



Errors Committed by EFL University Students in Writing Composition

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1. Introduction

This research is intended to identify and analyze the errors committed by the Iraqi students when they deal with composition. Before writing a good composition, students should master a lot of things. first, they should learn a great deal of vocabulary as to be the lexical forms(words) that refer to parts of our experience(Hejal, 2003: 22).

Secondly, they have to know grammar, i.e, the rules of joining words, phrases and clauses in sentences and different parts of speech with their functions (Gramley and patzold, 1992:124). Punctuation is no less importance than the previous ones since it helps readers well understand different sentences and styles(Fromkin et al, 2003: 559). So composition is considered as the ultimate writing or experience of man's ideas.

This investigation tries to answer the following questions:

- (i) Do university students commit any errors when writing free composition?
- (ii) What are the kinds of errors if any?
- (iii) What are the reasons behind doing such errors if any?

The present study tackles the types of errors committed by (EFL) English Foreign Language students in writing free composition and the way to help them overcome such difficulties. The present paper has two goals: theoretical and pedagogical (Richards, 1974; Corder, 1981).

It aims at discovering the types of errors and their causes to be a good guide for teachers and students of English as well as for text book writers.

2. Composition

According to (Abdul-Razzak AL- hassan, 1981: 8-13 & Shaw, 1986: 34-35, Aarts and Aarts, 1988: 80, 83, 86) several factors should be available to achieve the process of composition: beginning with a sentence, then a paragraph and ending with a full composition.

The following criteria will cover the topic:

2.1 The sentence

A sentence is a group of words that make complete sense and it is of three kinds according to its structure.

2.1.1 Simple Sentence

A simple sentence consists of only one independent clause, i.e, one subject and one pridicate as in:

- 1) Ali is here.

2.1.2 Compound Sentence

A compound sentence consists of two or more independent clauses, each clause contains of a subject and a predicate of its own .Each clause can stand itself with good sense. There are some conjuncts or coordinators used to join the two parts of the compound sentence, i.e, and, but, or, for as in:

- 2) The moon was bright **and** we could see our way.
- 3) The sky darkened, **but** no rain fell.



2.1.3 The Complex Sentence

A complex sentence consists of one independent clause and one or more secondary ideas. Dependent clauses may be nouns, adjectives or adverbs as in:

- 4) The teacher said that the answer was correct. (Noun)
- 5) This is the boy who brought the papers. (Adjective)
- 6) He ran as fast he could. (Adverb)

2.1.4 The Compound-Complex Sentence

It contains two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause as in:

- 7) The agent knew that the roof leaked, but he did not tell us.

According to the feelings or thoughts that are needed in communicating others, i.e., meaning. Sentences can also be classified into four kinds:

a) Interrogative Sentence

It asks a direct question and ends with a question mark (?) as in:

- 8) Do you think she will be elected?

b) Declarative Sentence

It marks an assertion, either by stating a fact or by expressing an opinion ends with full stop as in:

- 9) Ali isn't coming.

c) Imperative Sentence

It expresses a request or command; it ends with full stop as in:

- 10) Don't be shy.

d) Exclamatory Sentence

It expresses strong, intense emotion, ends with exclamation mark(!) as in:

- 11) What a show!
- 12) Don't leave me!

(Shaw, 1986:33-34; Leech Svartvik, 1994: 373).

2.2 Qualities of a Good Sentence

The basic qualities of a good sentence are as follows:

2.2.1 Unity

It is needed for making good sentences since it expresses one main idea and connects the parts of sentences with each other to convey the intended sense as in:

- 13) Yesterday Ali cut his hand, and he could not find his grammar book any where.

This sentence lacks unity because there is no connection between the idea of (Ali's cut his hand) and (looking for his grammar book).

2.2.2 Coherence

When there is coherence, there is a logical order of the parts of the sentence. In other words, lack of coherence means lack of clearness (ambiguity). Such ambiguity comes from one of the following reasons:

(i) Faulty arrangement of words or phrases or clauses:

- 14) He said that he ate only rice. (He ate nothing else).
- 15) He said that only he ate rice. (No one else).
- 16) Only he said that he ate rice. (No one else said it).

