Methodological drawbacks in students' final projects (Mémoires)

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ملخص:

يتمحور هذا المقال حول الطرق غير الأكاديمية التي أصبح يستعملها طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية عند كتابة مذكرات التخرج. يقوم الطلبة, على سبيل المثل، بذكر الدرجة العلمية للكاتب (دكتور –أستاذ –شيخ) في الهوامش و كذا المراجع و من جهة أخرى أصبح شائع بين الطلبة الاعتماد على المصادر الإلكترونية السهلة النسخ و اللصق دون اللجوء إلى قراءة الكتب العلمية المطبوعة.

أجريت هذه الدراسة بقسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة أدرار, مستندة في ذلك على 190 مذكرات تخرج كتبت و نوقشت ما بين السنتين الجامعية 1999 و 2011. كما أن خلاصة هذه الدراسة هي أن فقر البرنامج الدراسي إلى مادة المنهجية يؤثر سلبا على طريقة كتابة و مناقشة مذكرات التخرج بقسم اللغة الانجليزية.

Abstract:

At the end of their four years of undergraduate studies, the students of the department of English are expected to achieve an acceptable mastery of the language both in oral and written forms. To attain an effective communicative level and to lend their works credibility and substantiality, they have to respect the models of writing. Among these last are the standards of referencing which enable the students to successfully present their ideas in their final projects. They do also enable the readers (examiners, students, and supervisors) to check and verify the writers' sources, and follow their argumentation.

This communication concerns itself with academic matters the main focus of which is the students' lack of precise methodological ways for presenting their research. In the projects, one can note several drawbacks, among which is the use of academic titles prefixed to the names of the authors. Another remark is that, nowadays, most students rely on the use of Arabic and electronic sources for referencing. The data are drawn from projects submitted during a period spanning from 1999 to 2011

Introduction:

English is becoming more and more important at all educational levels, for business transactions and worldwide communication. Students at departments of English are expected to achieve an acceptable mastery of the language both in oral and written forms. In the latter part, they have to follow and respect the models of academic writing to attain an effective communicative level and to lend their works credibility and substantiality. Among these models are the standards of referencing which enable the students to successfully present their ideas in their final projects, namely, *Mémoires de fin d'études*. It does also enable the readers (examiners, students, and supervisors) to check and verify the writers' sources, and follow their argumentation.

This communication concerns itself with academic and educational matters the main focus of which is the students' lack of precise methodological ways for presenting their research, since the module of 'methodology' was not included in the former BA program. In the final projects, one can note several drawbacks, among which is the use of academic titles prefixed to the names of the authors. Another remark is that, nowadays, most students resort to using electronic sources for referencing. Although this choice reflects their access to the worldwide web, it does, on the other hand, show that they spend less time reading, analysing, and quoting from books and scientific papers in traditional print. They rather prefer a material ready to copy and paste.

The data are drawn from a number of final projects (n= 190)¹ submitted during a period spanning from 1999 to 2011. The methodology consists of a general survey of the works, in particular the bibliographical part. Two immediate findings are attained: most students use electronic sources more than paper ones. They also make use of academic status titles when using references and citations; as such they do not respect the already established methodological standards of citation and referencing.

1. Theory

The literature on academic writing purports that the use of intext and out-text citations is part and parcel of scientific production. However, it is important to note that 'methodology' is not part of the university's English curricula, and that under-graduation and post-graduation students encounter tremendous problems in dealing with methodological issues, among which is the use of citations.

Some students use Arabic standards of referencing in their English written projects as part of a transfer of "discourse organization" (cf. Mohamed-Sayidina, 2010:253)² from L1 to L2 (English). Consciously or unconsciously, they follow Arabic standards when citing articles, authors, and books. From another angle, one may hypothesise that this problem reflects a lack of knowledge of the international referencing conventions such as the (APA, IEEE, MLA, MRHA, etc) (see Annex n°1) as reported by Al-Khasawneh: "Writing references according to certain conventions (APA, IEEE, etc) helps the

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¹ In some academic years, the total number of final projects is unknown, for many were missing from the university's library archives. Only those available are considered in the present paper.

