

Investigating Grammatical Mistakes by Iraqi EFL University Students: A Case Study

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Summary:

This paper attempts to investigate the most common grammatical mistakes committed by Iraqi university students who are learning English as a foreign language. The problem of the study is that grammatical mistakes would make sentences unclear or confusing. They deviate from the standard rules of a language. In this regard, Iraqi EFL university students encounter a variety of problems in learning grammar. Common problems include incorrect use of verb tenses, articles, prepositions, and subject-verb agreement. These mistakes are frequently caused by poor transfer from Arabic and a lack of exposure to English. The study aims to examine the grammatical proficiency of Iraqi EFL university students by analyzing their responses to a 20-item multiple-choice grammar questionnaire. The purpose is to identify, analyze, and understand the most common grammatical errors made by these students in their use of English. Through this analysis, the study seeks to uncover patterns of recurring mistakes and highlight areas of persistent difficulty. A 20-item multiple-choice grammar questionnaire has been designed and distributed to a sample of 110 second-year students, morning studies at Department of English Language and Literature/ College of Arts/ Mustansiriyah University. The questionnaire aims to assess students' grammatical knowledge and pinpoint recurring error patterns across a range of grammatical categories, including subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, article usage, auxiliary verbs and prepositions. The data could reveal that despite two years of formal instruction, many students continue to commit consistent grammatical mistakes, particularly in areas that

involve complex structures or subtle distinctions in English grammar. The highest error rates appear in items testing the use of the tense and subject-verb agreement. The analysis of these items proves that while some grammatical areas are generally well understood, others pose significant challenges. The results confirm that students often rely on intuition, native language transfer, or incomplete rule acquisition when selecting grammatical forms. Statistical analysis shows that 69 students fail the grammar test, while only 41 students pass. This suggests a performance gap that requires pedagogical attention. The study concludes that traditional approaches to grammar instruction may not fully address learners' difficulties, especially when instruction emphasizes rule memorization over contextual application. The study underscores the need for more practical, focused, and communicative strategies in EFL grammar teaching in Iraqi universities.

1 Errors and Mistakes

The agreement on the definition of "error" and "mistake" has not yet been reached by many experts or researchers, especially those in linguistics and language teaching. Some researchers attempt to differentiate between the two terms, while others use them synonymously. This paper presents some experts who differentiate between the terms. First, Corder (1967), as cited in Ellis (1994, p. 51), states that an error occurs when a deviation arises due to a lack of knowledge, representing a lack of competence, but mistakes are performance phenomena that are regular features of native-speaker speech, reflecting processing failures caused by competing plans, memory limitations, and lack of automaticity. Second, James (1998, p. 83), as cited in Kacani (2014, p. 324), defines errors as deviations that "cannot be self-corrected," whereas mistakes "can be self-corrected if the deviation is pointed out to the speaker." Conversely, some researchers use the terms "error" and "mistake" synonymously. For instance, Hu (2014, p. 561) states, "through analysis of writing errors, a teacher can learn how and why the learners make mistakes in the process of

writing, so that he or she can take some measures to correct the mistakes." Similarly, Kacani (2014, p. 324) decides to use the terms synonymously in her study, referring to the production of inaccurate forms in learners' oral and written output. Furthermore, Ellis (1994, p. 52) points out that Corder's (1967) distinction between errors and mistakes is difficult to apply in practice, even when learners provide an "authoritative interpretation."

Based on the information above, it is clear that there is ongoing disagreement among experts regarding the definitions of "error" and "mistake." For this paper, the researcher uses the terms synonymously, referring to any deviation from target-language norms that reflect either a problem in performance or competence.

2 Limit of the Study

The study is limited to a sample of 110 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Department. They are learning English as a foreign language. It focuses exclusively on the grammatical mistakes revealed through a structured 20-item multiple-choice grammar questionnaire. However, the results are specific to this academic context and sample, and may not be generalized to all EFL learners or broader educational settings.

