

# **A longitudinal study of vocabulary in L2 academic English writing of Arabic first-language students: development and measurement**

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## **Data collection**

Data collection centred on examination essays written at regular intervals by 42 university students over a period of two years.

## **The students**

The students are all female, United Arab Emirati nationals who entered higher education after successfully completing high school, having chosen to come to Zayed University as the only university in the United Arab Emirates which offers bilingual degree courses. Those students on the two-year (maximum) foundation English programme (the ABP) have mostly come from government schools, where the medium of instruction is Arabic, as opposed to private or international schools, where the medium of instruction is English. To gain admission to higher education, high school leavers must take the Common English Proficiency Examination (CEPA), part of which is an essay. Reflecting the candidature, this varies greatly in quality and length, at most about 160 words, although some are likely to be considerably shorter, perhaps not beyond sentence level. Essay 1 in the present study is always the CEPA Essay. Once their CEPA essays have been assessed and the papers marked, those students who gain the minimum requirements are offered places on the Academic Bridge Programme, which comprises eight levels. Depending on the CEPA score, entry may be to any level and, for the participants in the present study, beginning in September 2003, those entry levels are shown in the table below.

<b>Level:</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Number of Students:</b>	0	6	6	15	14	1	0	0

**Entry Levels (2003 Cohort)**

## **The Essays**

In total, there are complete sets for thirty-one students as eleven essays are unaccounted for and hence not part of the corpus. Even though complete sets were available until Level 8, Students 6 and 9 eventually had to be deleted as their Level 8 essays were found to have been destroyed. As a result, although there are forty-two participants, student numbers run from 1 to 44.

The essays were written every 10<sup>th</sup> week of teaching with 200 hours of teaching between each essay. Over the period of this study, changes to courses and examination format were very few but it was desirable to make the selection of writing samples such that the effects of as many variables as possible would be minimised. There was also the added issue of genre and whether cross-genre samples would contaminate results. The starting point for forty-one subjects was Essay

1, the essay component of the CEPA. This is a two-and-a-quarter-hour examination in reading comprehension, grammar and composition taken by all students who wish to enter tertiary education. The integrity of the examination in respect of preparation, administration, marking and general security is beyond question. One student completed high school a year before CEPA was implemented and started at the university after a 'gap' year. Her first essay is therefore the first essay of her ABP course (referred to as Essay 2, since she has no CEPA Essay 1).

Once accepted into the university, into a particular level, the students followed an English course that was assessed at regular intervals of ten weeks. Part of that assessment was an essay, based on reading and listening texts, themselves the basis for the assessment in those skills. The genre of essay was prescribed, using a format that is seen in the United States more than in Europe, known as 'rhetorical patterns'. Thus, in Levels 2, 3 and 4, 'description' (initially from pictures) was the pattern in their examination, in Level 5, 'cause and effect', Level 6 wrote 'problem/solution' and Levels 7 and 8, a 'position' essay. The names and prescriptive nature of these essays centres on the way they are organised in that there must be an introduction, a paragraph in which there would be (for example) causes of a particular occurrence, a paragraph of the effects and a conclusion. This was repeated in all the patterns except of course, instead of paragraphs of causes, and effects, there would be paragraphs of problems and solutions. The position essay adhered to the same format but the introduction would indicate if the student agreed or disagreed with a prompt, whereupon the paragraphs would explain her reasons for such agreement or disagreement.

It quickly became clear that the maximum period in which data could be relied upon to be available was the time students spent in the ABP, which was two years, as all writing was directly available to the researcher. Whether a student passed or failed was not considered significant, but if she *completed* Level 8 (Level 2 is the lowest level in which students will be accepted), her essays were included in the study. Although starting levels varied (see table above), irrespective of her starting point in the programme, if she did not complete Level 8, she was excluded from the work. All essays were written as responses to examination questions and all written under identical examination conditions.

As mentioned above, there are some gaps in the data set and the only reason for these is that, despite exhaustive enquiries and considerable searching, some required essays were not in their exam packs. While this was an irritation, it was not considered necessary to reject the student's work on the omission of a single essay other than a final Level 8. Some students have inevitably left the university for various reasons (failure, transfer, dismissal) which caused an attrition rate that was anticipated.

As mentioned, it was recognised that independent variables need to be controlled. Genre, arguably a prominent variable, has been accommodated insofar as there were a limited number of titles and, over the time the students spent in the ABP, most answered at least one from each of the title groups. If the essays are grouped under four general genre headings, then all students answered at least one from each group.

Essays originated from the following general format but lengths of reading and listening texts, as well as degree of difficulty, were adjusted according to the level. Examinations were theme based

and students were given a listening test in which they listened to a four to fifteen minute talk, took guided notes and answered five to twenty<sup>7</sup> multiple-choice questions in twenty to forty minutes. Their answers were then collected. This was followed immediately by a reading text on the same theme and on which were based three sections of questions. Time allowed was forty-five minutes after which the answers to the reading section were collected. The listening notes and the reading texts were retained, whereupon students had one-and-a-quarter-hours to write an essay on the same theme but from a cold prompt. The answers to the reading section were not available during the writing.

Given the particular genres required of the students and used in the present study, they also needed to demonstrate the clearly delineated format of the rhetorical patterns for each level, as outlined in the curriculum. As well as an introduction and conclusion, essays were required to have a prescribed number of paragraphs and a minimum total number of words, although how the students used each paragraph was a matter of choice in that there could be, for example, two paragraphs of cause and one of effect or vice versa. For all essays, students were given prompts based on the listening and reading texts in the exam except for the position essay, where there was usually a choice offered, to be neutral or to either agree or disagree with the subject. This was also based on the listening and reading texts and, while a position essay may have as many paragraphs as a student wishes, at least 400 words were expected. Approximate number of words for other essays depended on the level.

## **The Corpus**

A selection of 340 formal examination essays (including CEPA) from forty-two students were collected between March 2003 and June 2005. The total number of words in the corpus of the study is 94,623 and mean length of essay, 270 words.

Of the complete set of 340 scripts, 41 were CEPA essays and 299 were end-of-term formal assessments given at the end of ten week terms and all were written under examination conditions. There were four per year.