



Errors Made by Iraqi Students in Writing a Descriptive Essay

Nawal Hussein Lafta

Department of English-College of Arts-University of Thi-Qar

Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to identify the most common errors made by Iraqi students who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Department of English at the College of Arts, University of Thi-Qar, particularly in academic writing. The research was conducted on 38 English texts written by third-stage students. The identified errors are categorized into several types, including punctuation, spelling, prepositions, articles, tenses, pronoun agreement, subject-verb agreement, and errors in compound words. By providing focused instruction, practice exercises, and feedback, it is possible to significantly improve the writing skills of EFL students. Instructors can offer extensive assistance in these areas, enabling students to confidently express themselves in written English and promoting their overall language skills and academic achievements. The research emphasizes the different areas where EFL students may struggle with writing. By identifying these common errors and providing focused guidance and practice opportunities, instructors can help students improve their language abilities and become better writers.

Keywords: error analysis, descriptive essay, writing skill.

أخطاء الطلبة العراقيين في كتابة المقال الوصفي

نوال حسين لفتة

قسم اللغة الانجليزية-كلية الآداب-جامعة ذي قار

خلاصة

الغرض من هذا البحث هو التعرف على الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعاً التي يرتكبها الطلاب العراقيون الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية الآداب جامعة ذي قار، وخاصة في الكتابة الأكاديمية. وقد تم إجراء البحث على 38 نصاً باللغة الإنجليزية كتبها طلاب المرحلة الثالثة. يتم تصنيف الأخطاء المحددة إلى عدة أنواع، بما في ذلك علامات الترقيم، والتهجئة، وحروف الجر، وأدوات التعريف، والأزمنة، واتفاق الضمير، واتفاق الموضوع والفعل، والأخطاء في الكلمات المركبة. من خلال توفير تعليمات مركزة وتمارين تدريبية وملاحظات، من الممكن تحسين مهارات الكتابة لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بشكل كبير. يمكن للمدرسين تقديم مساعدة مكثفة في هذه المجالات، مما يمكن الطلاب من التعبير عن أنفسهم بثقة باللغة الإنجليزية المكتوبة وتعزيز مهاراتهم اللغوية الشاملة وإنجازاتهم الأكاديمية. يركز البحث على المجالات المختلفة التي قد يواجه فيها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية صعوبة في الكتابة. ومن خلال تحديد هذه الأخطاء الشائعة وتوفير التوجيه المركز وفرص الممارسة، يمكن للمدرسين مساعدة الطلاب على تحسين قدراتهم اللغوية وأن يصبحوا كتاباً أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطأ، المقال الوصفي، مهارة الكتابة



1. Introduction

Writing skills are considered the biggest challenge that Iraqi students face, especially in academic writing that requires special writing (formal writing), and many studies have analyzed students' errors. As Brown (2000) points out, learning a second language is a difficult process that takes a lot of work. Arab language learners will likely encounter numerous challenges when acquiring the language, just like any other learners. Their difficulties lead them to make phonological, syntactic, and semantic errors in language. Meyers (2005) asserts that writing produces language, and speaking is a natural human ability. Writing is spoken communication with others.

According to Blanton (1987), ESL students' perspectives and ideas may not align with their goals of becoming skilled writers in the writing classroom. Students did not allow themselves to go through the process of learning to write progressively; instead, they treated their writing tasks as tests. Those students were looking forward to the day when they could finally write well and flawlessly. Writing skills are an essential component of communication for students throughout their academic careers because they enable them to organize their feelings and ideas and convey meaning through well-written text. One of the most crucial, if not the most difficult, academic skills for university students to acquire seems to be academic writing. This is predominantly evident in second-language learners (Negari, 2011). Two categories of errors are proposed by Keshavarz (1994). The first category is called syntactical morphological errors and covers errors made when using prepositions, articles, qualifiers, intensifiers, plural morphemes, and typical Persian constructions in English. Lexical-semantic mistakes, which include cross-association and language switching, make up the second classification.

According to Bahloul (2007), the inconsistencies in the English writing system are a major contributor to spelling errors and appear to be a major issue for most English language learners as they work to improve their spelling skills. Even native speakers who are learning a new language seem to be perplexed by this irregularity.

