

## **Error Analysis of Written English Essays: The case of Students of the Preparatory Year Program in Saudi Arabia**

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### **Abstract**

The present study attempts to investigate the errors in a corpus of 32 essays written by 32 Arabic-speaking Saudi learners of English. All the participants in the study are male students who graduated from Saudi secondary schools and joined the Preparatory Year Program at University of Ha'il. The instrument used for this study was participants' written essays in English language. All of the errors in these essays were identified and classified into different categorizations. The results show that the Arabic speakers in this study committed ten common errors. These errors are: (1) verb tense, (2) word order, (3) singular/plural form, (4) subject-verb agreement, (5) double negatives, (6) spellings, (7) capitalization, (8) articles (9) sentence fragments and (10) prepositions. On the basis of these results, a group of recommendations to further research are suggested and some pedagogical implications which might assist ESL/EFL teachers with some helpful suggestions and teaching strategies that will reduce future problems regarding writing English essays among Arab learners.

**Keywords: error analysis, interlingual, interlingual, essays, writing**

## 1. Introduction

The past thirty years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of error analysis. However, research has consistently shown that students have not attained an adequate understanding of how to reduce errors in writing. This paper reports on the findings of a large-scale study that aims at examining the errors made by Saudi learners of English in their English writing at the university of Ha'il.

Bjork and Raisanen argue:

We highlight the importance of writing in all university curricula not only because of its immediate practical application, i.e. as an isolated skill or ability, but because we believe that, seen from a broader perspective, writing is a thinking tool. It is a tool for language development, for critical thinking and, extension, for learning in all disciplines (1997, p. 8).

Ulijn and Strother (1995, p.153) state that writing is generally considered to be one of the active or productive skills of language usage. In Arab universities, writing English is significant in students' academic course of study as research work depends on it. It is needed for taking notes, describing objects or devices and writing essays, answering written questions, writing their compositions, writing experimental reports, etc. Further, the process of writing, specifically writing through a practical research task, also helps to develop the students' cognitive skills in acquiring the necessary strategies such as analyzing results of a research task, inferring from the significant differences observed in comparing means, frequencies (Bacha, 2002, p.164). For these reasons, writing has always been an essential aspect of the curriculum of English as a major, and for academic purposes. English writing is also a fundamental aim of teaching English in Arab institutions of higher education because English language is the medium of instruction in these institutions, (Al-Khuwaileh and Shoumali, 2000).

The field of error analysis (EA) in Second Language Acquisition was established in the 1970s by Corder and his colleagues. EA is a type of linguistic study that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in target language (TL) and within that TL itself.

According to Corder (1967), EA has two objects: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical object is to understand what and how a learner learns when he studies an second language (L2). The applied object is to enable the learner to learn more efficiently by using the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes. At the same time, the investigation of errors can serve two purposes, diagnostic and prognostic.

Researchers interested in error analysis observed that errors are advantageous for both learners and teachers. It provides information to the teachers on students errors. This helps the teachers in three ways, firstly to correct their errors, secondly to improve their teaching and thirdly to focus on those area that need reinforcement (Al-haysoni, 2012).

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides an account of the previous studies on errors made by EFL learners in writing. Section 3 specifies the study objectives and significance .Methodology is described in section 4. Findings are presented and discussed in section 5, while conclusions are provided in section 6.

## **2. Literature Review**

Error Analysis is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition. It is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors ( James, 1988). For Crystal (1999, p. 108) Error Analysis in language teaching and learning is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language. According to James (2001, p. 62), EA refers to "the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance".

Another definition of error analysis is given by Brown (as cited in Ridha, 2012, p. 26). He defined error analysis as "the process to observe, analyze, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second languages and then to reveal the systems operated by learner". As stated

by AbiSamara (2003), Error Analysis can be viewed as " a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on errors committed by learners".

Corder (1967) views errors as valuable information for three beneficiaries: for teachers, it clues them on the progress of the students; for researchers, it provides evidence as to how language is acquired or learned; for learners themselves, it gives them resources in order to learn.

Brown (2000, p. 224) states that there are two main sources of errors, namely, interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual (Interference ) Errors are those errors that are traceable to first language interference. These errors are attributable to negative interlingual transfer. The term "interlingual" was first-introduced by Selinker (1972). He used this term to refer to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learner's L1 and the target language (AbiSamra, 2003, p. 5). According to Kavaliauskiene (2009, p. 4), transfer of errors may occur because the learners lack the necessary information in the second language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate second language routine.

Transfer is of two kinds: positive and negative . The transfer may prove to be justified because the structure of the two languages is similar – this case is called 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation', or it may prove unjustified because the structure of the two languages are different – that case is called 'negative transfer' or 'interference' (Wilkins, 1972, p. 199).