3 Classifications of Grammatical Mistakes

3.1 Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

Subject-verb agreement errors significantly impact sentence clarity and grammatical accuracy. According to Quirk et. al. (1985), these errors frequently arise due to confusion caused by intervening words, collective nouns, or complex sentence structures. Swan (2005) notes that these mistakes often stem from overgeneralization of irregular verb forms or interference from the learner's native language, as in:

1/ She have a book. (incorrect). 2/ She has a book. (correct)

3.2 Verb Tense Errors

Verb tense errors can distort the meaning of a sentence, making it unclear whether an action occurred in the past, present, or future. According to Richards (1971), these errors arise due to overgeneralization, inadequate exposure to natural language input, or transfer from the learner's first language. Larsen-Freeman (2003) highlights that verb tense errors are particularly common when learners struggle with aspectual distinctions such as the difference between simple and progressive tenses, as in: 3/ Yesterday, he go to school. (incorrect). 4/ Yesterday, he went to school. (correct)

3.3 Syntactic Errors

Syntactic errors disrupt sentence structure, leading to confusion in communication. According to Ellis (1997), these errors can be interlingual, influenced by the learner's first language, or intralingual, resulting from incomplete learning of English grammar. Richards (1971) notes that word order mistakes, misplaced modifiers, and incomplete sentences fall under this category, as in: 5/ He can plays football. (incorrect). 6/ He can play football. (correct)

3.4 Morphological Errors

Morphological errors involve incorrect word formation, particularly in verb inflections, noun pluralization, and the use of derivational morphemes (Dulay et. al., 1982). Brown (2007) explains that these errors result from the overgeneralization of rules, such as applying (-ed) to irregular verbs, as in: 7/ She readed the book yesterday. (incorrect). 8/ She read the book yesterday. (correct)

3.5 Addition, Omission, Disordering, and Substitution Errors

These errors occur when learners incorrectly modify sentence structure by adding, omitting, misplacing, or replacing elements within a sentence. According to Dulay et. al., (1982), these errors arise due to overgeneralization (applying rules too broadly) and simplification (reducing complex structures). Ellis (1997) explains that omission

errors are common in early language learning, while addition errors appear in more advanced stages when learners attempt to construct complex sentences.

Addition Errors: Occur when learners insert unnecessary elements, as in: 9/ She went to home. (incorrect). 10/ She went home. (correct).

Omission Errors: Involve missing required words or grammatical structures, as in: 11/ He going school. (incorrect). 12/ He is going to school. (correct).

Disordering Errors: Result from incorrect word order, affecting meaning and readability, as in: 13/ Is raining it outside. (incorrect). 14/ It is raining outside. (correct).

Substitution Errors: Happen when a learner replaces one grammatical element with an incorrect one, as in: 15/ He gave me a apple. (incorrect). 16/ He gave me an apple. (correct).

3.6 Preposition Errors

Preposition errors occur due to incorrect usage with verbs, adjectives, and nouns. Swan (2005) states that these errors persist among advanced learners because preposition use often lacks clear grammatical rules. Richards and Schmidt (2010) confirm that preposition errors are among the hardest for learners to correct due to memorization requirements, as in: 17/ He is married with her. (incorrect). 18/ He is married to her. (correct).

3.7 Pronoun Errors

Pronoun errors occur when learners misuse subject, object, possessive, or reflexive pronouns. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) note that pronoun errors are common due to differences in pronoun case, gender, and number agreement across languages. Brown (2007) adds that these errors often appear due to transfer from the learner's native language, as in: 19/ Me and him went to the store. (Incorrect). 20/ He and I went to the store. (Correct).

3.8 Auxiliary Verb Errors

Auxiliary verb errors involve incorrect or missing helping verbs (be, do, have, can, etc.), particularly in negatives and questions (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 128). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) highlight that confusion between auxiliary and main verbs may cause these errors, as in: 21/ She don't like ice cream. (incorrect). 22/ She doesn't like ice cream. (correct).

