

English Handwriting Difficulties of Arab Learners: Analysis of Possible Causes and Some Suggestions for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract.

Handwriting is not a skill that people are born with; it is a skill that must be learned. This paper will look at some of the difficulties that the Arabic writer encounters when learning to handwrite in English from the point of view of the native speaker. Many authors have claimed that these difficulties can be attributed to the differences between the Arabic and English languages. Although we will see that many of the problems that the Arabic writer has can be found in these differences, as for example with learning to write from left to right in English, it will also be seen many problems have sources other than the differences between English and Arabic. In this sense, this paper attempts to go beyond other interference studies, in an effort to demonstrate how traditional methods that have been employed in the instruction of handwriting can be creatively and effectively adopted by the Arab handwriting instructor.

صعوبات كتابة خط اللغة الإنجليزية لدى المتعلمين العرب: دراسة تحليلية للأسباب الممكنة، وبعض الاقتراحات للتعليم والتعلم

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قسم المناهج وطرق التدريس - كلية التربية - جامعة الملك سعود - الرياض..

الملخص

تعد مهارة الخط مهارة مهمة تكتسب بالتعليم والتدريب، ويتناول البحث الحالي بعض الصعوبات التي يواجهها المتعلم العربي عند كتابة اللغة الإنجليزية بالطريقة التي يراها أصحاب اللغة، ويشير البحث إلى مدى صدق الدعوى بأن هذه الصعوبات تعزى إلى الفرق بين اللغتين العربية والإنجليزية كالاختلاف في اتجاه الخط من اليمين إلى الشمال ومن الشمال إلى اليمين وطريقة ربط الحروف. وستبين لنا أن هناك أسباباً لهذه الصعوبات غير مجرد الاختلاف بين اللغتين.

كما سنحاول في هذا البحث تخطي دراسات التداخل ولعلنا نجد طريقة تمكن مدرس الخط السعودي من استخدام الطرق التقليدية المتبعة في تعليم الخط بطريقة بناءة وفاعلة.

English Handwriting Difficulties of Arab Learners: Analysis of Possible Causes and Some Suggestions for Teaching and Learning

Introduction

In this paper, we will look at some of the handwriting difficulties that the Arab learner of English experiences when learning to write cursively. First we will look at some of the general causes of illegibility when writing in any language, then focus on the specific illegibilities that Arab writers make while writing in English. Despite the number of possible causes of these illegibilities or malformations, it will be seen that they fall into certain patterns. The paper will conclude with suggestions for curriculum development and teaching based on the causes of illegibility presented.

General causes of illegibility in handwriting

Although this paper will be devoted to the handwriting problems that Arab writers encounter when learning to write in English, it will be first worth our while to look into some of the problems that are involved when anyone attempts to learn how to write cursively, no matter what language. For learning to write cursively is a complicated affair, involving complicated movements of the hand and the memorization of the varied contexts in which those movements are necessary and appropriate; in addition, the problems that lead to malformations, and finally illegibility, are numerous, and for the beginning writer, as with the person learning any new task, such as learning to drive a car, there are so many details that must be attended to at the same time.

What T.F. Mitchell says about individuals learning to write in Arabic as a foreign language is equally true of learning to handwrite clearly in any language, and his comments summarize the present author's notion of the general problems that the Arab writer will have

to deal with, in addition to the specific problems discussed below: "The frequent need for speed together with a natural tendency towards economy of effort tend to produce irregularities in the cursive rendering of the Arabic script" (Mitchell, 1927: 128). This thought was penned in 1927, but it speaks well to the idea expressed above, that there are certain causes of handwriting problems that any writer can fall prey to. Here, Mitchell mentions speed and economy of effort. In other words, anyone writing too rapidly is likely to make errors and create malformations in the script. Likewise, one often finds oneself attempting to find shortcuts when writing in an effort to save energy, and this Mitchell, and others who have followed have termed economy of effort. Carelessness would be another reason for a person failing to make his or her letters clear enough for the reader.

Underlying causes of illegibility for the Arab writer

All of these primary problems the Arab writer learning to hand-write in English will most likely have to deal with at some point. And these potential problems, of course, are increased by the fact that the Arab writer must learn to deal with combating the influence of his/her first language and all the habits from which he/she has developed over time. According to Swan and Smith, the interlanguages of all learners dealing with English as a second language, whether they be Thai, Korean or Arabic, are "specific and distinct," and account for many of the problems that the authors in their book, *Learner English*, describe (Swan and Smith, 1987: xi). The reason for the specificity of the interlanguages, of course, is because of the influence of the learner's mother tongue; and we will see that many of the problems that the Arab writer in English faces are a result of this first-language influence, such as learning to write from left to right. I think that the adult often forgets just how complicated it is to learn to handwrite, and the EFL teacher of English in the Arab world would do well to keep this complexity in mind when instructing his or her students.

There are of course a number of similarities between the Arabic and English languages, similarities that are often overlooked in people's attempt to highlight the differences. These similarities have to do mainly with the handwriting strokes employed in both languages. In Arabic, for example, as in English, a clockwise motion is employed to form

some letters, as is a top to bottom motion, an anti-clockwise motion, the act of retracing, and even the left to right motion in writing numbers (see pp. 22-23 below). Despite these similarities, however, the beginning Arab writer in English must deal with a plethora of factors that make his/her writing in English a challenge that derives not so much from the discreet differences between the two languages, but from the playing out of already learned hand strokes, for example, in entirely new contexts and frameworks of habit.

