly such as the correct abbreviations. Furthermore, it is important for us as TEFL teachers to raise student's awareness to the danger of using the literal translation from L1 to L2 a matter that could destroy the whole message

that should be delivered. Studies in the field of teaching English as a foreign language support this finding ( Ababneh 2008; Koosha and Jafapour 2006; Mahmoud 2005; Deveci 2004; Zughoul and Abdul-Fattah 2003; Brown,H.D.2002; Huang 2001; Liu 2000; Hussein 1998 ; Farghal and Obeidat 1995).

This section will be dedicated to discuss the second part in this study which dealt with students' responses on the questionnaire statements' which were basically about students' attitudes towards writing their CVs by themselves or resorting to help from others; their preference of writing them in English versus Arabic, as well as the effect of their CVs on their future job as it is their way to introduce and sell themselves. Table (1) below shows the number of the students who participated in this study which was seventy- five. There were twenty –nine male students and forty- six female ones. In this table the researchers computed the mean scores and the standard deviations of students' responses on each question. From this table we can see that there were eleven questions in the questionnaire. The first question was about the importance of writing a CV when applying to a job and it has the highest mean score followed by question nine which was about the positive influence of using a correct language when writing a CV on one's chances to get a better job. Next came question seven which dealt with the impact of the way of presenting oneself in the CV on his chances of having his/her future job. Question six came next and it was about the need of teaching the correct way of writing a CV as part of the courses taken at the university. With a mean score of (4.12) question eight which catered for the effect of presenting one's CV in English came next. Question three in which the students were asked whether they present their CVs in English to apply for a job vacancy came next with a mean score of (3.78). It was followed by question eleven which was about whether the students rewrite and revise their CVs regularly in order to update the information about themselves. Question two where the students were asked about presenting their CVs in Arabic came next with a mean score of (3.57). Then came question four which inquired about the fact that whether the students resort to any help from others when they write their CVs with a mean score of (3.36). Question five which inquired about whether the students face any problems or difficulty when they write their CVs with a mean score of (3.05). The least mean score was scored by question ten which asked the students if they write their CVs only once and never updated it.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Students' responses on the questionnaire

Question. No.	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q.1	75	1.00	5.00	4.57	.68
Q.2	75	1.00	5.00	3.57	1.16
Q.3	75	1.00	5.00	3.78	1.09
Q.4	75	1.00	5.00	3.36	1.16
Q.5	75	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.19
Q.6	75	1.00	5.00	4.21	1.20
Q.7	75	1.00	5.00	4.28	1.04
Q.8	75	1.00	5.00	4.12	1.02
Q.9	75	2.00	5.00	4.42	.85
Q.10	75	1.00	5.00	2.78	1.07
Q.11	75	1.00	5.00	3.77	1.10

In order to investigate the first hypothesis of the study which claimed that there are no statically significant differences at ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) between students' responses to the questionnaire questions due to the difference in their gender, the researchers did a t- test for equality to the mean scores of the students' responses according to their gender. No significant differences at ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) between the mean scores of the students' responses on all the questionnaire questions were found. Table (2) below summarized the results.

Table 2. Mean scores and T-test of Students' Responses on the Questionnaire According to Gender

	Paired Differences						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1 GENDER-Q1	-2.96	.82	.095	-3.15	-2.76	-30.9	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q2	-1.96	1.25	.145	-2.24	-1.67	-13.5	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q3	-2.17	1.29	.149	-2.47	-1.87	-14.4	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q4	-1.74	1.22	.140	-2.02	-1.46	-12.3	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q5	-1.44	1.19	.138	-1.71	-1.16	-10.3	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q6	-2.60	1.33	.154	-2.90	-2.29	-16.8	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q7	-2.66	1.16	.134	-2.93	-2.39	-19.8	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q8	-2.50	1.18	.137	-2.78	-2.23	-18.2	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q9	-2.81	.96	.111	-3.03	-2.59	-25.1	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q10	-1.173	1.21	.139	-1.45	-.894	-8.3	74	.000	
Pair 1 GENDER-Q11	-2.16	1.15	.132	-2.42	-1.89	-16.2	74	.000	

The second hypothesis of this study was: There are no statically significant differences at ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) between students responses to the questionnaire questions due to the difference in their academic major at college. There were five different majors included in this study: Engineering, Computer Science, Vocational Education, Management information science (MIS), and Accounting. To investigate this hypothesis, the researchers computed the mean scores and the standard deviations of the students' responses to the questionnaire. Table 3 below shows the results and the number of the students distributed according to their academic major.

Table 3. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Students' Responses to the Questionnaire According to their Academic Major

Academic Major	N	mean	Standard Deviation
ENG	21	3.7	0.93
COM	7	3.5	0.99
EDU	30	3.9	0.96
MIS	7	3.8	0.83
ACC	10	3.6	1.11
TOTAL	75	3.5	96.4

To see if there are any significant differences between the mean scores of the students' responses to the questionnaire responses according to the academic major, the researchers did a test of covariance between their responses.