In the above three sentences: the different positions of the adverb (only) lead to different meanings of each. So the order of words in sentences must be fixed well to give the intended meaning.



(ii) Vague use of pronouns

A pronoun must not be so placed that it might refer to either of two antecedents as in:

17) Ali met Sameer when he was going to the cinema.

The pronoun "he" could refer to either "Ali" or "Sameer". It is not clear who was going to the cinema – Ali or Sameer. This sentence should be rephrased as "When Ali was going to the cinema he met Sameer".

(iii) Omission of necessary words.

There will be no clearness of a sentence if some important words in it are omitted as in: Ali likes me no more than Sameer.

There is a word omitted in the sentence as result confusion appear in whether ' Ali likes me more than he likes Sameer ' .or ' Ali likes me than Sameer does'. Thus, comparison should be balanced clearly.

(iv) Inconsistency – tense / mood / class of person / of pronouns / number

When shifting of one grammatical structure into another the result will be obscurity of meaning as in:

a) Shifts in tense:

The writer should not suddenly change from past to present or vice versa as in:

18) Romeo goes in disguise to a Capulet feast, falls in love with Juliet, and married her secretly.

present → present → past?

b) Shifts in class or person of pronouns:

19) If one tries hard enough, you will succeed.

It is wrong to switch over the pronoun (one) to another class of pronouns (you) in the second part of the sentence, i.e, we must keep to the same (you) as in:

20) If you try hard enough, you will succeed.

d) Shifts in number:

A great attention should be paid when dealing with both singular and plural in sentences. We must use suitable verb with singular and plural nouns (subjects).

21) Each student in the class was asked to sign their name on the list.

Each can be dealt with as one / but the wrong is to mention the possessive pronoun / plural (their) – it must be (his):

22) Each student in the class was asked to sign his name on the list .

2.2.3 Variety in sentence structure

To be effective, sentences should show various forms of length and structure. It is not good using identical sentences in length and structure:

23) He flung open the door.

24) He rushed into the garden.

25) He caught the thief.

The above three sentences have the same subject (he) which gives monotony and it is better to join them in one sentence with one subject :

26) He flung open the door, rushed into the garden, and caught the thief.

It is advised to follow these rules:

1) Don't begin a number of successive sentences with the same word.

2) Don't place the subject at the beginning of every sentence.

3) Vary the length of successive sentences.

(Abdul Razzak & AL- Hussan, 1981: 17- 35) .



2.3 The paragraph

A paragraph is a group of several sentences dealing with one main idea. It has three parts in general. (Hornby, 1974: 607).

2.3.1 The topic sentence

The topic sentence tells what the paragraph is about and the writer's attitude or idea about the topic, i.e, the controlling idea.

2.3.2 Support

The supporting details in a paragraph explain or develops the topic sentence. The supporting part can be narratives, details, facts, examples, explanation or statistics.

2.3.3 The conclusion

The conclusion summarizes or comments on the main idea. In a one paragraph composition, the conclusion is one or two sentences.

It is necessary to mention here the 'title' which every composition should have. It has an important role to introduce the reader to the composition. Usually, the title is a relevant word or phrase, not a complete sentence. All of the major words in the title are capitalized and it should not have quotation marks (" ") around it. (Ruetten , 2003: 6-13).

2.4 Characteristics of a good paragraph

2.4.1 Unity

To achieve unity, sentence in the paragraph should be related clearly to the controlling idea and this is done by the topic sentence, because it contains the ideas or topic that is developed in the rest of the paragraph. Unity can be shown when excluding the material that does not develop the controlling idea.

2.4.2 Coherence

The second feature of a good paragraph is called coherence which means sitting together. Three things should be taken into consideration: (i) Arrangement of sentences

The one who wants to write a paragraph coherently should follow a logical order to do so. For example, if he narrates a story or an event, he had better use time order of sentence. Or if his topic is descriptive, he will use space order of sentences and the like.