For example, the student must learn a completely new alphabet system; there is no lower/upper case letter distinction (in the Arabic language, upper case letters do not exist at all); and the difference that probably accounts for more difficulty than any other is the fact that Arabic is written from right to left while English, of course, is written from left to right. This difference alone, which pertains to so many aspects of writing in English, such as anti-clockwise and top to bottom motions and the necessity for the student to develop these habits, accounts for many of the malformations that the Arab student will make when handwriting in English, as we shall see below in the discussion of specific handwriting problems, such as spacing, slanting, joining and others.

Competence

Before proceeding to a discussion of some of the handwriting malformations that Arab writers most commonly make in English, one other concept should be mentioned when discussing some of the underlying causes of illegibility with regard to the Arab writer, and that is "competence." By the time that the native writer has begun to learn to handwrite, he/she is already highly competent in the spoken language; he or she can speak and understand the spoken language at a fairly high level, but most likely has the skills of reading and writing ahead of him or her. Handwriting in this sense, then, is a special skill and is learned on a more "conscious" level than learning the spoken language is.¹ Learning to handwrite in fact is most commonly approached by the teacher as the learning of similar strokes, as we shall

(1) See Krashen and Terrell's distinction between "learning" and "acquisition" in their book. *The Natural Approach*. Hayward, CA: Alemany, 1983.

see in the concluding section of this paper. What is highly important for the teacher and for the Arab person learning to write in English is that fact that the speed and the economy of effort required to do so, to borrow those terms from Mitchell, are greatly influenced by the *degree of the student's competence*, something that the native individual rarely has to deal with.

When you are just beginning to learn a new language, for example, exposure to a radio or television show will result in confusion for the listener or viewer, since the information streaming from either will only represent noise for him or her. This phenomenon of learning a new language, at least at the beginning stages, as the process of learning to make distinctions between words and phrases, has been dealt with in the literature; and this is something that the native writer will not have to deal with.²

For the Arab writer in English, however, the reality is very different. The student at a low level of competence, for example, will lack the ability to make these important distinctions, and this is the reason that the EFL teacher in the Arab world will often find the student merging one word with another where it is inappropriate, or failing to create spaces that are appropriate, as we shall see below. What is to be remembered here is that fact that competence is a factor that will play a strong role in the acquisition of English language handwriting for Arab students: the higher the degree of competence in the language, the easier it is for him/her to learn to write cursively because he/she will have to attend to fewer discreet problems and challenges at the same time, such as dealing with a new alphabet and learning to write from left to right.

Specific areas of difficulty for the beginning Arab writer in English

Besides competence and general needs of the beginning handwriting

- (2) It is easier for the native to understand speech with background noise and writing that is illegible to various degrees than it is for the non-native. This is the reason for the relative effectiveness of "noise" tests and "distorted legibility" tests, in the case of listening and reading respectively. See for example Harry Gradman and Bernard Spolski's article, "Reduced Redundancy Testing: A Progress Report. In R.L. Jones and B. Spolsky, (eds.) Testing Language Proficiency. Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975, 59-70, and Muhammad Alfi's unpublished dissertation, "Distorted Legibility for Testing English as a Second or Foreign Language." 1980.

student, there are specific areas of illegibilities that Arab writers make while writing in English. These are due to the influence of the learners' mother tongue: Arabic. These specific areas of difficulty include spacing, joining, dotting and printing, slanting, open and closed letters, reversed letters and upper case.

(a) Spacing

The skills required to learn to handwrite in any language, then, are manifold; and the Arab learner has, in addition, to deal with learning new habits, or transferring old habits to new contexts, when learning to write in English. This process of having to create letter formations that are new to the student, and in a new, left to right context, results in malformations that are typical for the Arab writer, and one of the most common concerns difficulties with *spacing*. In English, as in Arabic, there are certain spacing requirements. In English, for example, the beginning writer, whether native or non-native, must learn to create spaces only between words. In the Arabic language, however, spaces are created where they do not exist in English. Take the following example. In English the word "lessons" is written without lifting one's pen; in Arabic, however, it is necessary for the writer to lift his/her pen three times, resulting in the creation of spaces (not counting lifting one's pen either at the beginning or end of the word).

Since Arabic writers are accustomed to lifting their pen in the actual formation of individual letters within words, a negative transfer can occur when they handwrite in English in the sense that they will create spaces within words where they are inappropriate. It is true that it is possible for an entire sentence to be created in Arabic that does not exhibit any joining between letters, particularly for pedagogical purposes, but this is extremely rare.³ The predominant characteristic of Arabic is that it is a language of spacing and of lifting one's pen in the

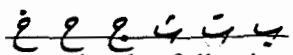
(3) The reader can refer to the book, *Learn Riqu'ah Script Handwriting* (a series handwriting skills in Arabic, written by Muhammad Alfi et al., 1992), page 78, where the first book is devoted to disconnected letters. In this paper, when I discuss such aspects of Arabic handwriting as spaces, joining and so forth, I am referring to any style of cursive Arabic; however, there are certain features I discuss, such as slants, that pertain specifically to the Riqua' style.

creation of individual letters and words. As a result, it is easy for the Arab writer in English to over-generalize and create spaces where they do not belong.