Table 4. Results of Mancova Analysis of the Mean of the Students' Responses on the Questionnaire Questions

		<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Q1	Between Groups	1.2	4	.306	.646	.632
	Within Groups	33.1	70	.473		
	Total	34.3	74			
Q2	Between Groups	6.2	4	1.568	1.166	.333
	Within Groups	94.0	70	1.344		
	Total	100.3	74			
Q3	Between Groups	14.2	4	3.566	3.358	.014
	Within Groups	74.3	70	1.062		
	Total	88.5	74			
Q4	Between Groups	5.3	4	1.325	.966	.432
	Within Groups	95.9	70	1.371		
	Total	101.2	74			
Q5	Between Groups	17.8	4	4.456	3.546	.011
	Within Groups	87.9	70	1.257		
	Total	105.7	74			
Q6	Between Groups	16.4	4	4.103	3.185	.018
	Within Groups	90.1	70	1.288		
	Total	106.5	74			
Q7	Between Groups	3.0	4	.760	.681	.607
	Within Groups	78.0	70	1.115		
	Total	81.1	74			
Q8	Between Groups	5.4	4	1.356	1.310	.275
	Within Groups	72.4	70	1.036		
	Total	77.9	74			



Q9	Between Groups	2.2	4	.550	.738	.569
	Within Groups	52.1	70	.745		
	Total	54.3	74			
Q10	Between Groups	7.8	4	1.960	1.787	.141
	Within Groups	76.7	70	1.096		
	Total	84.587	74			
Q11	Between Groups	1.756	4	.439	.344	.847
	Within Groups	89.390	70	1.277		
	Total	91.147	74			

As data in Table 4 show, we refuse the second hypothesis that claims that there are no statically significant differences at ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ) between students' responses to the questionnaire questions due to the difference in their academic major. Since the significance value for questions three, five and six was less than 0.05 but we accept the null theory for the rest of the questions as their significance value was more than 0.05. The three questions in which the results showed that there are significant differences that could be attributed to the difference in their academic major were mainly about the key factors of this study since question three inquired about whether the students prefer to present their CVs in English when they apply for a job vacancy. This result could be explained as some of the students who participated in the study are poor in English and they suffer to pass their English courses at the college, those students are vocational education majored. This result goes in line with what Ababneh and Al-Momani (2011, p.57) concluded in their study that dealt with vocational education students' problems in learning English. In the same vein, there were significant differences between students' responses due to the difference in their academic major on question six which focused on the students need of learning the correct way of writing a CV as part of the courses presented at the college and question five which inquired about the difficulties or the problems that the students face in writing their CVs. This result was also reasonable and could be explained by the fact that different majors at the college require different scores in the secondary exam which is the basis of distributing the students on the different majors in the universities as some majors like engineering requires high scores in secondary certificate in order to be enrolled in the college and this of course demands high scores in all the school subjects including English, while other majors like vocational education does not require high scores.

## Recommendations

This study analysed the errors committed by Jordanian job applicants when they write their CVs in English and it tried to shed some light on certain attitudes towards writing CVs in English as well as the need to equip the university graduates with some skills like writing their own CVs correctly in order to apply for their future jobs appropriately since we learn a foreign language for many purposes but most of us learn a foreign language as a mean to facilitate and pave their way to get a better future job, especially when it comes to English as it is the language of science and technology today, Hinkel, (2005) argues that learner's aims and goals influence the development of their skills in the foreign language which they attempt to learn. Therefore, the goal for which a foreign language is used determines how it is learnt. Based upon the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are offered. First, teaching material that introduces good examples on well-written CVs should be included and introduced in the English language courses presented at the college and teachers are invited to draw a spotlight on the importance of learning such skills and the benefits that they might

bring for the students' sake. These recommendations go in line with the calls and the demands of the participants of the sample of the present study as most of them call for their need to learn how to write their CVs by themselves as most if not all of them resort to the others for help such as special offices that offer services for students, or they ask their colleagues or teachers to help them in fulfilling their mission, a matter that is not convenient for everyone. The worst thing ever that could be noticed about job applicants who do not know how to write their CVs in English and they do not have the opportunity to ask someone who knows English well is that they prefer to translate it from Arabic their mother language by using special computer programmes of translating a matter that creates terrible mistakes and yet gives the wrong image about the person. Thus students should be encouraged to practice writing their CVs on their own through applying the correct way from what they learn in the college and not to let the others do what they should do. This need to empower future workers with the ability to be good writers is also a demand in other countries as according to the British Chamber of Commerce that conducted a study which dealt with public sector workers in the UK, revealed that the public sector workers should be given lessons in interview techniques and in how to write a CV appropriately since they are viewed as bad and only 20% of them would hire them.

Finally, it is recommended to repeat this study using a larger sample as a larger sample would be more representative and, therefore, make results more reliable.

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