



Exploring Grammatical Errors in English Writing.... Dr. Abdulrahman Ali Al Towity

Humanities and Educational
Sciences Journal

ISSN: 2617-5908 (print)



مجلة العلوم التربوية
والدراسات الإنسانية

ISSN: 2709-0302 (online)

Exploring Grammatical Errors in English Writing Made by EFL Saudi Learners at Al-Dayer University College, Jazan University(*)

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تاريخ قبوله للنشر 5/12/2021.

<http://hesj.org/ojs/index.php/hesj/index>

(*) تاريخ تسليم البحث 14/11/2021.

(*) موقع المجلة:

المجلد (8)، العدد (20)، ديسمبر 2021م

525

مجلة العلوم التربوية والدراسات الإنسانية

استكشاف الأخطاء النحوية في الكتابة الانجليزية التي يقوم بها متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالكلية الجامعية بالداير - جامعة جازان

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الملخص

تحليل الخطأ هو طريقة للبحث والتحقيق في الأخطاء الحاصلة في اكتساب اللغة كلغة ثانية أو أجنبية. وتعد دراسة تحليل الأخطاء هذه جزءاً من البحث في عملية تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. ان وجود اخطاء نحوية في كتابة وتعبير طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية/أجنبية امر لا مفر منه وهذا يجعل من مهمة معلمي اللغة في مساعدة المتعلمين على تجاوز هذه المرحلة عملية صعبة إلى حد كبير. وقد يصاب بعض المتعلمين بالإحباط من تكرار تلك الأخطاء على نفسها وعدم النجاح في تجاوزها. لذلك يجب على معلمي اللغة البحث والكشف عن الأخطاء الشائعة عند المتعلمين ودراسة اسبابها وكيف يتم علاجها. وكون الباحث يعمل استاذاً للغة فانه يهدف في هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة الأخطاء النحوية الشائعة التي يرتكبها متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من اجل المساعدة في حلها. ويعتمد هذا البحث على تحليل عينات من تعبيرات طالبات الكلية الجامعية بالداير التابعة لجامعة جازان. وقد تم إجراء البحث بناءً على تصنيف الأخطاء الشامل لبيرد وبنسون (1994). تم تصنيف الأخطاء إلى ثلاثة أجزاء، الأخطاء الأكثر أهمية والأخطاء المتوسطة والأخطاء في علامات الترقيم والمشكلات الفنية. وقد وجد الباحث بأن الطالبات ارتكبن أخطاء نحوية مختلفة وأن أكثر الأخطاء شيوعاً حدثت في المجموعة الثالثة، مشاكل الترقيم والمشكلات الفنية بنسبة 32.7% من الطالبات. اما ثاني أكبر عدد من الأخطاء فيمكن في الفئة الأولى بنسبة 26.9% من الطالبات. واما في المشاكل الوسطية فقد جاء ترتيبها ثالثاً على أنها أقل عدد أخطاء بنسبة 18.3% من الطالبات. ويبدو أن تأثير اللغة الام (العربية) هو أحد الاسباب الرئيسية في العديد من أخطاء الطالبات النحوية مثل التهجئة، وصيغة الفعل، وصيغة الكلمات، والجمل غير المغلقة، واستخدام الفواصل نهاية الجمل. وقد اقترحت الدراسة بعض التوصيات لبحوث مستقبلية وبعض الحلول لتحسين كتابة الطلاب باللغة الإنجليزية وتقليل الأخطاء النحوية عن طريق زيادة التركيز في مقررات القواعد والكتابة على المفردات التي تساعد طلاب وطالبات اللغة الإنجليزية على تجاوز الأخطاء في قواعد اللغة في مهارة الكتابة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخطاء النحوية، الكتابة، طالبات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المملكة العربية السعودية، تحليل الأخطاء