² Mohamed-Sayidina, A. 2010. Transfer of L1 Cohesive Devices and Transition Words into L2 Academic Texts: The Case of Arab Students. *RELC Journal* 41(3): 253-266.

students to be scholarly writers and trains them in academic integrity." (2010:16)

Another reason may be that the students have an easy access to the internet WebPages and websites from which they draw their theoretical input. Many research studies have been conducted to deal with this new phenomenon (cf. Leu 2002; Coiro 2003; Harwood 2010) wherein foreign as well as second language learners engage in an online versus print environment. Leu (2002) says: "the Internet has entered our classrooms faster than books, television, computers, the telephone, or any other technology for information and communication" (p: 311)¹

However, the introduction of this new means of electronic access to worldwide information and knowledge brings with it several drawbacks. Among these is speed of reading and cyber-plagiarism. Kurniawan and Zaphiris (2001) came up with a field research in which students were tested as concerns their preferences for reading online texts or traditional print ones. The readers showed that they read more easily the printed materials than the digital ones.

Within the same trend, Murray (2005) conducted a research to show that there is a transfer of traditional literacy to the digital one. Yet, her result proved the contrary, since the students had tremendous problems reading online texts. A fact she explains in the following

¹ Leu, D.J, Jr.2001. Internet Project: Preparing students for new literacies in a global village [Exploring Literacy on the Internet department]. *The Reading Teacher 54*(6). Available:

 $http://www.readingonline.org/electronic/elec_index.asp?HREF=/electronic/RT/3-01_Column/index.html$

words: "print literacy does not automatically transfer to digital literacy" (p: viii). 1

As for cyber-plagiarism or what is known as "copy and paste" (in French "copier-coller"), it stretches from simple and incorrect referencing, i.e. in-text citations, to the stealing of whole ideas, hypotheses and works. In the case of students, cyber-plagiarism consists mainly in copying passages (paragraphs) and pasting them on their papers without referring to their original writers or to the website sources from which they copied them. In other words, cyber-plagiarism is either deliberate or unintentional.

Plagiarism may be due to several reasons:

-Lack of research skills:

Students do not know how to look for information, and if they get it they do not know how to refer to its source.

- Plagiarism and paraphrasing:

An instance of unintentional plagiarism is the confusion between plagiarism and paraphrasing. Students do not distinguish between paraphrasing and plagiarizing, particularly when they need to tackle technical subjects with unfamiliar words.

-Problems of referencing:

Sometimes this problem arises from the confusion of styles and of standards of referencing, since there are many models. Universities and disciplines do not always use the same type, which adds to the confusion. On the other hand, the students face the obstacle of how to

¹ Murray, J. 2005. Testing Information Literacy Skills (Grades K - 12). Retrieved April 25, 2012, from http://www.big6.com

reproduce the electronic addresses, for these may change overnight, or may even disappear from the web.

The present research considers the following postulate as its theoretical starting point: « ... what writers and readers do with citations and why-and how such micro-practices link to larger social practices of knowledge construction, circulation, and evaluation globally » (Lillis et al. 2010:113)¹

2. Methodology

The methodology used in this research is based on:

- A bibliometric analysis of electronic sources used in English-written final projects as compared to Arabic, English, and French references.
- A statistical analysis of out-text (references) citations with a particular attention paid to the frequencies of use throughout the years by males and females and by matter.

To come up with the date, the researcher made a survey of 190 final projects found in the university's central library as well as in the library of the department of English.

One noticeable fact is that, in 1999, only three projects were submitted as final projects were not obligatory at that time. Now and since it has become compulsory, all students are obliged to write and present their projects. This practice started to take its regular shape since 2005

We also report that some memoires (n=21) were not considered in the research. Most of them did not have any references, for they were

¹-Lillis, T, A. Hewings, D.Vladimirou, and M.J.Curry. 2010. 'The Geolinguistics of English as an academic lingua franca: citation practices across English-medium national and English-medium international journals.' *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 20.1: 111-135.

presentations rather than final research projects. Having more than one writer, these papers did not follow any methodology and did not have any bibliographies. The number of informants and their characteristics are reported in the next table:

Years	Males	Females	Total
1999-2005	0	3	3
2005-2006	9	29	38
2006-2007	4	12	16
2007-2008	6	15	21
2008-2009	5	53	58
2009-2010	6	29	35
2010-2011	10	30	40
total	40	171	211
%	18,95	81,04	100

Table1: Details of the sample

3. Use of references and websites

Years	Number of	Arabic	English	French	Websites
	projects	references	references	references	
1999-2005	03	3	6	0	0
2005-2006	14	17	41	4	38
2006-2007	10	21	86	4	21
2007-2008	12	<u>49</u>	84	7	55
2008-2009	<u>58</u>	<u>89</u>	500	18	<u>433</u>
2009-2010	35	30	302	10	<u>251</u>
2010-2011	<u>58</u>	<u>74</u>	252	5	<u>242</u>
Total	<u>190</u>	<u> 283</u>	<u>1271</u>	48	<u>1040</u>
%	100	<u>10</u> ,38	<u>46,62</u>	1,76	<u>41,41</u>

Table2: Overall results for the use of printed and online references in

final projects

As reported in table2, the students have a significant use of Arabic references (n=283, 10.38%) in their bibliographical citations. This fact which shows that, either there is a lack of resources in English, or there is easiness in reading and using Arabic written sources. A gap they fill with the most readily available material, i.e.:

Arabic-written books, papers and research projects. On the other hand, it also indicates that the students resort to sources conveyed in a language they understand and, relatively, use well.

