CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In general, Arabic-speaking learners of English have to cope with certain radical differences between their mother-tongue and the target language. The first obvious difference is that Arabic is a synthetic language. That is, syntactic functions and semantic roles of words in sentences are indicated by means of inflections. Nouns and pronouns, verbs and adjectives and even adverbs are inflected. Naturally the order of words is relatively free in Arabic. Verbal sentences in Arabic begin with verbs under intricate rules of agreement. Similar is the case with nominal sentences, which begin with nouns. Except for prepositions, conjunctions, all word classes are used with inflections which realize case, gender, number and person categories on nouns, and tense, aspect, person, number as well as gender on verbs. Arabic, like other synthetic languages, has a heavy inflectional system for all syntactic relations.

This is the system the native speakers of Arabic have internalized from their childhood onwards. It is beyond dispute that their ability to speak Arabic fluently is controlled by the system of knowledge represented in their mental grammars. However, it is not widely perceived that their writing ability in their native language is also conditioned by their internalized grammar, which has a very rich morphology and a less rigid word order.

The English language, on the other hand, like any analytic language, has relatively fewer morphemes, and is rigid in its word order. Inflections on nouns or verbs in English are far fewer than in Arabic. Thus the Arabic learners of writing in English face the task of encoding their messages through word order in English rather than through the arrangement of inflections on lexical items. They have to switch from morphology to syntax in a big way. For example, the
Arabic sentence ‘saylabu kura gadan’ conveys the message in the English sentence: ‘he will play football tomorrow.’ That is, the Arabic sentence expresses the same message as the English sentence, but does it by means of inflections whereas the English sentence does it through a specific arrangement of words in a sequence. It follows that he/she is required to replace his acquired writing strategies in his native language by a different set of writing strategies in English. He has to learn to separate the bits of information in English that are presented to him in combinations in Arabic. Besides, the writing systems of the two languages are radically different. Arabic is written from right to left, English from left to right. This seems to have notable consequences for Arabic learners of English spelling system, particularly in the ordering of sound segments in words. Cf. twon for town, tow for two, skoming for smoking, etc.

1.2 English as a Lingua Franca

English is the world’s most widely used language. In his article English, Finegan (1987, pp.77-79) points out:

>though Chinese is spoken by a greater number of people, English is spoken around the globe and has wider dispersion than any other language...the widespread use of English around the globe is often attributed to social prestige and the need for English in technological advancement, as well as to the simplicity of English inflections and the cosmopolitan character of its vocabulary.

Most importantly, English is the native language of many countries in different parts of the world, and the second language in a number of other countries, such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia and some African countries. Besides, it is the foreign language taught in several countries all over the world. The current status of English has turned a significant percentage of the world’s population into part-time users or learners of English. It is also noteworthy to say that the importance of English stems from the fact that it actually allows people to
access the world of knowledge and technology. In addition to all these very important factors, English can also offer people excellent job opportunities, which would ultimately enable them to have a more prosperous future. Thus, knowing English as a second language in addition to one’s mother tongue gives one the edge over those who are monolinguals. All in all, a good command over English can be one’s passport to the world of excellence and prosperity. Taking all this into account, the Yemeni educational authorities made it mandatory for Yemeni students to learn English as a foreign language.

By definition, English as a foreign language refers to the role of English in countries, where it is taught as a subject in the school curriculum but not used as a medium of instruction in education, nor as a language of day-to-day communication within the country (Marckwardt, 1965; Richards, 1974). Linguistically and culturally the language remains foreign to the learners in these EFL situations. Most often the FL as opposed to a second language has no status or socio-economic role in the region. The learners in such situations are expected to rely on what is offered in their courses, programs for a FL. As a result, FLT finds no support from the environment, the socio-cultural context in which it is taking place outside the domain of education.