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Abstract

Error analysis is a way to investigate errors in the second or foreign language acquisition. This study of error analysis is part of an investigation of the process of English language learning. Making grammatical errors by students of English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) in their writing is unavoidable and this makes the task of language teachers rather difficult to help learners overcome this stage. Some learners feel frustrated dealing with the same mistakes repeatedly. Therefore, language teachers should investigate students' common mistakes and seek for the reasons of making them. Thus, the researcher, as a teacher, in this study aims at describing the grammatical errors committed by Arabic-speaking learners of EFL. This research is based on the analysis of writing compositions done by the students at Al-Dayer university college, Jazan University. The research is conducted based on the comprehensive error taxonomy of Byrd & Benson (1994). The errors were classified into three parts, 'The Most Serious Errors', 'Intermediate Errors', and 'Punctuation and Mechanic Problems'. It is found that learners made various grammatical errors and the most common errors occurred in the third group, 'Punctuation and Mechanic Problems' (32.7% of the students). The second highest number of errors lay in the first category, 'The Most Serious Problems' (26.9% of the students). The second category in the table, 'Intermediate Problems', came as the least number of errors; 18.3% of the students made grammatical mistakes in it. It seems that L1 (Arabic) influence is the cause of so many errors that are committed by students such as 'spelling', 'verb tense', 'word form', 'run-on sentences' and 'comma splice'. The study suggested some recommendations for further studies and also suggested to take in consideration students mistakes in the materials of grammar and writing courses so as students' writing in English could be improved and grammatical errors be reduced.

Keywords: Grammatical Errors, Writing, Saudi EFL Students, Error Analysis.



1. Introduction

Nowadays, English is used as an international language and a tool for communication among people in diverse contexts and purposes. Due to its importance in modern life, it is taught for Saudi students from elementary schools until colleges. There are four skills students learn in English class, namely: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. However, writing is considered the most complex skill to be mastered by its learners. Therefore, great efforts should be done to help students write better English than they are currently doing.

Students face challenges in learning a new language since they are required to gain information and write down their ideas by the use of this language. Writing is a very essential skill in learning a structured and expressive language. That is why learning how to produce the language through writing is included plentifully in the courses of English. Students, thus, need to learn how to communicate a clear, correct and understandable message either spoken or written. As a productive skill (Golkova & Hubackova, 2014), writing is a cognitive activity that encompasses the ability to find out and express ideas as well as to organize them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader (Nunan, 2003).

Let us ask a simple question; what do student learn in their class of writing. For sure, students learn how to express their thoughts and communicate effectively. They begin to write sentences that indicate a complete thought. The sentence comprises a group of words that have to be ordered in a certain way. Students, definitely, follow certain rules – grammar rules – in order to write correct sentences. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002) defines grammar as “the set of rules that allow us to combine words in English into larger units”. In writing class, students learn syntax, grammar and vocabulary, which will help them produce a good foreign language writing (Hermini, 2015). From all these subjects, grammar comes as the most difficult and complicated subject to be mastered by students (Belo, 2017). Students produce understandable sentences based on the grammatical rules (Furtina, Fata, & Fitrisia, 2016). No one can formulate a correct sentence in a language without knowing its grammar rules.

Most of English for Foreign Language students tend to make errors in writing, especially grammar errors. Cullen & Kuo, (2007) demonstrates the



significance of written English in language learning as it is more about accuracy of language and hence highlights the importance of grammar. This indicates the disapproval of making grammar mistakes in written English. How could we understand the language fully without having a writing text free of grammatical mistakes? This shows clearly the importance of writing correct language. Among many scholars, Brown (1994) has still supported the idea that grammar is the most important aspect of a language because it shows the accuracy of a language.

Due to the difficulty of combining words into larger units, sentences and texts, EFL students may commit errors. Here, students may have gained insufficient knowledge about grammatical rules that are used in their interaction. Moqimipour & Shahrokhi (2015) confirm that errors can be resulted from students' inadequate knowledge about foreign language rules, which start the production of unacceptable written or oral linguistic items. As a result of such errors, readers may misunderstand the meaning the writer wants to convey.