(b) Joining, dotting and printing

Closely related to the problem of spacing for the Arab writing in English is the difficulty of joining where it is appropriate, and in English, particularly according to certain American handwriting conventions as mentioned above, it is nearly always appropriate. English cursive is basically a system of joined letters, with spacing required only between words. As Sassoon has pointed out, joined letters "occur when there is no pen lift involved, whatever the form of the letter or the variations of the joins" (Sassoon, 1990: 44). In Arabic, however, as mentioned, spacing is more frequent, as is lifting one's pen in the formation of letters. When the Arab writer moves from the creation of words in his/her native language to English, there is in the first place the necessity to overcome the habitual right to left direction of writing. In fact, when Arab students attempt to write cursively in English, they will often try to find shortcuts that are perhaps derived from the strokes they are familiar with in Arabic. Grant-Robertson has indicated, for example, that such students will write *o* clockwise, as in  and , in order to avoid backtracking (Grant-Robertson, 1983: 52).

This is complicated, of course, by the fact that in Arabic more than half of the letters are dotted, and there are so many variations of dotting, for example in the following: dots are placed over the letters, under the letters, and even inside the letters, these same letters (in the example) exemplify one dot standing alone, two and three dots joined together:

 Further, some dots are even joined with the letter, as in the following:  Consequently, when the Arab writer begins writing cursively in English, he/she has to overcome a learned habit of directional flow and of lifting his/her pen much more frequently than in English. Hence, the frequent appearance of malformations of letters and words that are supposed to be written cursively but look as though they were printed.

In a book called *Learner English*, Smith says that the malformation of individual letters is rooted in a variety of causes, with capital letters,

with the letters o, a, t, d, and g, "and the cursive linking of almost any letters" (Smith, 1987: 146). It is this last emphasis that is important here, since, as Smith says, this fear of forming letters incorrectly can lead to the reality that many Arabs, including adults, "continue to print in English rather than attempt cursive script." This is justification for having students begin cursive writing before practice with print script.

In fact, one of the problems I have encountered, both in my teaching and in my supervision of student teachers, is that when Arab students are taught printing script first, this usually has a negative rather than a positive influence on their ability to write cursively in English, despite the fact practice in print script is often done for the purpose of helping the student to make appropriate distinctions between words at the beginning of their study. This problem is only increased by the fact that most of the material that the students read, in class and out, is in print script. In fact, some students even attempt to imitate this form of writing in their cursive writing, as Grant-Robertson has pointed out, as for example when they write "x" for *ae*, which developed from typeface 'a'." (Grant-Robertson, 1983: 52).

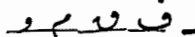
The commonly held view in contemporary handwriting research is to have students develop the habit of cursive writing even in the introduction of letters. With a modified version of the "Marion Richardson" style, for example, students can "begin to write without going through a phase-of print script" (Hartley and Viney, 1982: 4).

(c) Slanting

Slanting is another problem that the Arab writer in English potentially faces: "For Arabic pupils it is essential that they develop a 'feel' for the proper slant, the position of the writing on the lower horizontal line, and the left to right motion. Learners using other learning systems in their native language and unaccustomed to joining letters will need to develop a 'feel' for the continually flowing motion of English cursive writing (Seward, 1972: 170-1). It is indeed true that writing with the proper slant is one of the characteristic problems of the Arab writer in English since in the Arabic language writers develop the habit of slanting their letters slightly to the left. However, in connection with Seward's second point above, "the position of the writing on the lower horizontal line," it should be pointed out that, contrary to

common misconception, Arab writers are required by convention to write on the lower horizontal line but often fail to do so because of speed, inattention to detail or for some other reason.

(d) Open and closed letters

A further source of malformation concerns the formation of open and closed letters. In the Arabic language, for example, some letters, for the sake of legibility, should be closed, like ; most letters, however, are formed with an open stroke. This type of closed letter writing, of course, does not exist in the English language and, as a result, when the beginning Arab writer closes the loops in this fashion he or she is likely to fail to perceive that a malformation is being made. Again, this is a matter of being negatively influenced by the individual's mother language, and it would be helpful for the teacher to bear this in mind when addressing the writing problems of his/her student.

(e) Reversed letters

We have discussed above how the nature of the Arabic language can lead to difficulties for the individual learner to write cursively in English. This is once again true of the habitual right to left direction of writing in Arabic as it applies to the formation of letters in English that forms "mirror shapes" of one another, or reversals, as some authors refer to them; letters such as "p" and "q," "d" and "b," in addition to such numbers as 6 and 9 fall into this category. Possible confusion can come also, however, from the fact that the Arabic language also contains reversals, as with  (English number 2) and  (6), and  (7) and  (8). It is interesting to note that many of the texts that deal with this problem of reversals are aimed at the native learner of English, and so it can be assumed that the difficulty with reversals can have sources in areas, cognitive for example, other than first language influence. As Jarman has pointed out, "The reversal of certain letters by some children may persist well after their seventh year: in particular letters such as *p, q, b, d, j, e*, and sometimes *g*" (Jarman, 9179: 46).

(f) Upper Case

Another problem that Arab writers have when writing cursively in English (or even when writing in print script for that matter) is making the distinction between upper and lower case letters when they are

required, as at the beginning of sentences, for certain nouns and so forth. This problem exists, of course, as Smith and countless others have pointed out, because "(t)here is no upper and lower case distinction" in the Arabic language (Smith, 1987: 146). As a result, this is one more characteristic of the new language that students will have to focus their attention on.

Suggestions for teaching and learning and the importance of time

As with nearly any teaching situation, the inherent complication of the material being studied can be increased or decreased according to the way in which the material is presented and according to the relative time that is devoted to that material. Learning a new language is of course one of the most complicated and ambitious tasks that an individual can undertake, and as so many writers have pointed out, what the second language student needs is time: time to search his or her memory to find a vocabulary item that will suit his or her present need, time to figure out the grammatical construction that will carry the intended meaning, and time, in the context of our present discussion, to learn how to handwrite correctly.