As far as the intralingual errors are concerned, they result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer (Keshavarz, 2003, p. 62; Fang and Jiang , 2007, p. 11). Richards (1972) cites four main types of Intralingual errors, namely: (1) overgeneralization, (2) ignorance of rule restrictions, (3) incomplete application of rules, and (4) false concepts hypothesized. Later he identifies six sources of errors: (1) interference, (2) overgeneralization, (3) performance errors, (4) markers of transitional competence, (5) strategies of communication and assimilation, and (6) teacher-induced errors.

Stenson (1974) states three main reasons for errors, namely, (1) incomplete acquisition of the target grammar, (2) exigencies of the learning/teaching situation, and (3) errors due to normal problems of language performance.

Committing errors is one of the most unavoidable things in the world. Students, in the process of learning language, profit from the errors that they make by obtaining feedback to make new attempts that successively approximate their desired objectives. Weireesh (1991) views learners' errors to be of particular importance because making errors is a device learners' use in order to learn. According to him, EA is a valuable aid to identify and explain difficulties faced by learners. He goes on to say that EA serves as a reliable feedback to design a remedial teaching method. Candling (2001, p. 69) states that L2 learner's errors are potentially important for the understanding of the processes of Second Language Acquisition.

Olasehinde (2002) also argues that it is inevitable that learners make errors. He also suggested that errors are unavoidable and a necessary part of the learning curve. Sercombe (2000) explains that EA serves three purposes. Firstly, to find out the level of language proficiency the learner has reached. Secondly, to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning, and thirdly, to find out how people learn a language.

Vahdatinejad (2008) maintains that error analyses can be used to determine what a learner still needs to be taught. It provides the necessary information about what is lacking in the learner's competence. He also makes a distinction between errors and lapses (simple mistakes). According to him, lapses are produced even by native speakers, and can be corrected by themselves. They call for on the spot correction rather than remediation, which is needed for errors.

Mitchell and Myles (as cited in Keshavarz, 2003) claims that errors, if studied, could reveal a developing system of the student's L2 language and this system is dynamic and open to changes and resetting of parameters. This view is supported by Stark's (2001, p. 19) study, who also explained that teachers need to view students' errors positively and should not regard them as the learners' failure to grasp the rules and structures but rather should view

the errors as process of learning. He subscribes to the view that errors are normal and inevitable features of learning. He adds that errors are essential condition of learning.

In the past few years, there has been a large and growing amount of literature on error analysis. In a recent study conducted by Sarfraz (2011) to examine the errors made by 50 undergraduate Pakistani students in written essays, he found that the overwhelming majority of errors the students made resulted from learners' interlanguage process and some errors resulted from mother tongue interference.

Darus and Subramaniam (2009), using Corder's (1967) model on error analysis, examined errors in a corpus of 72 essays written by 72 Malay students. They found that students' errors were of six types, viz., in singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order.

AbiSamra (2003), in his article entitled "An analysis of errors in Arabic speakers' English writing", collected samples of written work from 10 students in grade 9. He classified the writing errors into five categories, namely, grammatical (prepositions, articles, adjectives, etc.); syntactic (coordination, sentence structure, word order, etc.); lexical (word choice); semantic and substance (punctuation, capitalization, and spelling); and discourse errors. The results revealed that one third of the students' errors were transfer errors from the native language, and the highest numbers of errors were in the categories of semantics and vocabulary. The rest of the errors (64.1%) were errors of over-application of the target language, the highest numbers of errors being found in substance (mainly spelling), syntax and grammar.

In addition, Ridha (2012) examined English writing samples of 80 EFL college students and then categorized the errors according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical/semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The results showed that most of the students' errors can be due to L1 transfer. Furthermore, she found that most of the learners rely on their mother tongue in expressing their ideas. She added that although the rating processes showed that the participants' essays included different types of errors, the grammatical errors and the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones.

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### 3. Objectives

The primary concern of this study is to explore the kinds of errors made by a group of Saudi male EFL learners at university level in their written work. More specifically, the study seeks answers to the following question: What are the most common errors that students commit in their written essays?

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1 Introduction

This section presents the research methodology used in this study and gives information about the population and the sample. It also describes the data collection instruments and procedures. It finally describes the validity and reliability of the instruments and gives information about the data analysis.