Teachers need to identify students' language errors and to know the causes of these errors. According to Divsar and Heydari (2017), error analysis (EA) is a way that is done to gather errors found in students' language, to decide either the errors are systematic or not, and to clarify what the reasons behind errors that are found in students' writing. As known, people are learning better from their faults and mistakes and students are not exceptional. Detecting types of mistakes that are commonly committed, teachers can address them better in the writing or grammar classes. Khan & Khan (2016) confirm that error analysis can assist teachers to find out the area of English which students find difficult in learning a language and it also assists teachers, learners and syllabus designers in discovering beneficial remedial material for solving the errors. Jabeen, Kazemian, & Mustafai (2015) also argue that error analysis gives a deep insight for more understanding about the process of language learning done by students. Moreover, error analysis is beneficial for the teachers, syllabus designers, and textbook writers since it can reveal the problems faced by learners in learning a language (Nzama, in Agustina & Junining, 2016).

Grammatical errors made by English learners should be received as an important issue. Based on the researcher's experience in the University



College at Al Dayer, Jazan University, learners make different types of grammatical errors in their written English. This problem may have arisen because they are not familiar enough with English grammar. In addition, learners' mother tongue, Arabic, could interfere much with their acquisition of English. Moqimipour & Shahrokhi (2015) state that "the first language interference is the major source of barrier to the acquisition of a new language". Thus, the researcher believes that a study of this nature, error analysis, could shed light into a more profound understanding of Saudi learners' grammatical errors in their writings and potentially a way in which English instructors could prevent such errors. In an example like "Farhan go to the market", learners are not aware of adding "es" to the verb "go" and putting "." at the end of the sentence.

Since learners of a foreign language make errors in their learning process, this research tries to deal with the types of the errors that may be found. It focuses on the common grammatical errors made by students of English in their paragraph writing. Out of researcher experience, improving students' writing skills is not an easy task and needs to be tackled the sooner the better. Since the big problem in writing appears in grammar, it is necessary to first investigate and classify the most common grammatical errors students make. After that comes the step of finding solutions to help students improve their writing ability and to minimize their mistakes in grammar rules.

2. Literature Review

Corder (1967) defines Error Analysis as an approach that examines the errors of learners to find out the process about the progress of individual learners. Error analysis, as illustrates, is done to identify learners' areas of opportunities (Corder, 1974). Corder calls for certain steps to be followed during the analysis of errors. These entail the collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors. Selinker (1972) looks at EA as a phenomenon that describes the second language acquisition such as interlanguage. David Crystal (2003) defines Error Analysis as a "technique for identifying, classifying, and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by a learner of a foreign language". Sinha (1997) asserts that such analysis informs learners' errors, and thereby, notifies the



competence learners attained. Ellis (2002) also suggests similar stages to follow for error analysis.

Richards (1971) also classified errors into three major categories: 1) interference errors that occur when the language learners use their mother tongue to create a sentence in target language; 2) Intralingual errors, errors reflecting general characteristics of the rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply, and 3) developmental errors. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) summarized the process of error analysis in four steps including: a) collection of a sample of learner language; b) identification of errors; c) description of errors; and d) explanation of errors.

EA is rich area and there are many interesting studies in the literature of English as a Second Language (ESL) made on the Arabic-speaking learners' writing. Alhaysony (2012) examined written samples of 100 first-year female Arabic-speaking students in the University of Ha'il, Saudi Arabia. The findings explored that students made a huge number of errors in their use of articles, especially, the omission errors, whereas substitutions were the least frequent. Al Tameemy, F. and Daradkeh, A. (2019) conducted an empirical study that scrutinizes comprehensively the types and frequencies of errors in paragraph compositions made by 80 EFL students, Preparatory Year Deanship, at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. They found out that at the sentence-level and the paragraph-level based on a particular rubric, the results reveal that the 80 students committed 1580 errors in total. At the sentence level, the subjects made 1316 errors in grammar (42.15%), punctuation (16.14%), spelling (14.81%) and capitalization (10.19%).