The next remark is that the students do not make use of French-written sources (n=48, 01.76%). This may be due to their lack of mastery of the foreign language, or because of the social pressure of their speech community, which rejects the French language as it represents the former colonisers' means of expression (cf. Bouhania 2008 and 2010).¹

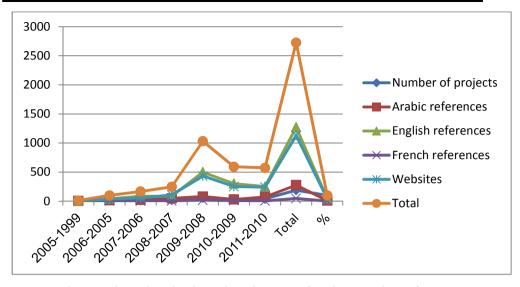
The third observation is that the students have a strong tendency towards the use of electronic sources (n=1129, 41.41%). Starting from the academic year 2005, the frequency of use of internet sources increased continuously. This is quite noticeable if we compare the 38 WebPages of 2005 to the 242 of 2011, i.e. an increase of 72.49%.

The next graph reports the overall frequencies of use:

Graph n°1: Frequencies of use of online and written sources

¹ Bouhania, B. 2008. 'Sociolinguistic Rejection of French by Touat Arabic Speakers: a Post-colonial reaction?' In Lahouel B. (ed.), *Africa and the West* 4:199-221, University of Oran, Proceedings of the International conference: Dialogue des Cultures et/ou Culture du dialogue.

⁻Bouhania, B. 2010. 'Assessing the Ethno-/Sociolinguistic Vitality of 'Arabic', French, and Zenete in the Touat'. *Cahiers de Linguistique et Didactique* 3:59-83.



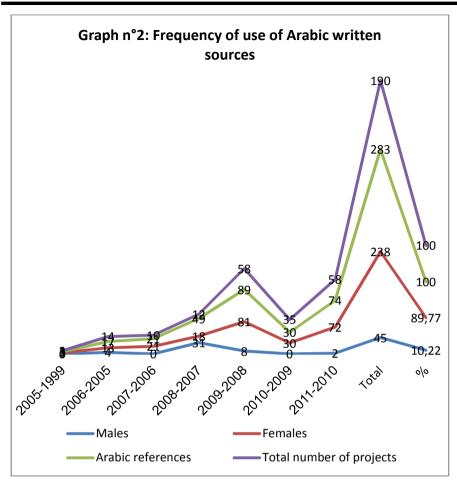
The graph makes it clear that the use of webpages is as frequent as the use of English references. The other two languages, namely Arabic and French, however, are less frequent.

3.1 Use of Arabic references

In the next table, we can note that the female students make use of Arabic references more frequently than their male counterparts i.e. 84.09% vs. 15.90%.

Academic years	Males	Females	Arabic	Total number of
			references	projects
1999-2005	0	3	3	03
2005-2006	4	13	17	14
2006-2007	0	21	21	10
2007-2008	<u>31</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>49</u>	12
2008-2009	8	<u>81</u>	89	<u>58</u>
2009-2010	0	<u>30</u>	30	35
2010-2011	2	<u>72</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>58</u>
Total	45	238	283	<u>190</u>
%	10,22	89, 77	100	100

Table3: Frequency of use of Arabic references throughout the years



3.1.1 Use of Arabic references by fields

Arabic	Linguistics	Civilisation	Psychology	TEFL	Literature	Total
references						
1999-2005	0	3	0	0	0	3
2005-2006	7	3	1	5	1	17
2006-2007	16	1	1	1	2	21
2007-2008	9	15	23	1	1	49
2008-2009	39	15	30	5	0	89
2009-2010	28	1	0	1	0	30
2010-2011	26	37	6	5	0	74
Total	125	75	61	18	3	283