3.9 Article Errors

Article errors arise when learners incorrectly use definite (the) and indefinite (a, an) articles. Biber, Conrad, and Leech (2002) state that these errors occur due to difficulty in distinguishing countable from uncountable nouns or specific from general references. Swan (2005) adds that learners whose first language lacks an article system struggle significantly with this concept, as in: 23/ She is teacher. (incorrect). 24/ She is a teacher. (correct).

4 Difficulties of Grammatical Mistakes

Students learning English as a second language already have a thorough understanding of at least one other language. When that L1 and the variety of English they are learning come into touch, there are frequently confusions that result in mistakes with a learner's usage of English. This can be seen in grammar, where a student's first language has a little different system: French students frequently struggle with the present perfect because there is a similar form in French but the same idea is conveyed differently; Japanese students struggle with article usage because both languages do not use the same reference system, and so on (Harmer, 2007). Crompton (2011) highlights that many students, particularly those learning English as a second or foreign language, face problems with the complexities of grammar in writing. In numerous countries, British and American English serve as the primary models, with the choice of variant often influenced by historical colonization. Even minor grammatical mistakes can significantly distort the intended

meaning of communication, leading to misunderstandings and hindering comprehension. This can undermine the effectiveness of the sender, resulting in doubts about the teacher's ability to facilitate learning. While clarity and understanding in written communication are prioritized over strict grammatical accuracy, it is essential to address the mastery of grammar, especially given English's global prevalence in various contexts. Thus, proficiency in using English correctly has become a valuable asset.

Arab academics in foreign language education have examined learners' faults in various contexts (Rababah, 2005; Al-Bayati, 2013; Humeid & Altai, 2013). These studies focus on the challenges Arab learners have while learning English. According to Rababha (2005), Arab English learners struggle with speaking and writing skills. Rababah (2005) identifies issues related to language use and usage. Corder (1973) emphasizes the importance of studying errors in language learning because they provide insight into the linguistic growth of learners and indicate effective learning strategies employed within this learning process.

5 Data Collection

The participants of this study are second-year students, College of Arts, Department of English Language and Literature at Mustansiriyah University. A total of 110 students participate in the study by responding to the questionnaire. These students have been selected as they have already been exposed to fundamental English grammar rules and are in the process of enhancing their proficiency. Repeaters aren't included in this study.

A structured questionnaire has been designed to collect data on grammatical errors committed by students. The questionnaire consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions, each addressing a different grammatical aspect. Each question presented four answer choices, with only one correct answer. This format is chosen to efficiently assess students' understanding and pinpoint specific areas of difficulty.

The questionnaire is conducted on Tuesday, March 11th 2025, students are given 45 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire is distributed to 110 students, who are given adequate time to complete it under supervised conditions. The responses are collected and systematically recorded for analysis. The questionnaire aims to examine students' grammatical knowledge and the common mistakes they make while using English.

The collected responses have been analyzed using an eclectic model of analysis based on Penston (2005) and Dutwin (2010). The accuracy rates for each question are calculated to identify the most frequently occurring grammatical errors. Statistical tools such as percentage analysis are used to determine the overall performance of students. The results are interpreted to highlight specific grammatical issues that require further instructional focus. To ensure ethical compliance, participants are informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation is voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents were maintained throughout the research process. By employing this methodology, the study aims to provide insights into the common grammatical mistakes made by Iraqi EFL learners, thus contributing to the improvement of teaching strategies and curriculum development.

6 Data Analysis

6.1 Results: After checking the answers, it can be said that the results are:

1. A total of 110 students participated in the grammar test. This sample represents second-year Iraqi EFL students at the university level and provides a broad overview of their grammatical competence.
2. 41 students (37.3%) pass the test. This result suggests that less than half of the participants demonstrate sufficient mastery of grammatical rules, even within a multiple-choice context.