By English as a foreign language they mean English taught as a school subject or on an adult solely for the purpose of giving the student a foreign-language competence which he may use in one of several ways— to read literature, to read technical works, to listen to the radio, to understand dialogue in the movies, to use the language for communication ... (Marckwardt, 1965, p.4)

For a second language situation, in contrast, the use of language outside the language classroom helps and supports the language learning process. English in urban Indian settings is an example of ESL while English language teaching in Yemen and in many other countries is EFL.
1.3 The Status of English in Yemen

English as a foreign language is an obligatory subject in the curriculum of the Yemeni schools and universities. In fact, it is the only foreign language that is taught in the Yemeni schools. However, there have been some serious efforts to introduce French into the curriculum of the Yemeni schools. The results of such an endeavor were not so fruitful and now the teaching of French is confined to few schools in the biggest two main cities in Yemen, namely, Sana’a, the capital city, and Taiz, the second largest city in the country. Hillenbrand (as cited in Al-Mekhlafi, 1999) gives a brief account of EFL situation in Yemen saying:

Arabic is the language of government, the media, religious observance, and education in Yemen. However, English is the medium of teaching in the Faculties of Medicine, Science, and Architecture at the University of Sana’a. The principal foreign language taught in the schools and universities is English. (P. 3)

Given the importance of English worldwide, Yemen chose not to be scientifically and educationally marginalized and therefore made it possible for its people to have full access to this language and enabled them to have maximum benefit from the various fields of knowledge that are written in English. Before 1962, Yemen was totally isolated from the rest of the world because the monarch of Yemen (Imam) wanted the situation to remain unchanged so that he could easily control the people. But luckily after the revolution in 1962, a new life came into existence in Yemen and schools and universities were established so that Yemen can catch up with the rest of the world. As a result, people started to talk about slogans such as ‘education for all’ and so on.

In recent years English has become an important language in the Republic of Yemen due to some political and economic changes that took place in the
country after the unification of the two parts of Yemen, the North and South, in 1990. Parents are now quite aware of the fact that English is very essential for their children’s success and prosperity in life. Therefore, parents feel very proud of their sons and daughters when they hear them speak English. They also, especially the affluent ones, send their children to English-medium schools so that they can be very fluent and competent in English. This positive attitude towards English gave some businessmen the incentive to establish language institutes in the main cities of Yemen. Now parents encourage their sons and daughters to join these institutes in summer vacations and also throughout the year to learn this prestigious language. This sort of awareness about the importance of English is actually based on the fact that if one is literate in English, he or she is very likely to have good job opportunities and consequently a better future. Besides, there is a lot of demand in the market for those who know English. They, for instance, can work as teachers, translators, secretaries; they can also get paid for writing articles in English newspapers. It is also worth mentioning to say that in order to facilitate English language learning in Yemen, two English newspapers (Yemen Times and Yemen Observer) saw the light of the day and now learners of English are sometimes given some short English lessons in those papers.

1.4 ELT Situation in Yemen

With the collapse of the ruthless monarchy system in Yemen in 1962, the country witnessed a number of very important changes. One of these changes is the establishment of the formal education system and the inclusion of English language as a subject in the school curriculum. According to Al-Mekhlafi (1999), the need for introducing English language into the Yemeni schools and universities was crucial; consequently, a group of Egyptian teachers were hired to teach English in Yemen. As there was no specific curriculum for teaching English to Yemeni learners, these teachers used the then used curriculum in Egypt, that is, *The Nile Course of English*. This curriculum continued to be used in the Yemeni schools until late 1960s. By 1970, this course was replaced...
by another one, *The Progressive Living English for the Arab World*. Before introducing this course to the Yemeni learners of English, it was in use in the neighboring Gulf countries. But since these courses were not specifically designed to meet the needs of the Yemeni learners of English, they soon got replaced by *English for Yemen (EFY)* in 1975, a series designed by the Ministry of Education in Yemen in collaboration with the British Council. According to Al-Mekhlafi (1999), the goals of *EFY* courses in the secondary stage are:

- To give further practice in the language acquired at the preparatory stage.
- To consolidate the language acquired at the preparatory stage.
- To extend the students’ knowledge of the basic language acquired at the preparatory stage.
- To introduce the students to practice in scientific language, vocabulary, sentences which are read in scientific descriptions.
- To give the students practice in basic scientific language, vocabulary, sentences, which are read in scientific descriptions.
- To give the students some knowledge of the descriptions of language.
- To give the students study skills, e.g., extraction of information from texts such as, reading, summarizing, categorizing, defining, etc.