Waelateh B., et.al (2019) have done an analysis of the errors based on the morphological, lexical, syntactic and discourse categories. The findings show 33 types of written errors associated with the different analytical levels: 1) syntactic (25 categories – the most frequent); 2) lexical (4 categories); 3) morphological (2 categories); and 4) discourse (2 categories). The findings of the study are essential to English teaching practitioners in Thailand for their pedagogical implications when teaching writing to Thai EFL learners. Qasem (2020) also looked at the spelling writing errors of ESL Arabic-speaking learners with relation to the phonological syllable structure of words and showed that spelling errors on the onset position is less compared to the nucleus and coda positions. It was found that Arabic-speaking ESL learners made more spelling errors with tri-syllabic and complex words to that of monosyllabic words. The research also showed



that the reasons of spelling errors were due to the different orthographical and morpho-phonological systems of Arabic and English, for instance the letter-to-sound correspondence, sound-to-letter correspondence and homophones. Kazazoglu (2020) looked at the L1 interference on foreign language writing using a contrastive error analysis of two groups. It was found that participants made various writing errors due to the mother tongue influence in terms of sentence structure: tenses, capitalization, word choice, and spelling errors.

As a framework of this study, the researcher deployed 12 types of errors, proposed by Byrd and Benson (1994), to analyze and interpret the data. The 12 errors are primarily categorized into three groups: 'the most serious problems', 'intermediate problems' and 'problems of punctuations and mechanics'. According to Byrd and Benson (1994), errors in the first group are the most serious errors, most of which can potentially disrupt the understanding or the flow of the writing and may hinder readers from getting the message they try to get when reading a text. Errors in the second group are not as serious as the first ones as they distract only certain parts of the sentences but readers may still be able to get the meaning. The third group could violate English writing conventions but will not cause that serious misunderstanding.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Objectives of the Study

This study aims at exploring the commonest writing grammatical errors of undergraduate B.A. students, English major students, the University College in Al Dayer, University of Jazan. The study also attempts to identify particularly which types of errors occur most frequently in the writing samples and accounts for the causes of errors in this EFL context.

3.2. Participants

The participants were 156 undergraduate B.A. students, English major students, who are doing writing courses, at Al-Dayer University College, University of Jazan. They were female students, but factors such as age and sex were not considered in this study.

3.3. Data collection

The data for this study were collected from the writing test of paragraphs written by the students in their midterm 2021. The topics of the paragraphs were about themselves, a close friend, and a trip. Grammatical errors in sentences were analyzed based on the conventional grammatical rules, using the framework of Byrd and Benson (1994). Then frequency of the errors were calculated.



4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Grammatical Errors classification (Byrd & Benson, 1994)

Groups of errors	Errors types	Descriptions	Examples	Errors explanation
The most serious errors	1.Fragment	Writing a fragment rather than a complete sentence.	I 18 years old.	In this example, there should be a verb <i>am</i> in this sentence.
	2. Verbs	Writing a wrong verb tense or a passive sentence incorrectly.	She be with me in all the time	
	3. Agreement	Writing a wrong form of the subject or the verb.	She speak three languages.	The subject <i>she</i> is singular. So, it requires the the verb <i>speak</i> ends with an <i>s</i> .
	4. Run-on sentence	Writing two or more sentences together without the correct punctuation.	My name is jamah i old 20 years old	In this example, two clauses are combined in one sentence without any punctuation.
	5. Comma splice	Joining two or more complete sentences by a comma.	My name is Amani, we are a big family, 12 people, 6 brothers and 4 girls, we have a cat.	These sentences should be separated using a full stop.
Intermediate errors	6. Parallelism	Writing word forms that are not grammatically the same.	She loves language and is want to become a translator in the future.	It is common to use the same verb form in the sentence, <i>lives</i> and <i>wants</i> .
	7. Word order	Placing some part of a sentence in the wrong position	My time free lik to read and play games.	Words are ordered in a wrong way. The sentence should be <i>I like to read and play games in my free time</i> .
	8. Word form	Using the wrong form of a word, including singular and plural features	I like reading book, I like dancing.	In this example, the word <i>book</i> should be plural.
	9. Article	Selecting the wrong article for the meaning that you need or leaving out an article when one is required for the meaning that you need	I am student.	The word <i>student</i> requires an indefinite article <i>a</i> .
Punctuation and mechanic problems	10. Punctuation	Making a punctuation error	My name is Latifa I am from salba	A full stop (.) is needed after the name <i>Latifa</i>
	11. Capitalization	Using inappropriate capital letters	I am <i>From</i> Saude Arapa.	The word <i>from</i> shouldn't be capitalized because it is not beginning of the sentence.
	12. Spelling	Spelling a word incorrectly	My family consists of 8 membar.	The word <i>consist</i> doesn't end with an <i>e</i> . The word <i>member</i> is written using an <i>a</i> before the letter <i>r</i> .