2. Literature review

According to Erdogan (2005, p.263), "Error analysis deals with the learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes they use in recognizing or coding the input they receive from the target language. Therefore, a primary focus of error analysis is on the evidence that learners' errors provide with an understanding of the underlying process of second language acquisition." Smedley (1983) believes that student's errors negatively affect the clarity of the written message and consequently interfere with communication between the writer and the reader. The most common



grammatical mistakes found in the written work produced by students at Arba Minch University were documented by Tizazu (2014). A collection of paragraphs ranging from first-year to graduating students was gathered. The findings demonstrated how the errors, including their intralingual and interlingual sources, had an impact on orthography, morphology, syntax, mechanics, and semantics. In their 2015 study, Na Phuket and Normah examined the primary sources and kinds of faults that EFL students made in their writing. The results indicated that word choice, verb tense, preposition, comma, and translated words from Thai were the most common forms of errors. It was shown that the most common errors were those that came from an intralingual source.

Naikoo et al. (2016) studied the most frequent grammatical mistakes made by Arabic-speaking students at Jazan University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Copula, concord, number, tense markers, aspect, infinitival to, prepositions, articles, and conjunctions were among the often made mistakes. Sermsook et al. (2017) investigated the sources used by 26 English majors at a Thai institution and looked at the grammatical faults they made in their writing. A total of 104 written works were gathered and examined. The findings indicated that punctuation, articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and fragment were the most commonly made mistakes. The main causes of the mistakes were students' negligence, poor vocabulary and grammatical understanding, and intralingual and interlingual interference.

It provides the necessary information about what needs to be improved in the learner's competence. Ahmed (2017) indicated that misspelling is one of the pervasive mistakes in the written tasks of first-year Kurdish university students. The main reason behind the widespread spelling errors is several factors, such as the irregularity and inconsistency of the English writing system. Spelling is a complex cognitive activity in which many interrelated skills are involved. Al-Jarf, (2010) stated that learning the spelling system entails understanding the proper correspondence between English phonemes and written graphemes. Given that Arabic and English spelling are different, it is predicted that Arab students may encounter various spelling challenges, especially in the earliest stages of spelling development. According to Boss (2005), interference from the mother tongue defined as both positive and negative transfer between the mother tongue and the target language causes learner errors. While there is a positive transfer when the mother tongue and the target language are similar, there is a negative transfer when the learner's mother tongue and the target language have different forms. He continued by saying that after correcting students' written work and compiling a list of their common mistakes in a notebook, a teacher can prepare remedial instruction. Musa (2010) stated that writing is considered a difficult skill to learn because it



includes several components, for example, a thorough understanding of spelling, punctuation, and syntactic subcategories such as verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, relative clauses, sentence structure, and adverbial clauses.

Al Mubarak (2017) found that students need help with academic writing at the university level. Proficiency in academic writing is seen as crucial for the academic success of students learning English as a second language, particularly in curriculum areas within tertiary settings. According to Irfan et al. (2021), there is a severe need for students to adopt the habit of writing daily because this is the way from which the proficiency of writing skills of students may improve. It is also seen during the visits to colleges, both private and public, that more care should be taken in regard to the writing skills of students. Bennui (2008) found that EFL learners construct sentences in their L1, which they later translate into English. Therefore, the absence of an article in the sentence was translated into English, resulting in incorrect English grammar. The primary objective of the study conducted by Imtiaz et al. (2023) was to examine the spelling errors made by secondary school-level English as a second language (ESL) learners. The findings revealed that most students made spelling errors in omission, substitution, insertion, and transition. They experienced difficulty accurately spelling words due to a deficiency in vocabulary, reading habits, self-perception, motivation, and the spelling system. Additionally, factors such as one's native language, the school system, inadequately prepared English teachers, limited reading and listening abilities, and lack of proofreading contribute to spelling errors.

This study has shown that most errors due to both interlingual transfer and transfer errors. It further shows that classification of errors provides information on common problems in process of language learning. Also, by being able to describe and predict errors, teachers can inform their students to know or conquer their errors in process of language learning

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3. Purpose of the Study

After studying the daily difficulties students face when writing essays and receiving ongoing instruction, the researcher decided to focus on most of these issues. By identifying the sources of the most prevalent problems in their writing, target students' writing in English as a second language is improved, and they are encouraged to write with fewer grammatical faults. According to Ellis (1997), learning a second language (L2) does not involve fossilising learners' grammar; rather, it is exclusive to L2 acquisition. Additionally, teaching writing is a challenge for EFL/ESL teachers, especially in the modern classroom, where students are becoming more and more visual and digital learners.

4. Methodology

The researcher used a descriptive qualitative method, and the data were collected from writing tests done by students of the English Department of college of Arts/ University of Thi- Qar who were in the third grade. The data is collected during one day of the first semester of the academic year and it is consisted of 38 students. The researcher used a test as a research instrument and the test was to write an essay in forty-five minutes. According to Kizlik (2012), a test is a method to determine a student's ability to complete certain tasks or demonstrate mastery of a skill or knowledge of content. In this study, the researcher, asks students to write a descriptive essay about "Your Favorite Place to Relax.". The writing was implemented inside the classroom, and the students were not told that their use of collocations would be studied. After collecting the data from thirty-eight samples, the researcher classifies the common errors based on their types that the students used in their descriptive essay. There were errors made by the students, and these errors were tabulated and classified into the following categories; punctuation, spelling, prepositions, articles, tenses, pronoun agreement, subject verb agreement, and errors in compound words.