Though the *EFY* series was far better than the previously used series, it was nevertheless criticized for its heavy focus on grammar and reading at the expense of the other language skills, namely, Listening, Speaking and Writing. As a consequence, in the school year 1995, the *EFY* series was replaced by *The Crescent English for Yemen*. This series was designed within the framework of the communicative approach to language teaching/learning, and is still in use in the preparatory and secondary schools in Yemen.

In general, the objective of teaching English as a foreign language in Yemen has been to develop the Yemeni learners’ productive and receptive skills in the
target language. English is therefore introduced to the seventh graders of the preparatory school, specifically when they are 13 years of age. This, in fact, seems to be in line with what the advocates of the Critical Period Hypothesis embrace. Their basic argument is that native-like acquisition of L2 after puberty is not attainable. Ellis (1994, p.35) asserts that “the acquisition of a native-like accent is not possible by learners who begin learning after 6 years of age.”

Obviously the decisions taken to change the EFL curriculum and teaching materials in Yemen did not occur in a vacuum, but were rather in accordance with the paradigm shift that language pedagogy witnessed in the twentieth century. This paradigm shift from grammar-translation approaches to direct methods and eventually to communicative-function oriented approaches to language pedagogy helped create a new understanding about what is it that language teachers, textbook writers and syllabus designers should focus on when planning or conducting an ESL/EFL program. As Narang (1996, p.2) put it,

At the fag end of the 20th century the pedagogical theory and pedagogical practices show a complete paradigm shift as the one from structure oriented, discrete point approaches in the first half to the communicative-function oriented language pedagogy in the second half...structure oriented syllabi and pattern practice drills, language laboratory methods of teaching second/foreign languages which dominated for more than half of the present century suffered from oversimplification of the things that are really not so simple, and shortcuts where there are none.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

Though the teaching of English as a foreign language has been around for almost half a century in Yemen, English Language Teaching is generally
considered unsuccessful at all levels. The dissatisfaction with the current status of ELT in Yemen is usually voiced by parents as well as teachers. The cause of such dissatisfaction has to do with the fact that the Yemeni students study English for six years at the preparatory and secondary schools and the outcome is that they are able to express themselves neither verbally nor in written language. However, it should be indicated that these deteriorating standards of ELT are not only found in Yemen, but also in the other neighboring Gulf countries. To quote El-Sayed (1993, p.69):

Indeed, school English instruction in the Gulf countries cannot legitimately be expected to produce students who are proficient in English, to English Literature (Sic), or any other content area, in this language. The quality of graduates of even English departments in the Gulf universities remains a subject of concern among several groups: the students themselves, who do not feel secure in the use of English after four years of coursework in English Literature and Language; employers of English department graduates; and English departments in those countries.

Gaps between the society’s expectations and the results of English language teaching in Yemen have been ever increasing. Inability of English language Education to meet the expectations of the Yemeni society can be attributed to several factors: learning environment in educational institutions, English Language Curriculum, teaching methodology and materials, dearth of qualified English teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and infrastructure problems including lack of audio-visual aids, and students’ motivation and attitude towards English and so on.

Most of these factors can be related to acquisition-poor environments of the EFL situation. Since the Yemeni students in the EFL situation receive only formal instruction in English in tutored settings, they hardly get any opportunities to practice the language in real communicative situations outside
the realms of the classroom. Put it differently, the students do not get adequate input in the target language, and their learning does not get consolidated because they hardly have access to genuine English speech in their daily life.