Saudi EFL curriculum and time

I feel that the failure to devote quality time to learning the art of handwriting represents one of the main weaknesses of the current Saudi and almost all other Arab EFL education systems: students are overburdened by a multitude of tasks at the same time, and not enough time is given them for concentration on the elements of writing that they find most difficult. The total number of hours that the teacher comes into contact with students in the Arab world is approximately 45 minutes, 60 times during a semester, from the intermediate through secondary levels. This totals approximately 45 hours per term, but this obviously does not constitute the net time required for teaching, since much of the time is devoted to such things as handing out papers and other routine tasks. How can a curriculum be designed, then, that will provide the student with time to devote quality attention to the skill of handwriting? One solution is to set aside a certain amount of time during each class period for the specific skill of handwriting. It is too often the case that handwriting is not taught as a separate skill, or too many things are

taught in too little time.⁴ For this reason, giving handwriting the attention it deserves by devoting more time to it as a separate skill would be a good first step toward the improvement of the current Saudi EFL curriculum. The Saudi EFL context is referred to here because the writer is familiar with it fairly well. However, needless to say that the Saudi EFL example may be generalized to almost all Arab EFL curricula.

Families of letters and time

As pointed out above, it is not just extra time in itself that will help the beginning student of handwriting, it is what you do with that time that matters most. From this point of view, the literature on handwriting instruction abounds with suggestions concerning how to make the best use of the students' time. These suggestions fall into two large areas that will be useful for our discussion. It is suggested that the teacher make better use of the students' time by concentrating on what are called "families" of letters; nearly every reader will remember learning to handwrite by working with letters that call for similar strokes. This approach is still universally accepted as both a time-saving method, as well as a method that lightens the "cognitive load" of the student.

Such a family of letters can be conceived from a variety of points of view. For example, a family of letters can consist of lines that are formed from top to bottom l, left to right E, or anti-clockwise z. The main point of course is that all of the letters that fall into one of these families have a relationship to each other in the fact that they can be formed in relatively the same fashion. The student's learning, then, will be cumulative in the sense that the learning of each new family of letters will incorporate elements from previous families, and this process will continue throughout the instruction that the student receives in the families of letters.

(4) In English for The Arab world (Kingdom of The Arab world Ministry of Education), for example; students are given, by the last (fourth) class period of the first week of instruction, exercises that include many of the items that should be extended over a much longer period of time so that the student will not be overwhelmed by the information: patterns, formations of families of letters, lower/upper case distinctions, and joins. See pages 1-4 of the 1998 edition for first year intermediate of the series.

Not all authors agree on what handwriting strokes constitute a family. Some authors, for example, focus on how letters are joined. According to Hartley and Viney, "[a]ll of these letters, when joined to each other, have a diagonal ligature [meaning join]" (Hartley, 1982: 3): *a, c, d, e, u, n, i, m* (diagonal ligature) and *v, w, r, o, b* (horizontal join). Other theorists, however, focus on the beginning or the shape (oval) of the letter in classifying a family of letters (please see first paragraph in "stages and time" below).

Some authors, on the other hand, focus on the direction of the movement, as with letters that are formed with an anti-clockwise movement, and with the letters *a, g, o, a*, and *q*⁵. Certain letters are formed with a straight line movement, as with the letters *I, l, K, j* and *t*. These authors are not alone in making these points, since the categorization of letters according to hand stroke has a long history in the instruction of handwriting. What must be recognized, however, is that all of these "styles" must be analyzed and the most useful chosen and used for pedagogical purposes in Saudi Arabia and other Arab EFL situations. Whatever strokes-the-teacher focuses on for instruction, grouping letters according to stroke will be a time and energy-saving method of instruction, particularly if the instructor does what Seward, among many others, has suggested, and devises exercises that build upon the students' previous knowledge.⁶ For example, exercises can be created that contain words with similar handwriting stroke, thus reinforcing the previous learning of the student while at the same time introducing new lexical items.⁷

Handwriting Stages and time

The second of the two time-saving methods is to have the student progress through a series of stages. For example, as Smith and Inglis

(5) See Gill McKeever in *Handwriting Practice*, London: 1987, for a discussion of families of letters. See also B.H. Seward's "Teaching cursive writing to EFL students," *English Language Teaching*, 26.2, 1972, 169-178. This article was later developed into a book entitled *Writing American English*. Hayward, CA: Alemany Press, 1982.

(6) See B.H. Seward's "Teaching cursive writing to EFL students," *English Language teaching*, 26.2, 1972, 169-178.

(7) This kind of "redundancy" in instruction would also be effective in lessening the anxiety the student might experience in learning new vocabulary.

have pointed out, students can begin at a simple stage of letter formation: "The shapes, particularly the oval bodies of *a, b, c, d, g, o, p* and *q*, were chosen because oval forms are more easily produced than round forms, and the making of letters in one continuous movement is more readily achieved" (Smith, 1984: 64). The authors then point out that this makes it easier for students to proceed to the next, more complicated, level of letter formation: "These simple lower-case forms learned in the early years are then developed gradually, with only minor modifications, throughout the scheme. Even at the stage of joining, there are no major alternations to the letter shapes so that those children who may be still learning to read are not confused by a sudden lack of correspondence between the letter forms they see in print and those they are expected to write" (Smith, 1984: 65).

These authors are not alone, of course, in espousing a pedagogical handwriting scheme that holds to the idea of a progression from simple to complex. Another example can be found in a text written by Sassi, a professional handwriting expert. She suggests dividing learning the alphabet into two "forms," the "beginning" form and the "following" form (Sassi, 1987: 128). Although her discussion, like that of so many other individuals, such as the author of the D'Nealian approach to handwriting,⁸ centers on the native writing of English, Sassi is just one individual among many who support the idea of easing the student into cursive writing through a progression from simple to more complex forms.