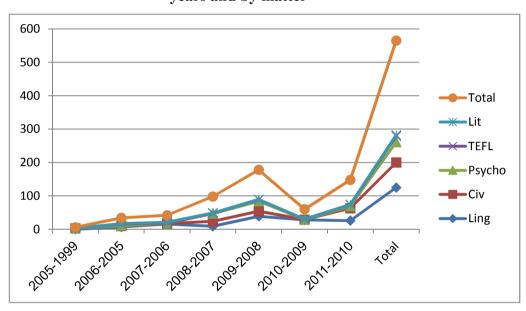
Table4: frequency of use of Arabic references by fields

The graph and table show that:

- -Genrally, most Arabic references are used for linguistic projects
- -They are followed by those on civilisation and psychology.

It is worth noting that the frequencies of use of Arabic references are not stable throughout the years, but are in constant fluctuation.

Graph n°3: Frequency of use of Arabic references throughout the vears and by matter



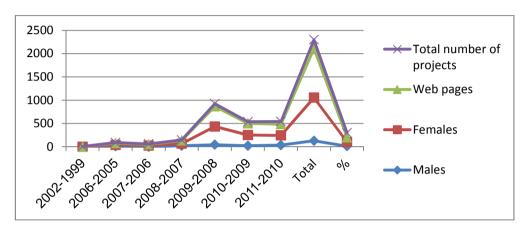
3.2 Use of websources

Years	Males	Females	Total number of	Number of web pages
			projects	
1999-2005	0	0	03	0
2005-2006	09	29	14	38
2006-2007	19	02	10	21
2007-2008	<u>08</u>	<u>47</u>	12	55
2008-2009	<u>43</u>	<u>390</u>	<u>58</u>	433
2009-2010	<u>21</u>	230	35	251
2010-2011	<u>34</u>	<u>208</u>	<u>58</u>	242
Total	<u>134</u>	906	<u>190</u>	1040
%	12,88	<u>87,11</u>	100	100

Table6: frequency of use of webpages throughout the years

The table illustrates that:

- -The female students tend towards the use of the internet web pages in their research, i.e.: 87.11% of the girls vs. 12.88% of the boys.
- -This trend started to become significant from the academic year 2005-2006 onwards.



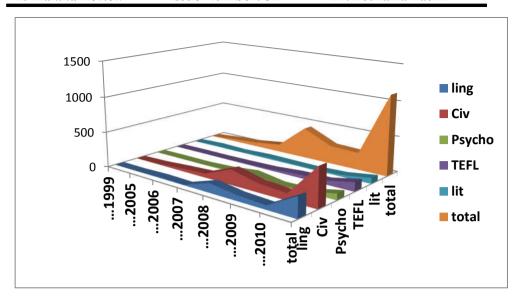
3.3.1 Use of webpages by modules

Academic years	Linguistics	Civilisation	Psychology	TEFL	Literature	Total
1999-2005	0	0	0	0	0	0
2005-2006	0	18	2	4	14	38
2006-2007	0	18	1	2	0	21
2007-2008	0	20	17	8	10	55
2008-2009	131	213	60	11	12	433
2009-2010	77	124	0	47	9	251
2010-2011	58	98	9	52	25	242
Total	266	491	89	124	70	1040

Table7: Frequency of use of webpages by seminars

The table and the graph show that:

- -Civilisation is the discipline in which students use electronic sources the most
- -It is followed by linguistics as second field in which students make use of websources



3.4 Use of academic status titles

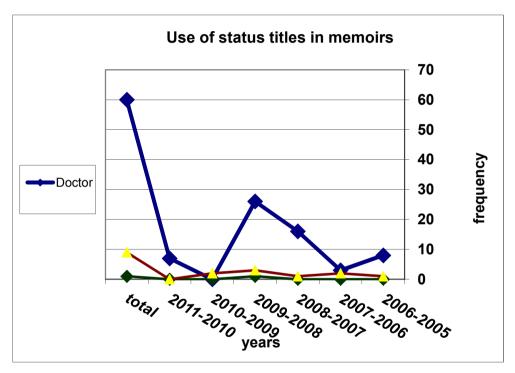
While reporting their sources, the students have a noticeable tendency towards the use of academic status titles such as 'doctor', 'ustaadh' and 'sheikh' prefixed to the names of the authors. Most particularly, they employ the abbreviation 'Dr.' in its Arabic form, i.e. '2' when citing an Arab writer. However, it is worth pointing that they also use the abbreviation in its Latin form when citing authors in the text and outside it (cf. Annexes n°2, 3, 4, 5 and 6). Table2 gives an overall idea about this phenomenon:

- -the use of academic status titles started in 2005-2006 with 'doctor' and 'sheikh'.
- -the abbreviation "Dr.' is the most used (n=85.71%); it is followed by 'sheikh' (n=12.85%) in Arabic.
- 2008 and 2009 are the years when the students largely used the status title 'doctor'; the peak being in 2009 with 26 uses.