Based on the analysis, the frequencies of errors committed by the participants were identified and counted as presented in Table 2 below.

Number of students	The Most Serious Problems					Intermediate Problems				Punctuation and Mechanic Problems		
	Frag.	Verb	S-V Agreement	Run - on	Comma splice	Parallelism	Word Order	Word Form	Art.	Punc.	Capital	Spell
156	24	80	16	45	45	10	27	53	24	33	33	87
%	15.4%	51.3%	10.3%	28.8%	28.8%	6.4%	17.3%	34%	15.4%	21.2%	21.2%	55.8%
122=77.9%	42 students = 26.9%					29 students = 18.3%				51 students = 32.7%		
122=77.9%	122 students who made errors = 77.9%											
34=22.1%	34 students who did not make the given errors = 22.1%											

According to the table, the highest number of errors occurred in the third group (**Punctuation and Mechanic Problems**) in which the mistakes occurred most with 'spelling', accounting for 87 students with the percentage of 55.8%. The problems with both 'punctuation' and 'capital letters' followed at an equal percent of 33 (21%) in this group. It seems that students are not caring enough about 'punctuation and mechanic problems'. The second highest number of errors lay in the first category (**The Most Serious Problems**). In this group, 80 out of 156 students made errors in 'verb tense', which means that the most frequent type was 'the use of wrong verb tense'. Its percentage was 51.3%. It was followed by 'run on sentences' and 'comma splice' with 45 students and percentage of 28.8% for both of them. Then followed by 'incomplete sentences or fragments'. There were 24 out of 156 students made errors in 'fragments' in total with the percentage of 15.4%. 'Agreement' was the least frequent errors with a number of 16 students made errors and their percentage was 10.3%.

In the second category (**Intermediate Problems**), there were mistakes in 'the use of wrong word form' that appeared with 53 out of 156 students, equaling to 34% as the most frequent type. It was followed by 'word order'. 'The word order' error appeared with 27 students and its percentage was 17.3%. Then came the mistakes in 'the articles' with 24 students which equal 15.4%. 'Parallelism' was the least frequent errors, made by 10 students equaling 6.4%.

In terms of participants committing those errors, only a handful of the students, 5 students, were free from doing mistakes. Most of the mistakes were in the third and first groups of errors (Punctuation and Mechanic Problems & The Most Serious Problems) with less mistakes in the second group (Intermediate Problems). In general, most of the errors made by



students in 'spelling', 'verb tense', 'word form', 'run-on sentences' and 'comma splice', 55.8%, 51.3%, 34%, 28.8%, 28.8% respectively.

From table 2 above it seems that 77.9% of the participants (122 students) made mistakes in the twelve categories, which means that the rest of the participants, 34 students (20.1%), did not make any mistakes in the grammatical problems under study.

Since there were five students free of grammatical mistakes, 29 students (18.6%) made mistakes other than the twelve kinds we discussed such as prepositions etc. The same number of the students, 45 (28.8%) committed the grammar mistakes in 'run-on' and 'comma splice', both kinds of mistakes belong to 'the most serious problems' group. The same was with 'punctuation' and 'capital letters' mistakes. They were made by the same number of the students, 33 with a percentage of 21.2% for both problems, which belong to 'punctuation and mechanic problems' group, the third category. 'Articles' of 'the intermediate problems' group and 'fragments' of 'the most serious problems' group were committed by the same number of the students, 24, with a percentage of 15.4% for both of them.