Integrated Approach and time

Another way to increase the class time that is devoted to learning handwriting is, as many authors have suggested, to integrate the instruction of handwriting in English with the introduction of other significant elements of the language. Naunton's work is outstanding in this context. According to him, "[m]ost of the target students experience great difficulty in developing their script and spelling skills at the same rate as oral skills" (Naunton, 1985: see un-numbered insert, "To the teacher," between pages 44 and 45). In his words, his work "encourages

(8) See for example *D'Nealian Handwriting, Book 4/Student* by Donald Neal Thurber, New York: Scott Foresman, 1993.

a more balanced development by dealing with this difficulty from the outset. The course [here he is referring to his method] teaches a simple but adult script and the introduction of new language is carefully graded. In the early stages both handwriting and reading are taught through phonics; as students progress through the course they are taught any basic spelling and writing conventions" (Naunton, 1985: "To the teacher", between pages 44 and 45).

For example, at the beginning of his text for students Naunton introduces the lower case alphabet by organizing the letters into groups characterized by similarity of handstrokes, as with *c, e, f, o,* and *s* (Naunton, 1985: "To the teacher", between pages 44 and 45). This is not unique in the instruction of handwriting and has existed in handwriting texts for natives for many generations of students. What the author carries out so well, however, is to follow the introduction of each of these items with the introduction of an additional "stage" that incorporates these items and introduces new ones. For example, in a later section of his text, he moves into groups of letters and words that are organized phonetically rather than in terms of physical stroke. "Naunton is not alone in this. Bynum too indicates, in an adopted integrative skills approach, that the "curriculum was planned to include structure, reading, listening, speaking, writing, technical vocabulary, general vocabulary, and English handwriting." (Bynum, 1985: (1 to 1) of 1).

In this way, these authors encourage the economical use of time through an intelligent organization of the material, an organization that goes far beyond the mere instruction of handwriting to include other important aspects of the language, such as reading through phonics, the whole word approach, vocabulary, punctuation, grammatical forms and numbers. The point to be emphasized here is that having a limited amount of time should not necessarily be considered a handicap by curriculum designers, since great progress can be made in learning the language when lessons are organized in such a time-saving way.

Padagogical/Curricular issues

In language instruction, the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are often separated in order to devote sufficient attention to the problems that attend each. In teaching pronunciation, for example, the teacher will often listen to the student's speech in an effort to isolate

those sounds that the student has most difficulty with. The idea is that with the correction of these few, discreet sounds students will improve dramatically, and class time will be used most effectively.

(1) Groundbreaking 1927 work of illegibility

This same approach of finding patterns of error in an effort to economize on instruction has been put forward by Pressey and Pressey in their groundbreaking 1927 article on illegibility in handwriting in children and adults. They stated that their purpose was "to determine the malformations, and the particular letters most commonly involved therein, which interfere with reading and to discover the comparative frequency with which each form appear" (Pressey and Pressey, 1927: 270-285). They found that the illegibilities the students made, child and adult alike, fell into certain patterns. According to them, for example, the six lower case letters *r*, *n*, *e*, *a*, *d* and *o* "account roughly for one-half of all the illegibilities" (Pressey and Pressey, 1927: 270-285).

Following this line of thought, the authors go on to claim that "five forms, *n* like *u*, *r* like *i*, *e* closed, *d* like *cl*, *c* like *a*, account for one quarter of these difficulties" (Pressey and Pressey, 1927: 270-285). By focusing on certain illegibilities, then, it becomes possible to improve students' handwriting legibility by shifting the pedagogical focus from attention to "general form, slant, and smootheness of stroke" to the avoidance of, for example, "*d* make like *cl*, *r* like *l*, *g* like *y*" (Pressey and Pressey, 1927: 270-285). Numerous subsequent studies of native writers have continued to develop the line of thought that was begun with the Presseys; Sassi's work is an example (Sassi, 197). There is little handwriting scholarship however in the area of EFL that devotes adequate attention to the topic of illegibility or that takes advantage of the work of the Presseys; it is certainly the contention of this author that if the teacher of English handwriting to Arab students were to follow their lead and give students extra practice in handwriting the letters that the Presseys believed were problematic, greater progress in instruction could be made and more time could be saved, time that could be devoted then to other areas in the EFL curriculum that need attention. I also feel that not only should the lead of the Presseys be followed in the EFL

classroom, but in the field of EFL scholarship as well.⁹ In other words, the field of EFL in general, and the Arab learners of English in particular, could profit greatly by studies that focus on illegibility.¹⁰

(2) Practice, Practice, Practice

Practice, according to Arthur Koestler and others that have followed, is the repetition of a skill that allows us, eventually, to commit that activity to the unconscious (Koestler, 1964: 347). In other words, with a lot of practice we are able to develop certain habits that allow us to carry out other activities while engaged in that original skill. For example, the person who is first learning to drive a car can be overwhelmed by all of the skills required to keep it safely on the road: shifting gears, putting on the turn signal at the appropriate time, etc. The same is true for handwriting. According to Sassoon, "The whole purpose of handwriting is that it should be automatic (Sassoon, 1990: 51). With time devoted in the curriculum to the specific development of this skill, the learner will have acquired the necessary skill to be able to handwrite while at the same time engaged in other language learning activities."¹¹

As Sassoon further states, with the development of this fluency, "writers can forget about their hands and concentrate on the content of their writing. In an experimental study Graham et al. found" "[i]n comparison to their peers in a control condition [that] participating students made greater gains in handwriting as well as compositional fluency following instruction." (Graham et al., 2000). For this reason adults may not realize how many essential sub-tasks are involved in producing letters. Handwriting is a taught skill, and nothing about it

(9) See Alfi et al., "Common Errors in the Handwriting of Learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language." *Journal of King Saud University*, Vol. 4. 1992, 127-176, and 6 practice books for native and non-native and non-natives learning to write in Arabic.