Another important factor has to do with the inadequacy of the teaching methods used in Yemen. English Education in Yemen is still very much influenced by the grammar-translation method, which does not obviously yield students who are both productively and receptively competent in the target language. The English teaching syllabus and English textbooks used in class mostly adhere to this method, and this involves a great deal of grammatical explanations and translation activities which develops in learners the tendency to employ translation strategies when producing sentences or utterances in the target language.

Another vital factor that needs mention is lack of EFL qualified teachers. Most of the Yemeni English teachers are neither fluent nor adequately qualified with reference to their command of English. They can express themselves neither in spoken nor in written English. This is due to the fact that these trainee teachers join the English departments with low proficiency levels in English and this causes them a lot of difficulty trying to cope with the nature and complexity of the courses offered in these departments. Moreover, the English programs currently in use in these departments do not actually do enough to help improve the linguistic competence of these learners by offering courses that can handle their linguistic as well as their communicative needs. What aggravates the situation more is that the in-service English school-teachers still embrace some outdated teaching methods such as the GTM, which do not help create students who are both linguistically and communicatively competent.

Overcrowded classes and shortage of audio-visual aids also contribute to the deterioration of the EFL situation in Yemen. A lot of Yemeni students get admitted into the preparatory and secondary schools every year and this naturally leads to large classes which makes it hard for the teachers to pay
attention to the individual needs of the learners. Additionally, unavailability of audio-visual aids in the Yemeni schools is also a hurdle facing the Yemeni English teachers. Use of such teaching aids can save these teachers time and make their teaching more interesting. Through these audio-visual aids, films, tapes, etc., one gets exposure to the native accent and use of language in the right contexts of situations. In other words, through such learning aids learners get the opportunity to listen to the native speakers of the target language in different communicative situations.

The Yemeni preparatory and secondary school students’ motivation and attitude towards English learning is not very encouraging. In fact, they consider English as a difficult subject and its being a compulsory subject in the school and university curriculum gives them no other option but to deal with its difficulty. In addition, the Yemeni learners study English because they need to pass their examinations and this gives them the incentive to memorize words, sentences and even paragraphs so as to do well in these exams. This whole ELT scenario in Yemen shows that the Yemeni students especially at the preparatory and secondary stages are not motivated enough to learn English as a language of communication and not just as a subject in the school curriculum. The Yemeni students joining the English departments in the country, on the other hand, feel comparatively motivated because they will end up teaching this language in the schools and this makes it imperative for them to improve their language skills. But, unfortunately, the structure of the English programs in these departments does not seem to enhance learners’ interest in the language by providing them with courses that are language oriented so as to have graduates who are both linguistically and communicatively competent in the target language.

1.5 English Education at Taiz University (TU)

Taiz University, the third largest university in Yemen, offers four-year undergraduate programs in various disciplines including Science and
Humanities. As far as English Education is concerned, two four-year undergraduate programs are offered at the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Education. For convenience, we will limit our discussion to the program offered at the Faculty of Education which trains and prepares some high school students to shoulder the responsibility of teaching English in the preparatory and secondary schools, in urban and rural areas in Yemen. Before getting officially admitted into the English department at TU, candidates, high school leavers, have to take an entrance exam which basically tests their grammar and their reading comprehension abilities.

The four-year English program at TU offers Language courses, Linguistics courses, Literature courses and Faculty and University requirement courses. The language courses include courses such as English Grammar, Spoken English, Reading and Composition and so on. Needless to say, the ultimate goal of such language courses is to help students to acquire the target language to be able to communicate successfully in it. However, Linguistics and Literature courses are content oriented and do not seem to do enough to help these learners develop their competence in L2. Further, Faculty and University requirement courses which are conducted in Arabic do practically nothing to develop learners' competence in L2 because learners are expected to spend plenty of time studying and preparing for these courses.