Academic Status	Doctor	Ustaadh	Sheikh
Titles /Years			
2005-2006	8	0	1
2006-2007	3	0	2
2007-2008	<u>16</u>	0	1
2008-2009	<u>26</u>	1	3
2009-2010	0	0	2
2010-2011	7	0	0
total	<u>60</u>	1	9
%	85.71	1.42	12.85

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Conclusion

El-Hakika Review

This small-scale research shows that, most students have some problems in dealing with methodological issues such as citations and references. They mix between the standards of referencing, in particular between Arabic and English ones. For instance, they make use of academic status titles preceding the authors' names, a fact which contradicts and does not respect the English conventions.

On the other hand, they make a heavy use of Arabic sources in their research projects, particularly in such modules as linguistics and civilisation; this shows that they either do not have the mastery needed to read, comprehend and quote from English written materials, or that they prefer to deal with Arabic written sources which they can understand easily.

The final conclusion is that the lack of "methodology" as a module of teaching is well felt in the students' final projects. This gap makes reading and correcting their projects a difficult and time consuming process.

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Annex n°1: Examples of referencing conventions

APA (American Psychological Association)

Citation technique usually used in the Social Sciences

Chicago

Style guide for typographical and citation techniques often used by academic publishers

Harvard

The most commonly used style of referencing; used widely in academic journals

Guidance from Cambridge Online Study Skills

<u>IEEE</u> (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers)

Referencing guidelines used in the fields of Engineering and

Technology

MLA (Modern Language Association)

Style guide used particularly in academic writing for languages and literature

MRHA (Modern Humanities Research Association)

Style guide used for academic theses and essays in the Humanities

OSCOLA (Oxford Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities)

Citation guidelines for legal materials

Vancouver

Style of referencing using a numerical system - often used in medical writing

Guidance from the University of Leicester

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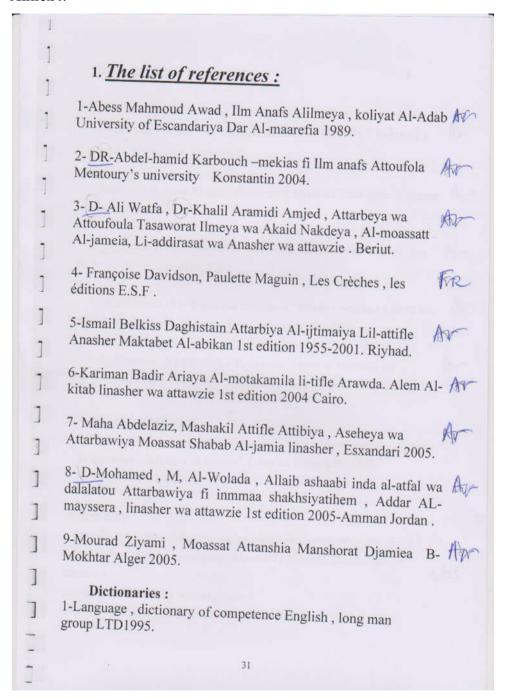
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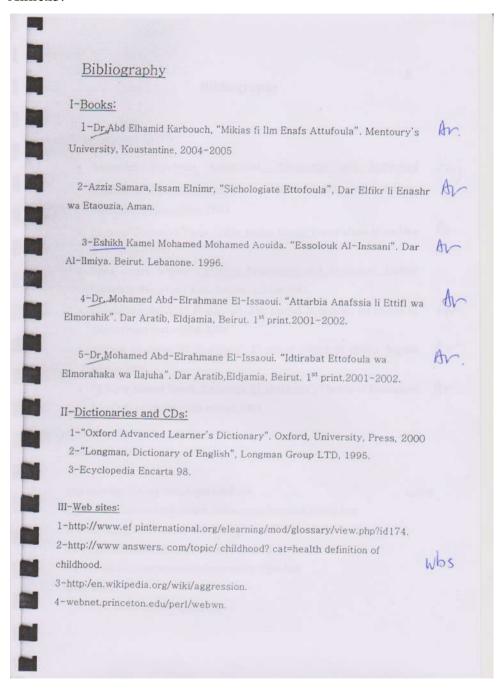
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