3. 69 students (62.7%) fail the test. This high failure rate reflects significant challenges in grammar comprehension and points to gaps in either instructional effectiveness or student engagement with grammar learning.
4. The easiest item is Item 1 (“My parents ___ coming over tonight.”), with only 18 incorrect responses (error rate: 16.4%). This item tests subject-verb agreement in the present continuous tense using a clearly plural subject (“parents”), a structure that students likely encounter frequently in textbooks and classroom dialogues, contributing to its high success rate.
5. The most difficult item is Item 9 (“She ___ already eaten breakfast by the time we arrive.”), with 100 incorrect answers (error rate: 90.9%). This item requires knowledge of the future perfect tense (“will have eaten”), which is rarely emphasized in EFL curricula. The construction involves two auxiliary verbs in a sequence, a form that many students find confusing due to its complexity and limited use in everyday conversation.
6. The overall number of incorrect answers across all students and items is 1,264. This high total suggests that students frequently select more than one incorrect response, which may indicate overreliance on guesswork or a lack of confidence in distinguishing subtle grammatical differences between distractor options.
7. Students are also influenced by their mother tongue, which is a reason for their incorrect answers, especially when learning the matter with prepositions and articles. This creates a gap that causes them to rely on their first language.

Questionnaire Performance Analysis

Item #	Answers		Percentage		Percentage of All Errors (Total: 1,264)	Error Concentration
	Correct	Wrong	Correct (%)	Wrong (%)		
1	92	18	83.6	16.4	1.4%	
2	61	49	55.5	44.5	3.9%	
3	62	48	56.4	43.6	3.8%	
4	50	60	45.5	54.5	4.7%	
5	37	73	33.6	66.4	5.8%	
6	80	30	72.7	27.3	2.4%	
7	30	80	27.3	72.7	6.3%	
8	30	80	27.3	72.7	6.3%	
9	10	100	9.1	90.9	7.9%	
10	15	95	13.6	86.4	7.5%	
11	36	74	32.7	67.3	5.9%	
12	51	59	46.4	53.6	4.7%	
13	31	79	28.2	71.8	6.2%	
14	37	73	33.6	66.4	5.8%	
15	31	79	28.2	71.8	6.2%	
16	40	70	36.4	63.6	5.5%	
17	38	72	34.5	65.5	5.7%	
18	81	29	73.6	26.4	2.3%	
19	59	51	53.6	46.4	4.0%	
20	65	45	59.1	40.9	3.6%	

Total Test Results

Total Students	110 (100%)
Passed Tests	41 (37.3%)
Failed Tests	69 (62.7%)

6.2 Discussion of the Results

After surveying the general outcomes demonstrated by the statistical values assigned to the students' contribution to their reactions to the questionnaire adapted in this study, one can say that items can be discussed as:

Item 1: “My parents ___ coming over tonight.”

The easiest item is (item 1) because the number of mistakes made by students in this item is very small. 18 students answer incorrectly (16.4% error rate). This item tests students' understanding of subject-verb agreement in the present continuous tense, specifically with plural subjects. Several students select the incorrect option (a. *is*), which constitutes a subject-verb agreement error by pairing a singular verb with a plural subject. This indicates a grammatical misjudgment in identifying the number of the subject. The error may stem from a semantic misinterpretation. Other students select (c. *was*), which introduces a double mistake. Not only is (*was*) a singular verb that mismatches the plural subject, but it also uses the past tense in a context that clearly requires the present continuous, as suggested by the time marker “tonight.” This double mistake reflects a more serious misunderstanding, suggesting that students neither recognize the correct grammatical number nor identify the appropriate tense. The option (d. *were*) reveals another pattern of partial misunderstanding. Students who select this option likely recognize the need for a plural verb but fail to apply the correct tense, showing a partial grasp of subject-verb agreement with a gap in tense recognition.

Item 2: “Nobody ___ allowed to leave early.”