#### 4.2 The Study Population and Sample

Burns and Grove (1993, p, 779) states that a population is defined as all elements (individuals, objects and events) that meet the sample criteria for inclusion in a study. The study population consisted of all male students enrolled in Ha'il university's Preparatory Year Programme. Mouton (1996, p. 132) defines a sample as elements selected with the intention of finding out something about the total population from which they are taken. The sample included in this study consists of 32 male undergraduates at the University of Ha'il (Ha'il, Saudi Arabia) during the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014. To select the participants of the present study, a simple random sampling method was used because it is regarded as one of the most reliable methods to obtain a representative sample. The participants, selected for the purpose of this study, are between 19 and 20 years of age. All of them were native speakers of Jordanian spoken Arabic, who also had a working

knowledge of modern standard Arabic. They live in an exclusively Arabic-speaking community. Like all Saudi students, the ones who participated in this study had experienced approximately the same number of 6 years of education through the primary and the secondary education system. All the participants are homogeneous in terms of their linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic background. They speak Arabic at home except for 6 who speak English at home. All the participants didn't receive any English language instruction in English speaking countries nor they had been to any English speaking countries to have any kind of English exposure. They had completed secondary school and enrolled in Ha'il university's Preparatory Year Programme.

### **4.3 Data Collection**

#### **4.3.1 Data Collection Instrument**

The major source of data used to find answers to the research questions is the written essays of 32 participants of the chosen university. The topics given in the essays were general but argumentative in nature.

#### **4.3.2 Data Collection Procedure**

All of the 32 participants were required to write on one of the five following different topics: *Ha'il University campus, my city, car accidents, shopping, or my favorite season*. They were asked to write approximately 150 to 300 words within a period of one hour. The participants were informed that they had to start with an outline, then a first draft and a final draft. The students did not know that their writings are going to be under investigation.

### **4.4 Reliability and Validity**

#### **4.4.1 Reliability**

Polit and Hungler (1993, p. 445) refer to reliability as the degree of consistency with which an instrument measures the attribute it is designed to measure. The researcher used a test-retest device to measure the reliability of the instrument. A pilot study was conducted



through selecting 30 students from the target population randomly. These students did not take part in the actual study. The students were asked to write on one of the essays twice within a two-week interval. Accordingly, the students' results showed consistency in the answers.

#### **4.4.2 Validity**

The validity of an instrument is the degree to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Polit & Hungler 1993, p. 448). To ensure the face and content of the study instrument, the method of trustee's validity was employed. a panel of judges consisting of two academic college instructors and three high school teachers were asked to evaluate the given topics. They approved that topics were taken from materials appropriate to students' standard and suit their ages, and that the rubric set was very clear.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

The analysis of written essays will be derived from Corder's (1967) method on error analysis. This method has three steps: (1)collection of sample errors, (2) identification of errors and (3) description of errors.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

The researcher used a simple random sampling method to select the participants of the present study which consist of 32 male undergraduates at the university of Ha'il. The participants were asked to write a well-developed essay from 150 to 200 words within one hour during one of their English classes. This section described the research methodology used in this study, including the population, sample, data collection instruments as well as strategies used to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

### **5. Results and discussion**

In this section, the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study in light of its objectives. First, the errors made by the students are classified; second, the common errors are identified with illustrative examples; and finally, these errors made by the learners are corrected by examples. Table 1 shows the types, numbers and percentages of errors committed by the participants in their written work.

TABLE 1. Analysis of errors produced by Saudi EFL learners

Type of Error	Frequency of errors	Percentage (%)
Verb Tense	235	16.5%
Word Order	156	10.9%
Subject/verb Agreement	114	8.2%
Pronoun	103	7.2%
Spelling	165	11.6%
Capitalization	88	6.3%
Preposition	120	8.4%
Article	177	12.4%
Double Negative	98	6.8%
Sentence Fragment	166	11.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1422</b>	<b>100%</b>

Now the researcher will present the ten types of error the students made in their written essays.

### (1) Verb Tense

Errors of wrong tense or wrong verb occur when a learner uses the wrong verb tense in a certain sentence. The results of this study reveal that the participants were not aware of applying the correct tense to the verb in the sentences.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
<b>Verb Tense</b>	1. I go to the shopping mall and I <b><i>bought</i></b> milk	1. I go to the shopping mall and I <b><i>buy</i></b> milk.
	2. Three children <b><i>die</i></b> in the accident last year.	2. Three children <b><i>died</i></b> in the accident last year.

## (2) Double Negative

A double negative occurs when two forms of negation are used in the same sentence.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Double Negative	1. I <u>don't</u> have <u>no</u> ideas about my English classes.	1. I <u>don't</u> have <u>any</u> ideas about my English classes
	2. I <u>don't</u> have <u>nothing</u> to wear in winter.	2. I <u>don't</u> have <u>anything</u> to wear in winter.

## (3) Sentence Fragment

A sentence fragment is a group of words that is only part of a sentence and does not express a complete thought. Usually sentence fragments are pieces of sentences that have become disconnected from the main clauses. Some fragments are incomplete because they lack either a subject or a verb.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Sentence Fragment	1. The performers who visited our university.	1. The performers who visited our university <u>were amazing.</u>
	2. bought fruits and vegetables.	2. <u>I</u> bought fruits and vegetables

## (4) Subject/Verb Agreement

Subjects and verbs must agree with one another in number (singular or plural). Thus, if a subject (the person or thing doing the action) is singular, its verb (the word representing the action) must also be singular; if a subject is plural, its verb must also be plural.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Subject/Verb Agreement	1. A large number <u>were</u> killed in a car accident.	1. A large number <u>was</u> killed in a car accident.
	2. Each of the classes <u>have</u> 30 students.	2. Each of the classes <u>has</u> 30 students.