5. Finding and Discussion

There were eight error categories were diagnosed in this research:



1. Punctuations (Pun)
2. Spelling (Spe)
3. Propositions (Pro)
4. Articles (Art)
5. Tenses (Ten)
6. Pronouns agreement (Pag)
7. Subject verb agreements (SVA)
8. Errors in Compound Words(CW)

In the following, we explore each of the following errors.

1- Punctuations: By correcting these punctuation problems and offering explicit illustrations of accurate usage, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students can enhance the clarity, organization, and overall influence of their descriptive essays.

a- The analysis showed eleven instances of capitalization misuse. A significant number of students failed to commence their sentences with a capital letter and neglected to capitalize proper nouns such as names of individuals and cities.

b- Misuse of full stop at the end of the statement. For example,
----- very helpful and kind I have -----

2- Spelling errors(Spl)

In a study conducted by Bancha (2013), it was found that spelling errors occur when a student lacks sufficient focus due to weariness or neglects the accuracy of words. Below, you will find several examples of these problems.

Errors identification	Errors correction
Musium	Museum
Wether	Weather
Resterant	Restaurant
Mountin	Mountain
Contry	Country
Ancent	Ancient
Promse	Promise
Discover	Discover
Memeres	Memories
Famley	Family
Famus	Famous
Wosh	Wish
Expinsive	Expensive



3- Prepositions (Pro)

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students frequently face difficulties in appropriately employing prepositions due to the variations in prepositions across different languages. They might employ inaccurate prepositions or completely omit them. For instance, substituting "on" for "in" in the sentence "I went to a park with my family on Sunday". Further, using "at" instead of "in" as "I am at the mall" also omit the preposition "to" I tied ride bicycle -----.

4- Misuse of article (Art): English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students may encounter difficulties in accurately employing articles, specifically when deciding whether to use "a" or "an" before a word. They may also exclude or excessively employ the definite article "the" when referring to particular or generic nouns.

- -----and beautiful place in Iraq-----
- -----new house and very big-----
- -----it is biggest park and very famous----

5- Tenses (Ten)

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students frequently struggle with maintaining a consistent use of verb tenses in their written work. They may interchange past, present, and future tenses without adequate contextual justification, as seen in examples such as

- I visit this place last year and I want to visit again.
- We eat spicy food last night.
- We visit that place twice to spend a nice time
- I will never forgot this place all my life
- I feel completely comfortable yesterday with my friend.
- I was so happy when I see birds , grass and small lake

6- Pronouns agreement (Pag)

Pronoun agreement is essential for efficient communication as it ensures clarity, coherence, grammatical accuracy, and precision in writing. Students must diligently focus on pronoun-antecedent relationships to guarantee that their writing is clear, coherent, and grammatically precise. Below are provided examples of various errors.

- -----my sister lost their bag in -----
- Me and my friend eat ice cream and enjoy together in this place -----

7- Subject verb agreement (SVA)



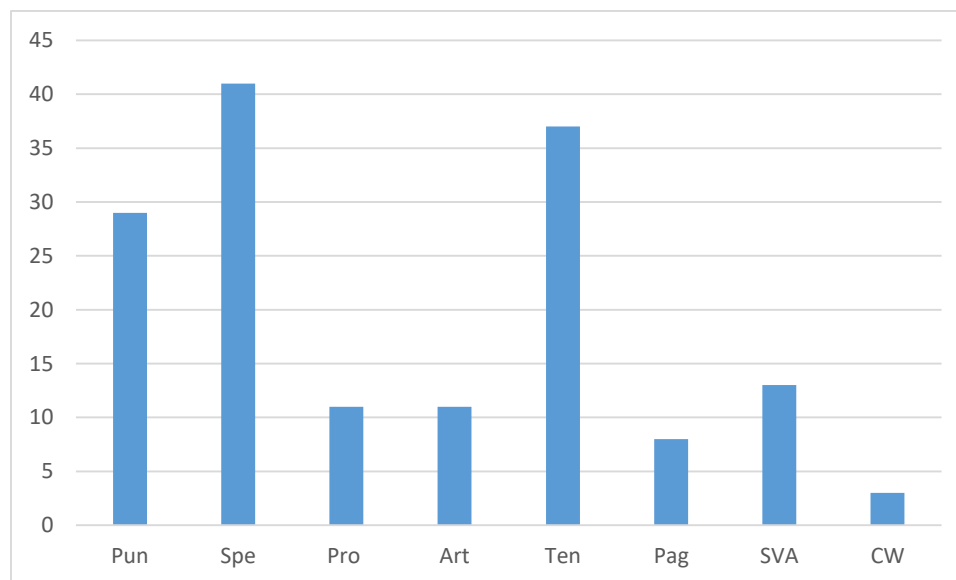
The researcher identified faults in the students writing including both singular and plural subjects. Several of these illustrations include:

- I likes to eat in this restaurant .
- -----we enjoys with some friends in this day-----
- They has a beautiful time together.....
- We see the flowers and trees in the park is so beautiful

8- Errors in Compound Words: A compound word is a combination of two or more words that together create a single word. Consequently, students have challenges while incorporating these words into their essay writing. Examples

- everyday" instead of "every day"
- "sontimes" instead of "sometimes"

Types of error	Frequency	Percentage
Punctuations (Pun)	29	19
Spelling (Spe)	41	27
Propositions (Pro)	11	7
Articles (Art)	11	7
Tenses (Ten)	37	24
Pronouns agreement (Pag)	8	5
Subject verb agreements (SVA)	13	8
Errors in Compound Words	3	2
Total	153	





Now, we discuss the results of the errors revealed in the data for EFL students.

1. **Punctuation Errors (Pun).** Punctuation errors are frequently observed among students learning English as a foreign language, accounting for 19% of all errors. This implies that students may encounter difficulties in employing punctuation marks accurately in order to structure their writing in an organized way. Correcting punctuation problems is essential for enhancing the accessibility and coherence of students writing.
- 2- **Spelling errors (Spe).** Spelling errors account for 27% of all errors. This means that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners may need help spelling English words correctly. Improving spelling skills is essential to improving written communication and correcting errors.
- 3- **Inflection errors (Pro).** Seven percent of errors are inflection errors. These results imply that students struggle to utilize particular vocabulary in their writing, which could have an impact on their language accuracy and continuous comprehension. Giving students instruction that emphasizes grammar and how to use it can help them become more knowledgeable in this field.
- 4- **Order Errors (Art).** It should be noted that verbal errors make up 7% of the total number of errors. Consequently, students may have challenges in selecting the appropriate identifiers (such as "a", "an", "the") in their writing assignments. Providing instruction to students on the regulations and practices can contribute to the mitigation of these errors.
- 5- **Timing errors (ten).** Timing errors, specifically 10, are quite prevalent, constituting 24% of all errors. These findings indicate that students may struggle to maintain consistent verb tenses in their writing. Action language skills enable students to express themselves effectively and logically.
- 6- **Pronoun agreement (Pag).** Pronoun agreement errors on this page constitute 5% of all errors. Consequently, students may have challenges in guaranteeing the agreement of pronouns with their antecedents in terms of number, gender, and person. Instructing students on pronoun agreement criteria and offering practice opportunities can enhance their proficiency in this area.
- 7- **Subject-verb agreement (SVA).** Subject-verb agreement errors, which refer to problems with the agreement between subjects and verbs, make up 8% of all errors. These data indicate potential challenges in maintaining subject-verb agreement within student populations. Instructing and aligning subjects and verbs can enhance grammatical precision in students' written work.



8- **Compound errors.** Compound errors, which comprise approximately 2% of all errors, are the most prevalent. While infrequent, it is essential to acknowledge and address these errors as they can impact the clarity and precision of students' writing. Teaching pupils how to build and analyze intricate phrases can assist them in minimizing these mistakes.

Conclusion

To summarize, examining errors identified in the written compositions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students reveals specific vital areas that need attention and improvement. The high frequency of spelling errors shows the importance of focused training and practice in improving spelling proficiency. Moreover, due to punctuation mistakes, incorrect prepositions, article errors, and disruptive errors, college students require assistance to achieve clarity and coherence in their writing. Furthermore, problems with subject-verb and pronoun agreement contribute to difficulties in maintaining grammatical consistency within phrases. Likewise, errors in compound words, although less common, must be corrected to guarantee clarity and precision in written communication.

Extensive practice, participation in supporting events, and feedback can significantly improve the writing abilities of college students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Instructors can provide significant assistance in these areas, enabling students to express themselves clearly and confidently in written English, ultimately enhancing their proficiency in the language and academic performance.

Overall, these outcomes highlight specific areas where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students may have writing challenges. Instructors can help college students enhance their language skills and become better writers by identifying typical errors and offering specific instruction and practice opportunities.

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