(10) I feel that studies of Arabs' handwriting in English would produce a set of illegibilities that were particular to that group.

(11) There is good reason to believe that specific attention to the act of handwriting can bring about dramatic results. Sister Mary Boyle, for example, has said that "[p]upils eliminate significantly more errors in size, slant, and formation of letters when taught handwriting by a diagnostic-remedial program than by a regular method. ("An experimental study of a diagnostic-remedial program in handwriting in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades," 1963, page 642-other bibliographic data unavailable).

comes naturally. It may take a real effort to sort out the logical sequence of actions in order to explain them to children, but this is essential, because the early lessons in the movement of strokes and then of letters are vital" (Sassoon, 1990: 51). We can see from Sassoon's statements how important it is, as was suggested earlier in the paper, to devote separate class time to learning the skill of handwriting. I feel that this is not often the case, however, particularly with the instruction of EFL. According to a study earlier referred to by Askov, Otto and Askov at the University of Wisconsin, 98 percent of the teachers surveyed reported that they do teach handwriting to their students as a separate skill, most schools reporting a separate handwriting period of 15 to 20 minutes a day, five times a week. The schools also reported "that they incorporate handwriting instruction in a meaningful context in conjunction with subject matter areas (Askov et al., 1970: 100-111). What is good for the native writing, in this author's opinion, is doubly necessary for the Arab student learning English, as we shall see immediately below in the discussion of children and handwriting.

Sassoon makes another point here that warrants attention: that it is important to assist the student in establishing good handwriting habits early in his or her instruction. Both of these points, separate attention to the skill of handwriting and attention to it early in the course of the student's study, should be kept in mind when fashioning an EFL curriculum that attempts to make the learning as easy and as enjoyable as possible for the student. Time spent on handwriting will ultimately save the writer's time, since he or she will not long have to labor over the act of handwriting with the solid acquisition of that skill; this time is not given to student, however, in the current Saudi EFL curriculum.

3) Teaching non-native beginners

A point should be made here in connection with the handwriting instruction for children, both in the native and the non-native context. It was mentioned above that the skill of handwriting is difficult enough to require special instruction, and this point cannot be emphasized too much. Askov, Otto and Askov, for example, have indicated that when teaching children, the instructor must keep in mind their intellectual development and perceptual needs (Askov et al., 1970: 100-111). For this reason, when teaching handwriting to children, an attempt should

be made to "coordinate [the instruction] with children's perceptual development (Askov et al., 1970: 100-111). Referring to an earlier study by Furner, (Askov et al., 1970: 100-111), the authors say that "since handwriting is a type of perceptual-motor learning, methods of instruction should reflect an awareness of perceptual development in children" (Askov et al., 1970: 100-111). As with other language learning activities, as mentioned, the non-native handwriter has to contend with certain challenges that the native learner does not. We mentioned how difficult it can be for the Arab student to overcome the habits of writing from right to left in Arabic, and how difficult it can be to deal with an alphabet that is completely different from his or her own. This is why the present author feels that the instruction of handwriting for Arab beginners in English represents such a great challenge for the teacher: they have to deal with the development of their motor skills, while at the same time dealing with the acquisition of the skill of writing from left to right (and right to left because they are learning their native language at the same time) and learning a new alphabet. Another good article that emphasizes motor development, psychomotor skills and educational strategies which is worth mentioning here is entitled "Helping Hands: A World of Manipulatives To Boost Handwriting Skills". This article identifies possible causes of handwriting difficulties and suggests activities to facilitate the development of hand muscles and handwriting skills. It discusses handwriting readiness, wrist stability, hand development activities, pencil grasp, hand dominance, eye-hand coordination, basic strokes, general readiness skills, writing materials, and general classroom accommodations "(Naus, 2000:64). All of these factors the sensitive teacher should bear in mind when organizing his/her classroom activities, at the center of which should be the foundation skill of committing the act of handwriting, as Koestler says in another context, to the unconscious.

4) Teacher education and the curriculum

We saw above that, as Sassoon has suggested nothing about handwriting is natural; everything needs to be taught" (Sassoon, 1990: 51). Handwriting is a skill, and as a skill it requires a lot of practice and a curricular framework that provides enough time in which to get that practice. In this section of the paper, we will discuss some of the

elements that have to come together so that the effective teaching of handwriting can take place; and we shall see that in terms of the current Saudi education system and in many of the Arab countries, there is a great deal of room for improvement. The main thing that is needed, of course, is knowledge: knowledge about the special needs of the Arab writing in English, and knowledge about how to create textbooks that satisfy those needs.

One thing that is needed in order to improve the quality of the current system of handwriting instruction is teacher education. Approximately half of the teachers who are now teaching handwriting in The Arab world do not have the personal handwriting skills necessary to carry out their teaching effectively.¹² For example, it is not uncommon for the teacher to require students to write cursively in English while at the same time writing in print script on the board in front of the students.¹³ The teachers must have the training then to be able to use their own handwriting skills as a model for the student. In an English Teaching Forum article, Mahamad M. Ajineh has pointed out that English teachers in the United Arab Emirates" and probably in most Arab countries were not trained to teach handwriting" (Ajineh, 1996: 44-46). His suggestion is to devise an in-service training session or series of sessions on handwriting. It would be useful also, so that the largest audience could be reached in the most economical way, to create a video devoted to the skill of handwriting that could become a routine part of teacher training programs geared specifically toward the Arab teacher of English.