(ii) Transitions between sentences

This is done by using pronouns referring to antecedents in the preceding sentences by repeating words or ideas, and using transitional expressions such as terms of continuation (in addition, next, besides, ...etc); the terms of contrast (on the contrary, however, on the other hand); and the terms of results or conclusion is referred by such expressions as (therefore, thus, so, hence, etc).

(iii) Length of paragraphs

There is no certain discipline which limits the writer with regard to the length of the paragraph used, i.e, short, long or in between . The norm is to which extent the idea is or clear. It is better to follow what a paragraph need to be understood easily and clearly.

(Abdul- Razzak & AL-Hassan, 1981: 44- 69; Rutten, 2003: 15-16)

3. The Test

In an attempt to cheque whether the Iraqi University Students especially those at the college of Basic Education/ University of Babylon are liable to commit some errors in writing composition, the researchers submit them to a test to measure their ability in this area .

Therefore the researchers have decided to make a free composition test for the students in their second year/ Department of English/ College of Basic Education/ University of Babylon. The number of the students participated in the test is sixty.

4. Error Analysis

After checking the students' answers, it was found that second year students committed many mistakes in writing free composition.



To start with:

In an attempt to respond to the question they start their composition as follows:

The one day in the University, especially in Basic Education College in English Department is very difficult.

The students' responses show clearly the negative transfer of the native language because they depend on translation to make such a wrong sentence. In Arabic we say:

(اليوم الأول في الجامعة صعب وخاصة في قسم اللغة الانكليزية/كلية التربية الأساسية)

This Arabic translation is wrong.

While in English the case is different if we want to make the sentence grammatically acceptable it will be as:

The first day in the University is difficult, especially in the department of English/College of Basic Education.

The same thing happened in:

* Life in the university is bad, but the teachers' treatment is sever.

Many students have used this sentence wrongly due to the negative transfer of their native language.

In Arabic we say

(الحياة بالجامعة تكلف الكثير من النقود)

This is wrong the students here are not aware and not able to make compound sentence (see sec 2.1.2) because their sentence give no sense, in addition, they misused the conjunct (*but*) which is used with compound sentences and implies contradiction between ideas . Conversely, they pay no attention to these things. Thus in English we may say:

Life in the university is good, but the teachers' treatment is not easy .

Another error that may be attributed to the negative transfer of the native language is:

* Life in the university costs the students to do duties.

The translation of this sentence is:

(الحياة بالجامعة تكلف الطلاب لعمل واجبات)

The students here misuse the verb (cost) in this sentence something which quite clear due to the fact that the meaning of (cost) in Arabic is (كلفت). Therefore, the verb (cost) in the sentence above is deformed it and the right use of it may be as in the sentence below:

- Life in the university costs a lot of money.

Thus using the verb (v.) (Cost) with the word (money) give the sentence its meaning. i.e, the sentence is meaningful.

The errors above are attributed to intralingual erroes. Where as errors those are ascribed to interlingual errors can be seen in the following example:

*Students should works hard to pass examinations.

Actually, this error is attributed to ignorance of rule restrictions. Apparently, the students have ignored the fact that: they can not add (third person singular-s) to the main verb that is perceded by a model one (should) is an easy rule to be followed instead they commit such an error which shows their neglecton of the rule restrictions.

Another error that is attributed to ignorance of rule restrictions) is the repetition of the words (students) and (life) where they should use the pronouns (they) instead of the (students) and (it) instead of (life) to be economic as happen in their sentences:

Students regard life in the university new experience .Students try to do their best to pass examinations. Students are very annoyed from being obliged to wear uniform .Students believe that life in the university is something complex. Life in the university is harmful. Life in the university will add nothing to the students.



This repetition makes the paragraph boring and this reveals their lack of knowledge of the use of pronouns in replacing nouns of things to avoid such repetition. (See sec 2.2.3)

"In complete application of rules" is another source factor to which the researchers have attributed the students' errors and this can be seen in the following:

*Life in the university is beautiful because students will have new friends because students need this because to communicate with each other. Because to avoid this. Ie, don't have new friends, don't communicate is very dangerous.