The actual competence levels of the students, especially of the level four students, reveal that there is a big gap between learners' needs and expectations and the English program in operation at TU. These learners face problems at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. Engaging in a real conversation for a few minutes in L2 is difficult if not impossible for these learners. Put it differently, these learners find it hard to communicate in English either orally or in writing.
1.6 The Aims and Objectives of the Study

The present study will focus on the writing skills of the Yemeni Arabic-speaking learners of English majoring in English at the English department, Faculty of Education, Taiz University. It is a well-known fact that Arab learners of English encounter very serious difficulties when attempting to write a paragraph or an essay in English. El-Sayed (1992) states that:

Too often we find students who have an excellent theoretical knowledge of grammar, students who are able to do the most elaborate exercises in grammar, who can break up someone else's sentences or essays, and who can quote definitions of prepositions, have the greatest difficulty in constructing simple sentences or combining two or three sentences together themselves. Those students have mastered the elements of grammar but lack the power of turning the knowledge to practical ends, the use of English which is idiomatic and native and not one which marks the writer as a foreigner. (p.45)

It is hoped that this study will be able to provide some insight into the nature of the problems and difficulties faced by these learners when they compose in English. This study will also attempt to provide some fundamental clues about the strategies employed by these learners when initiating a composition in English. The aims and objectives the present study will pursue are as follows:

1) To assess the linguistic competence of the 80 selected subjects of this study by giving them a Language Ability Test (LAT) and Composition Writing assignments.
2) LAT will be analyzed objectively and subjectively.
3) Compositions will be analyzed in terms of nature and types of errors produced (syntactic, lexical, morphosyntactic, miscellaneous and spelling errors). Compositions will also be analyzed to find out the
problems and difficulties facing Arab learners when composing in English.

4) To conduct a needs analysis on the basis of the data elicited from both learners’ and teachers’ questionnaires. Needs of the learners can also be assessed in terms of their level of competence and in terms of their expectations from the program.

5) To review and assess the teaching materials and methods currently in use for teaching writing skills to the learners in question at different levels of the undergraduate program. This is to assess and evaluate if the teaching materials and methods are best suited to serve the needs and expectations of the learners.

To achieve these objectives, the present research aims to develop a three-component approach, namely, Assessment of learners’ competence, Needs Analysis and Review and Assessment of the teaching materials and methods currently in use in teaching writing skills to the learners in question. The first component, assessment of learners’ competence, includes both LAT and Composition writing assignment. We firmly believe that the combination of these three components will certainly help yield some useful insights into the nature of the research problem considered in this study. It may be pointed out that combining these three components as complementing each other is more useful than treating them separately.

Furthermore, the importance of this study stems from the fact that there is a dearth of research on the subject of learner language of Arabic-speaking learners of English, especially in Yemen. It should also be emphasized that very little research has actually been devoted to addressing the hurdles that Arab learners of English encounter when they compose in English. It is thus hoped that this study will be a real endeavor towards providing some pedagogically useful remedies to the writing-related difficulties and problems facing Arab learners of English as a foreign language. It is also hoped that the findings of the present study will help lead to some crucial changes to the way
the English programs are designed and conducted in the EFL situation in
Yemen.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study does not claim to deal with all aspects of the problems of Yemeni
learners in learning English. Rather, it limits itself to the analysis of the three
components viz. assessment of learners’ competence, needs analysis, and
review and assessment of the teaching materials and methods and tries to
establish correlations between these components, explain the problems on the
basis of the second component-Needs Analysis and some in terms of the third
component. The study also focuses on the writing-related difficulties and
problems facing these learners when they compose in English through the
analysis of the three components aforementioned. It also aims to shed light on
the strategies employed by these learners when they attempt a composition in
English. It is not, however, the purpose of the present study to discuss or
explain the subtypes of the errors produced by the subjects of the study.
Instead, the study will provide a broad classification of the errors into five main
linguistic categories: syntactic, lexical, morphosyntactic, miscellaneous, and
spelling categories. Further, the present study will not attempt to tackle other
aspects such as text coherence and cohesion as they are beyond the scope of the
present study.