We mentioned above the significance of the development of good habits, and since it is natural for students to imitate their teacher, it is important that they do not receive mixed messages between what they are encouraged to imitate in their textbooks and what they see the

(12) From my previous study, "Coping with First Day: Anxiety Among Student Teachers of English at the intermediate School Level in Saudi Arabia "King Saud University, Educational Center Series, 182, 2002, 1-7 it was determined that approximately half of my student teachers have been unable to write cursively, and chose print script when cursive was most appropriate.

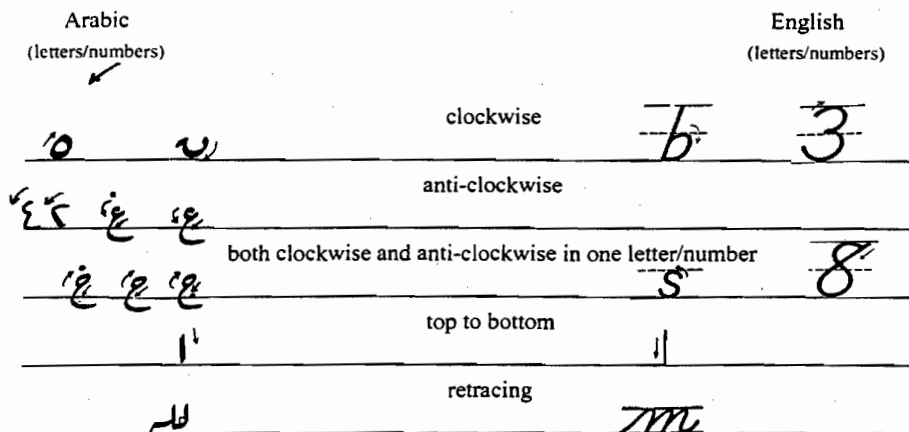
(13) I have seen this in my own teacher training experience.

teacher doing himself/herself. The danger involved here goes far beyond the single classroom involved, however, since it has been pointed out by experts that it is extremely difficult for the individual to overcome the handwriting strokes that are acquired in childhood (Sassoon, 1990: 53). This is one of the reasons that it is possible for forensic scientists to determine the authenticity of a handwriting sample with such accuracy, even when the individual is attempting to alter his or her style in order to hide his/her identity. This imitation becomes problematic when the teacher is unable, as Sassoon has indicated in her handwriting research, to alter his or her personal handwriting style to fit the style being presented in class. Sassoon found, for example, that when teachers demonstrated a particular slant in their personal handwriting, they would also demonstrate that slant in the model of the handwriting being presented to the students (Sassoon, 1990: 53).

A successful handwriting curriculum then must employ teachers with the necessary personal handwriting competence; but the teacher's competence has to go beyond this personal level of ability. In order for a Saudi handwriting curriculum to be successful, the teacher must be acutely aware of the general needs of the beginning handwriting student, as discussed above, as well as the special needs of the Arab student writing in English. At the beginning of this paper, we mentioned that there are both similarities and differences between the Arabic and English languages, and the successful teacher of handwriting must be cognizant of both. A great deal of practice time must be planned into the class schedule in order for the student to overcome the habit of writing from right to left and of slanting his or her words slightly to the left, for example.

On the other hand, the teacher may want to try to lessen the negative affective elements in the class, such as the fear of having to deal with a new alphabet and writing from left to right, by stressing the fact that most of the strokes, patterns and directions employed in English handwriting can be found in Arabic cursive style, i.e. riqu'ah. These clockwise, anticlockwise, both clockwise and anti-clockwise in one letter or number, top to bottom, retracing strokes and so forth that we find in Arabic, for example, and which are expressed in English in

different writing, as Smith and Inglis term it (Smith, 1984:23). In the following figure, the reader will see how similar these strokes are (numbers are also included):



5) pattern, rhythm and annotation

We have seen the emphasis on pattern earlier in the paper in our discussion of families of letters, the recognition of which would simplify the learning of the student. Here again we find an emphasis on patterns (for both beginners and adults who wish to improve their handwriting, as well as for children and adults), this time in connection with the practice that we have seen is so essential to the learning of the handwriting skill.¹⁴ Smith and Inglis offer the following advice to teachers. The context is for native beginners, but I feel that the principle suggested here would apply equally well for the beginning Arab hand-writer. In fact, it could be argued that the following suggestion and emphasis on rhythm and pattern is perhaps even more important to the learner who is attempting to overcome a right to left habit of hand-writing: "Before children embark on writing these exercises on paper they should learn the movement and establish the rhythm in making it by sliding the blunt end of the pencil over the model or by keeping the point of the pencil just off the surface of the paper. When they are familiar with the movement, the point of the pencil can be lowered and

(14) Much of Sassi's book, *Better Handwriting in 30 Days*, is devoted to the presentation of, and practice with, patterns.

the exercise begun with a "running start," (Smith, 1984: 34). This idea of working in patterns and rhythms has been voiced countless times, including authors writing for non-natives.¹⁵

Another effective method of introducing the student to the skill of handwriting and making certain that he/she follows the lead offered by the teacher involves "annotation," as it is referred to in the literature and handbooks. Annotation in this sense means essentially the collection of notes, such as arrows and written comments, that accompany handwriting texts that help the student to understand how to form letters and words. Discussion has occurred concerning whether, in terms of second language acquisition, the learner should provide annotations in his/her native language or in English. Arrows are useful when a simple graphic sign of this kind will do the job; however, since the main focus is on handwriting at this point of the students' acquisition, it might lessen negative affective learning factors to have examples accompanied by comments in Arabic.