49 students answer incorrectly (approximately 44.5% error rate). This sentence tests knowledge of subject-verb agreement with indefinite pronouns and the use of passive voice. “Nobody” is grammatically singular and thus should be followed by the singular verb *is*. A frequent error occurs with the choice (b. *are*), which suggests students misinterpret “nobody” as plural based on its meaning—referring to

multiple people—rather than its grammatical function. This semantic interference is common when learners apply meaning-based judgments rather than syntactic rules. Although “nobody” may conceptually include “no people,” it functions as a singular subject grammatically. The selection of (*c. were*) demonstrates a double mistake. The verb is not only plural, which does not agree with the singular subject, but also in the past tense, which does not fit the present-tense passive structure required by the context. This indicates a more serious lapse in grammatical awareness, suggesting that students neither recognize the number agreement rule nor the proper tense for expressing general prohibitions. Similarly, (*d. have been*) introduces a double mistake: the verb phrase suggests a plural subject and shifts the sentence into the present perfect tense. The incorrect tense and number combine to make this a highly problematic choice. Students who select it may have a superficial familiarity with more complex verb forms but lack a clear understanding of their syntactic constraints, particularly within passive constructions.

Item 3: “One of the players ____ injured during the game.”

48 students answer incorrectly (43.6% error rate). This item assesses students’ ability to identify the correct subject in a “one of the...” construction and apply proper subject-verb agreement in the past passive voice. Although the noun “players” is plural, it is not the subject of the sentence. The true subject is “One,” which is singular, and thus must be followed by the singular past verb *was*. A common error involves the selection of (*a. were*), which reflects a misunderstanding of subject identification. Students who choose this option likely treat the nearest noun (“players”) as the subject. This reflects a surface-level reading rather than a deeper syntactic understanding. More complex issues arise in the choice (*b. are*), which introduces a double mistake. First, (*are*) is a plural verb that disagrees with the singular subject “One.” Second, it is in the present tense, whereas the sentence clearly refers to a past event. This double mistake suggests the student does not

recognize the time frame of the action or the head of the noun phrase, indicating significant difficulty in tense control and sentence structure analysis. The choice (*d. is*), while correct in number, is incorrect in tense. This suggests a partial understanding, in which the student correctly recognizes the subject as singular but fails to adjust the verb tense to match the temporal context.

Item 4: “The children ____ excited about the trip.”

60 students answer incorrectly (54.5% error rate). This item tests students' knowledge of subject-verb agreement in the present tense. Several students select the incorrect option (*a. were*), which, although correct in number, introduces a tense error. Students who choose this option may understand that the subject is plural but fail to match the tense appropriately. Other students select (*c. will*), which introduces a double mistake. First, (*will*) is a modal auxiliary that requires a main verb after it, but in this option, there's no main verb. Second, (*will*) suggests a future context, which does not match the present-focused expression. The choice (*d. have*) is also incorrect because the tense is inappropriate for a present simple description of a current emotional state. Students who choose this option misapply verb 'have' instead of verb 'be'.

Item 5: “I ____ and he sings.”

73 students answer incorrectly (66.4% error rate). This sentence examines students' ability to use parallel structure and appropriate tense consistency within compound sentences. The subject “I” pairs with the present simple verb “dance” to match the structure “he sings”. The coordination between clauses requires both verbs to be in the same tense. Some students select (*a. have been*), which introduces a tense mismatch by using the present perfect tense. This error suggests that students don't recognize the importance of parallel grammatical structures in compound sentences. Others choose (*b. am dancing*), which also creates tense inconsistency, as the present continuous form (*am dancing*) does not align with “he sings.” While both

forms refer to the present, their aspectual meanings differ: (*am dancing*) implies an action happening right now, whereas “sings” expresses a general habit or repeated action. The choice (*d. danced*) presents a clear tense mismatch as it uses the past simple form while the second clause remains in the present. Students who choose this option may interpret the sentence as referring to past action, but such an interpretation violates the coordination implied by “and,” which calls for structural symmetry between both clauses.

Item 6: “She ___ her homework right now.”

30 students answer incorrectly (27.3% error rate). This item tests students’ knowledge of the present continuous tense. The time expression “right now” clearly signals the need for the present continuous. The choice (*b. did*) introduces a clear tense error, shifting the sentence into the past tense despite the time marker “right now”. Students who select this option may be relying on fixed expressions or personal familiarity with “did homework” as a common phrase without aligning it with the actual temporal context. Students who choose (*c. does*) make a tense error, applying the simple present where the progressive aspect is required. This misinterpretation likely reflects an overgeneralization of the simple present for all present-time events. The option (*d. will do*) is incorrect because it introduces the future tense and fails to reflect the present-time nature of the action. This reflects a misunderstanding of time expressions and their grammatical implications.

