Chapter 17
Omani Undergraduate Students’ Writing Errors: Reflections

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ABSTRACT
This chapter analyses learners’ writing errors. It focuses on error types and sources because these will reveal learners’ current linguistic competence and what they need now for improvement. Data was collected mainly from the written work of English Department students at Al Buraimi University College. Results show that their errors are both interlingual and intralingual and that there is a positive relationship between these and learning strategies. Not only does the learners’ previous language-learning experience influence the process of second language acquisition; target language learning experience does so as well.

INTRODUCTION
Teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. Though teaching brings about changes in learners, it does not simply lead to learning because learning requires learners’ energy and attention (Scrivener, 2005). In other words, learning is the result of personal effort. Learners need to reflect on their learning experience in order to generate new ideas which will empower them to tackle new learning situations effectively. Scrivener (2005) points out that, “new learning is constructed over the foundations of our own earlier learning” (p. 21). Thus SL learners use previously-acquired structures, reasons, logic, and strategies in each new learning situation. Specifically, ESL learners use their mother tongue and the target language as a result of transfer, interference, and overgeneralization (Corder, 1974; Odlin, 1989; Richard, 1974) in the process of learning English. Brown (2007) has observed that “the three terms are sometimes mistakenly considered to represent separate processes; they are more correctly understood as several manifestations of one principle of learning - the interaction of previously learned material with a present learning event” (p. 102).

All formal learning and teaching take place in a social situation like a classroom which is influ-
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enced by the culture on which the local society is constructed. As a result, learners bring with them to the classroom their culture and first language, along with a variety of personal agendas which affect the entire teaching and learning process. As far as Omani learners of English are concerned, Arabic, as their mother tongue, plays a crucial role in the process. Thus a pertinent question is whether Arabic plays a negative role, causing troubles to learners of English, or whether the role is positive. This chapter focuses on this central issue. Related questions are:

- Do Omani learners of English actually face problems in writing?
- What types of problems do they have and what are the reasons?
- What constitutes their interlanguage?
- Are their errors a hindrance or a learner strategy?

REFLECTION

‘Reflection’ is an evolutionary rather than revolutionary term, whose current meaning has taken over 80 years to determine. Much theory and philosophy has been added to it since John Dewey defined the term as a proactive ongoing examination of beliefs and practices (as cited in Stanley, 1998). According to Pennington (1992), reflective teaching started as “a movement in teacher education in which … teachers analyze their own practice and their underlying basis and then consider alternative means of achieving their ends” (p. 48). Richards and Lockhart (1994) add a critical component to reflection, viewing it as a practice “in which teachers and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching” (p.1). Minott (2009) relates reflection to past, present and future actions and decisions, seeing it as a sort of temporal bridge. Cruickshank (1987) has stated that the central feature of reflection is questioning the self, i.e. interrogating not only our beliefs, values, contexts and goals of teaching activities, but also classroom events and decisions. Brookfield (1995) talks about teachers’ reflection, learners’ reflection, colleagues’ reflection and reflection on current theories and literature. Zeichner and Liston (1996) associate reflection with research and classify it into five levels. The first level is rapid reflection, which is immediate, automatic and ongoing. The second level is repair reflection, which is used to change a particular learning or teaching behavior. The third level is less formal and in it the teacher discusses an issue with a colleague. The fourth level is a type of action research, done over a period of time and focusing on a specific issue. The fifth and last level of reflection is more abstract and rigorous: in this practicing teachers analyze their teaching critically in terms of academic theories. As action research, reflection is done systematically by collecting data about a particular issue through focused thinking and observation. The present study uses this view of reflection in order to study students’ writing errors.

Reflection of course is a part of teacher training programs designed to improve teaching methods and professionalism. However, in this study reflection is used to improve second language learners’ writing by collecting their written products, analyzing their errors, identifying error causes, and providing solutions.

WRITING AND ERRORS

Writing

A review of the development of writing shows that there have been considerable changes recently in both the role and scope of writing in everyday life. Much writing was restricted to formal and informal letters, job applications and complains...