The beginning student of handwriting can be helped in so many ways, as we saw, through communicative annotations and work with patterns. It should be mentioned that although textbooks can certainly be extremely helpful in presenting these patterns and in communicating essential stroke information through annotation, the teacher plays the central role in helping the student to learn to handwrite effectively. Once again this is why instruction for student teachers is so essential, since they will be modeling their handwriting for the students. As Jarmin has indicated, among many others, "a child will not learn to write from a work card or copybook. The teacher must teach the shapes and movements personally in the first place. The worksheet is strictly for revision only, and after the instruction has taken place" (Jarman, 1979: 43).

6) Educational games

The teacher's active role in the instruction of handwriting can be seen in other ways as well. The literature on the importance of games to the ESL/EFL classroom, particularly in terms of lowering the "affective

(15) See for example Seward's suggestion of having students draw patterns in the air, a potentially fun way to introduce children to handwriting rhythm. Go to footnotes 5 and 6 in this text for references.

filter," (Mitchell, 1927:19) is vast, and applies equally to the instruction of handwriting. Many people have the image in their mind of the handwriting teacher standing in front of the class and having the student follow his or her example on the board in a mind-dulling series of rote exercises. The instruction of handwriting, however, as important as it is as a foundation to the acquisition of English as a foreign language for Arab students, need not be so intimidating for the student. There are a variety of games that the teacher can employ in the classroom that will help the student by making his/her learning enjoyable.

For example, the student can work with forms that are used commonly in daily life and which are given at their current level of linguistic competence, like filling out their names and addresses, writing checks, and filling out their personal data for an application form, as is done in Janette Haynes book, *American Handwriting: Slow and Easy* (17). What is particularly interesting about that book is the way she has incorporated these exercises into the book, along with a series of exercises in which she has written lists of words on the left hand side of the page in print script, and the student is to write the same word in cursive on the right hand side of the page.

Another book that would be useful, if not for instruction itself but for inspiration for authors of handwriting textbooks for Arab students who could use the information in the book as examples for their own texts, is Naunton's *Start by Writing*.¹⁶ His book includes a series of pictures in which the student is to write the appropriate word according to the cue given in the annotation. Another good example is an exercise in which the student is to fill out an incompletely written sentence or question according to the cue given, thus giving the student practice not only in handwriting but also is correct grammatical form (Naunton, 1985: 60). According to Ediger "[s]tudents should receive instruction in specific handwriting problems, and it is best if learners practice handwriting skills in functional writing, rather than simply practicing hand-

(16) See Jon Naunton's book (see footnote 18) *Start by Writing*, 1985. I feel that the Arab cultures would do well to play a more active role in the creation of their own textbooks, rather than relying so heavily upon the Americans and British for their EFL material, as for example in *English for the Arab world*, written and prepared under the supervision of the Ministry of Education in the Arab world, 1998.

writing skills in isolated practice. (Ediger, 1999). The types of exercises that could be employed in class are limited only by the creativity of the teacher. The main point is that the teacher will find that these games will reduce the students' anxiety and raise their motivation as they deal with learning to write cursively in English.

Conclusion

For many years, I feel that instructors and textbook writers have given handwriting instruction short shrift, devoting little class time to it and expecting students to master the necessary strokes in a short time, or devoting a few pages to handwriting as an adjunct to the main material of a textbook. As with perhaps all areas of human investigation, the more one looks, the more one finds. This is certainly true of handwriting scholarship for the second language learner, and this paper has not touched on many of the other areas of handwriting that merit attention. In terms of learning to handwrite, we have seen that it is a skill that is developed over time and with a great deal of practice. We have also seen that if it is difficult for the native writer to learn, it is doubly so for the student who has to deal with these new skills in an alphabet that is so different from his/her own, and in a script that is written in a direction opposite that which he/she is used to, as is the case with the Arab learner. The Arab learner has special needs, needs that are not sufficiently addressed with textbooks written for the native learner. For this reason, instead of relying upon "outsiders" who do not have sufficient knowledge of Arabic cursive handwriting for textbooks, it would be a good idea to have textbooks and programs of instruction written and organized by individuals who have a complete picture of the Arabic script and style of handwriting in addition to intimate familiarity with the English language and English language cursive style.

The teacher needs to play an active role in the classroom, as has been so often suggested for the instruction of other language skills, modeling good cursive handwriting for students and initiating games that can make their learning more enjoyable, and integrating the instruction of handwriting with the introduction of other language elements and skills. Above all, the teacher needs to educate himself/herself and take advantage of all of the work that has been carried out

on handwriting in the past for natives and non-natives alike. This is true, not only in terms of classroom activities and taking advantage of knowledge about patterns and families of letters, for example, but also in terms of the creation of new textbooks that are aimed specifically at the beginning Arab learner of handwriting. It is the responsibility of the people who are charged with the selection of textbooks that those books be written with sensitivity to the needs of the Arab learner that have been touched upon in this paper. This is especially true of course in a system of instruction in which, often because of limited time and a deficit in teaching resources, instructors rely heavily on the use of textbooks in the classroom. It is hoped that this article will encourage further investigation into this neglected area of scholarship and further creative activity in the classroom.

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