The students' in the example above misuse the conjunct (because) and used it wrongly with (to+ infinitive verb) and this is due to the incomplete application of rules. Actually, they have to use either (because) only or (to+ infinitive verb) and to avoid using them together which is an easy rule to be followed. Instead they neglect such a rule which leads to such an error. There is no coherence in their sentences; therefore, their paragraph is meaningless because coherence is one of the characteristics of a good paragraph (see sec.2.4.1).

Some of the students' errors may be ascribed to the "Context of learning" as in:

I'm very happy when I wake up early in order to went to university.

This sentence is ungrammatical since it lacks consistency. The students' shift from (present tense) into (past one) results in obscurity of meaning (see sec 2.2.2(iv)). In writing composition students should use one tense and not try to play with tenses within one composition if this happens it might be because some teachers neglect to draw the students' attention to such important matter and as a result the misleading explanations will lead them (students) to make errors .

Another error is:

In the university the students are classified into clever weak and lazy in addition they are classified into polite impolite shy trouble maker cleverless nervous worried...etc.

In writing composition the students' here neglect to use punctuation marks such as: capital letters, comma, two dots(colons) which are very necessary in writing .They also forget to use (full stop) which indicates the end of a sentence (short pause in speech) and the beginning of a new one . They have to use (two dots) when they began to classify students and (comma) after each type of them such as (clever, weak and lazy) (polite, impolite, shy, ...and worried) This error may be because some teachers pay no attention to punctuation marks and when their students misuse them they (teachers) don't let them lose marks because of their wrong use as a result the students continue in using punctuation marks wrongly something which is horrible since they'll become teachers in future .

The other source of errors is "Communication strategies" to which some of the students' errors are attributed as in:

*Ali want to be doctors when he enter the college of Medicine .

The students have omitted the third person singular(-s) in the verb (want) in which they have to use (wants) instead, and they make the (singular) noun (doctor) plural where the subject (singular) .Actually, this is a very easy pattern: (S V C) but the students misused it . The correct form is:

Ali wants to be a doctor when he enters the college of Medicine .

Some of the students giving no response, they left the papers without writing free composition and this is another communication strategy which is called "carelessness" or "avoidance strategy" which shows the students inability to write a well- connected composition and this means that students face difficulties in writing composition .

5. Conclusion

In the course of this paper, the researchers tried to show some errors in free composition writing through which the second year Iraqi students face difficulties. It has been



found that the Iraqi students are liable to commit errors in this respect. The highest percentage of committing errors is attributed to "intralingual errors". In addition, the repetitions of errors were appeared highly in the field of grammar, and then came translation and finally punctuation.

What is important is the fact that teachers of English should pay much attention to the errors made by the students especially when dealing with the areas in question , in order to improve their ability in using language correctly . Furthermore, a great deal of practice besides assignments ought to be given to them and there must be, at least, a weekly observation by teachers to measure the progress of the students.

It is worth mentioning that beginners (students) when learning English should use good English-English dictionaries and teachers advise them to neglect Arabic to avoid interference between the two languages. In addition, teachers will do their best to make their students use the different words or expressions exactly as they are used in the English context since it is of great importance in translation in particular and in language in general. As for grammar, students should apply their knowledge (competence) to show their different ideas especially in writing . It is advised that beginners should use simple sentences and simple tenses when writing. Teachers can disambiguate punctuation marks by identifying the difficult ones to be discussed well and given more practice on the board paying students' attention to their uses.

6. Appendix 1

The Test

In not more than one hundred words write a well- connected composition about life in the university

7. Appendix 2

The percent of committing errors

No. of Question	Correct Responses	%	In correct Responses	%	Avoided Items	%
Q.1	10	16.66	41	68.3	9	15

7. Appendix 3

Types of errors and their percentage

Types of Errors	Frequency of errors	%
1.translation	11	18.3
2.Ignorance of rule restrictions	18	30
3.Incomplete application of the rules	9	15
4.Failure to give grammatical sentences	6	10
5.Misuse of punctuation marks	7	11.6
6.Giving no response	9	15



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