Item 7: “We ___ at the restaurant last night.”

80 students answer incorrectly (72.7% error rate). This item focuses on proper verb tense usage, with “last night” clearly indicating a past event. Therefore, the correct verb form is the simple past tense “ate.” Students who choose (*a. eat*) commit a tense error, using the present form despite the sentence’s explicit past-time context. This type of error suggests that students may overlook temporal adverbs or may be uncertain about irregular verb forms like “eat–ate–eaten.” The option (*b. can eat*)

introduces a double mistake: first, the modal “can” suggests ability, which does not fit the completed past action described; second, the present-time reference of “can” is incompatible with the time marker “last night.” The choice (*d. have eaten*) is grammatically correct in structure but not in context. The present perfect tense typically describes actions with relevance to the present, not completed events confined to a specific past time such as “last night.” Students choosing this option may confuse perfective and past references, indicating incomplete understanding of aspectual distinctions.

Item 8: “By next year, she ___ finished her project.”

80 students answer incorrectly (72.7% error rate). This item tests students’ familiarity with the future perfect tense, which expresses an action that will be completed before a specific time in the future. The choice (*b. will*) shows a structural and tense misunderstanding. Using (*will*) without a main verb makes the clause incomplete. Additionally, (*will*) alone does not capture the idea of completed action before a future point, which is necessary for future perfect expressions. Choosing (*c. will have been*) reflects a tense and form error. This structure would be correct only if it were followed by a present participle. As it stands, the verb phrase is incomplete, indicating confusion over future perfect continuous constructions. The option (*d. will be*) introduces a semantic and grammatical mismatch. It suggests a future state rather than a completed action and does not support the past participle “finished.” Students selecting this option likely misunderstand the difference between progressive and perfective future constructions.

Item 9: “She ___ already eaten breakfast by the time we arrive.”

The most difficult item is (item 9) because of the huge number of mistakes made by the students. 100 students answer incorrectly (90.9% error rate). This sentence uses the future perfect tense to describe an action that will be completed before another future event. Some students choose (*a. has*), which creates a tense mismatch by

using the present perfect instead of future perfect. Although “has eaten” is a correct present perfect form, it does not align with the future-time reference introduced by “by the time we arrive.” This suggests that students may not fully understand the sequencing of future actions. The option (*c. was*) reflects a tense error. It uses simple past instead of the necessary perfect aspect. The choice (*d. had*) suggests past perfect, which is used to indicate a prior past action, not a future action completed before another future time. This reveals confusion between past perfect and future perfect tenses. Students who select this likely fail to analyze the temporal cues in the sentence.

Item 10: “Each of the four army soldiers ____ for the mission.”

95 students answer incorrectly (86.4% error rate). This item assesses subject-verb agreement with quantifying expressions such as “Each of...” which always take a singular verb. Despite the plural noun “soldiers,” the true subject is “Each,” which is singular, and thus the correct verb is “was.” Students selecting (*a. were ready*) likely focus on the plural noun “soldiers” rather than the singular subject “Each,” reflecting a failure to identify the actual syntactic head of the noun phrase. The choice (*b. are ready*) introduces a double mistake. First, it uses the plural verb “are” with a singular subject. Second, the tense does not match the implied past context of a completed preparation for a mission. The option (*d. have been ready*) introduces a double mistake: it uses a plural auxiliary verb (“have”) and shifts the sentence into the present perfect tense. This indicates both number disagreement and inappropriate tense selection, revealing that students may have difficulty coordinating auxiliary verb structures with complex subject phrases.

Item 11: “Joey ____ from the vacation just now.”