5. Conclusion

It is for sure that Saudi students, like other EFL students, face problems learning English as a foreign language. Definitely, they make various grammatical mistakes when they write in English. This paper identified and studied the grammatical mistakes that were committed by 156 Saudi female students of English in their composition writing.

Many scholars mentioned the reasons behind making such mistakes such as the process of acquiring the language and the interference of L1 in learning a foreign language, what is called interlanguage. Hinnon (2014) stipulated that errors committed by the learners could be influenced by their native languages. Mistakes such as 'spelling', 'verb tense', 'word form', 'run-on sentences' and 'comma splice' seems to correspond with such findings. Since Arabic 'verb tense' is different, Arab students used to make mistakes in the verb and also deal with English pronunciation as they are pronounce Arabic which affect their writing. Regarding 'run-on sentences' and 'comma splice', students are influenced by writing Arabic sentences. For example, 'I born in Fifa'. In this sentence, the student wrote one word verb 'born' instead of writing 'was born' as if she writes in Arabic. She is not familiar



with writing two verbs in Arabic to indicate the same meaning and form of English. In Arabic, there is no helping verbs like those in English. An English verb like 'is playing' which contains two words 'is' and 'playing' is only one word in Arabic since there is no present continuous in Arabic. Arabic verb in the present tense is only one form يلعب which equals both 'plays' and 'is playing' in English. English and Arabic have totally different grammar rules when it comes to the formation of present sentences.

Another serious problem that Arab English learners have is 'fragment' or 'incomplete sentence'. This is also influenced by Arabic grammar because in Arabic, a complete sentence can be said without verbs. However, in English, to make sentences complete, there must always be a verb. Here is an example of Arabic sentence without a verb:

Arabic sentence: انا جائع

Literal English translation: I hungry.

Correct English sentence: I am hungry.

This example shows that in Arabic grammar, 'adjectives' can function in a sentence without 'verbs'. When the adjectives come at the end of a sentence, they can render it complete. Consequently, this may explain why Arab students omit the copula verbs in front of the adjectives.

Arab students who do not use articles before nouns in English are influenced by their mother tongue. For example:

Arabic sentence: هذا بيت جميل

Literal English translation: This house beautiful.

Correct English sentence: This is a beautiful house.

This example also shows that in Arabic grammar, there is no form of indefinite articles like 'a' and 'an' in English. This adds more confusion to Arab students of English. This study supported many relevant studies which show clearly that Arabic ESL learners are influenced a lot by their mother tongue (Arabic), Arabic linguistic forms whether in terms of grammatical errors or types of errors, Alhaysony (2012), Al-Jarf, R. (2010), Almahameed, Y. S., & Al-Shaikhli, M. (2017), (Qasem, 2020).

Grammar proficiency is still an essential part in the teaching of English in our classes so as students could communicate with English language users and convey an understandable message. Therefore, we, teachers of English, find ourselves obliged to support accuracy as a priority for students



in the Arab context. We have to diagnose their grammatical weaknesses so that such weaknesses can be treated well.

6. Implication

In this paper, the researcher looked at the grammatical mistakes of Saudi English learners and quantified them into percentages. In fact, this is the first research that had been done to analyze the grammatical errors of Saudi female English writings in Jazan University. It is suggested to provide suitable courses and materials which can address the students problems in grammar and writing skills. It is preferred most that teachers of English should investigate grammatical errors committed by their students and consequently apply appropriate methods to teach grammar and writing. Great efforts should be done to help students improve their understanding and abilities in English. Students have to practice the language more and more to avoid or minimize the grammatical errors to occur and then present accurate and understandable language.

Recommendations for the further studies

The study recommends conducting further researches on the L1 exposure and interference in more profound detail and mistakes in paragraph writing, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

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