### (5) Capitalization

Capitalization means writing a word with its first letter as a capital letter (upper-case letter) and the remaining letters in small letters (lower-case letters).

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Capitalization	1. <u>english</u> is my favorite subject at university.	1. <u>English</u> is my favorite subject at university.
	2. My friend and <u>i</u> go to the beach every weekend.	2. My friend and <u>I</u> go to the beach every weekend.

### (6) Word Order

Word order is the syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence, clause, or phrase.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Word Order	1. The students <i>read often</i> books in the library.	1. The students <i>often read</i> books in the library.
	2. <i>In the city are</i> many car accidents.	2. In the city, <b>there</b> are many car accidents.

### (7) Spelling

Spelling means the act or process of writing words by using the letters conventionally accepted for their formation.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Spelling	1. My teacher's email <u>adress</u> is msawalmeh@yahoo.com	1. My teacher's email <u>address</u> is msawalmeh@yahoo.com
	2. We will go on a two-week holiday <u>tommorrow</u> .	2. We will go on a two-week holiday <u>tomorrow</u> .

### (8) Prepositions

A preposition is a word that shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence. It links nouns, pronouns and phrases to other words in a sentence. The

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word or phrase that the preposition introduces is called the object of the preposition. A preposition usually indicates the temporal, spatial or logical relationship of its object to the rest of the sentence. The great majority of the participants in this study demonstrated confusion for the right usage of prepositions as shown in the examples below.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
<b>Preposition</b>	1. They have known each other <u>since</u> eight years.	1. They have known each other <u>for</u> eight years.
	2. The whole family loves to go sailing <u>on</u> the springtime	2. The whole family loves to go sailing <u>in</u> the springtime

### (9) Articles

An article is a word that is used with a noun to indicate the type of reference being made by the noun. English has two articles: **the** and **a/an**. **The** is used to refer to specific or particular nouns; **a/an** is used to modify non-specific or non-particular nouns. We call **the** the *definite* article and **a/an** the *indefinite* article.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
<b>Articles</b>	1. It took me <u>a</u> hour to get home.	1. It took me <u>an</u> hour to get home.
	2. I am best student in the class.	2. I am <u>the</u> best student in the class.

## (10) Pronouns

A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun. We use pronouns to make sentences less cumbersome and less repetitive. They are classified into several types, i.e., the personal pronoun, the demonstrative pronoun, the interrogative pronoun, the indefinite pronoun, the relative pronoun, the reflexive pronoun, and the intensive pronoun.

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
<b>Pronouns</b>	1. The fruits <u>who</u> I bought from the shop were delicious.	1. The fruits <u>which</u> I bought from the shop were delicious.
	2. My colleague and <u>myself</u> check all the answers together.	2. My colleague and <u>I</u> check all the answers together.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has given an account of the main errors made by a group of Saudi EFL learners at university level in their written work. Based on the discussion of the findings and the examples given, it could be concluded that the Arabic speakers in this study committed ten common errors, viz., verb tense, word order, subject/verb agreement, pronouns, spellings, capitalization, prepositions, articles, double negatives and sentence fragments. It goes without saying that most of the students' errors can be due to L1 transfer. The overt influences of Arabic on the students' writing of English indicate that language teachers need to take careful stock of the transfer and interference of the students' mother tongue in their spoken or written production. Therefore, one way to highlight the influences of the mother tongues on the students' learning of English is to collect these errors and ask the students to analyze them and if they could to correct them (Ridha 2012, p. 42)

The current findings of this study have gone some way towards enhancing the understanding of categorizing and diagnosing the errors in English essays writing of the EFL Saudi university students. The present study, like all studies, has a number of important limitations that need to be considered. First, the participants of the study were males only. Therefore, the results would be more generalizable if both sexes were included in the current study. Second, the participants of this study were those enrolled in Ha'il

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university's Preparatory Year Programme. Thus, the results in this investigation may not be generalized to other group of Saudi EFL learners. Last, a limitation of this study is that the numbers of subjects involved were relatively small.

Given the results of this study, a number of recommendations for further research are suggested. First, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to investigate the errors made by undergraduate students majoring in English. Second, further investigation into interlingual and intralingual errors of writers of other language is strongly recommended. Last but not least, it would be interesting to compare experiences of subjects from high school and university for the purpose of examining the common errors produced by these two groups.

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