74 students answer incorrectly (67.3% error rate). This item assesses students’ understanding of present perfect tense, particularly the correct usage of auxiliary verbs to express recent past events with unspecified time frames. A number of

students select (*b. had returned*), which reflects the past perfect. This reflects a misunderstanding of temporal sequencing and inappropriate application of complex tenses. The option (*c. has been returned*) contains a double mistake. First, the phrase is in the passive voice, which is inappropriate here because “Joey” is the subject performing the action, not receiving it. This indicates confusion not only in tense selection but also in voice and subject-object alignment. The choice (*d. returns*) is also incorrect, though it reflects a simpler error. While (*returns*) is in the simple present tense and grammatically correct on its own, it fails to reflect the recentness suggested by “just now.”

Item 12: “He should not ____ the worst.”

59 students answer incorrectly (53.6% error rate). This item tests the correct use of base verbs following modal constructions such as “should.” Several students incorrectly choose (*a. assumed*), which represents a past-tense verb form. This error results from misunderstanding the syntactic requirement of modals and inserting a past tense unnecessarily. It suggests confusion between modal + base form constructions and typical past-tense declarative sentences. The option (*b. assuming*) introduces a double mistake. First, it uses the present participle (*assuming*) instead of the base form required by the modal “should.” Second, this form alters the sentence structure, possibly converting the phrase into a progressive construction, which is inappropriate in this syntactic context. This double error reflects a significant lack of control over non-finite verb forms and auxiliary structures. Choosing (*d. assumes*) also indicates a misapplication of tense. (*assumes*) is the simple present third-person singular form, which cannot follow a modal verb like “should.” This selection suggests students either do not recognize the syntactic dependency created by modal verbs or rely too heavily on subject-verb agreement rules without considering modal usage.

Item 13: "This is the car ___ I want to buy."

79 students answer incorrectly (71.8% error rate). This sentence examines students' understanding of relative pronouns and elliptical relative clauses. The correct structure omits the relative pronoun entirely. The implied word is "that," which introduces a defining relative clause and can be omitted when it functions as the object of the verb in the clause. Many students select (a. *who*), which is used for people, not things. This error stems from a misunderstanding of pronoun referents, confusing animate and inanimate antecedents. Other students choose (b. *whom*), which introduces a double mistake. It both misidentifies the antecedent and imposes a formality that is unnecessary or ungrammatical in this context. This indicates not only an incorrect choice of pronoun but also a misunderstanding of formality and function, making it a dual error. The choice (c. *whose*) shows a different kind of misunderstanding. (*whose*) denotes possession and is used to describe ownership. Students who select this option may incorrectly associate (*whose*) with any noun, regardless of the intended meaning. This suggests semantic overgeneralization and a failure to parse syntactic function.

Item 14: "I saw a man ___ shoes were dirty."

73 students answer incorrectly (66.4% error rate). This sentence tests the proper use of relative pronouns, particularly possessive ones. The word "whose" appropriately introduces a clause indicating possession. Students who choose (b. *who's*) misinterpret the possessive requirement. (*who's*) is used for subjects, not possessive cases, and cannot logically link "a man" with "shoes" in a way that implies ownership. This mistake reveals a lack of awareness of the syntactic role played by the relative pronoun in this context. The option (c. *whom*) introduces a double mistake. First, it misidentifies the function of the pronoun, because (*whom*) is used for objects of verbs or prepositions, not for possessive relationships. Second, it disrupts sentence clarity by not showing how "shoes" relate to the "man." These dual

mistakes suggest confusion both in grammatical case and logical connection. Selecting (*d. which*) reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of relative pronouns and antecedents. (*which*) refers to things or animals, not people, and cannot logically introduce a clause about a man's possessions. This error likely stems from applying general pronoun rules without attention to referent type, indicating surface-level comprehension.

Item 15: "Is this the book ___ you were looking for?"

79 students answer incorrectly (71.8% error rate). This item assesses knowledge of relative clauses, particularly the omission of object pronouns. The sentence structure allows for the omission of "that," which is the object of the verb "looking for." Some students mistakenly choose (*a. who*), which is reserved for human antecedents. Applying (*who*) to "book" shows a semantic mismatch, indicating a failure to link pronoun choice to the referent's animacy. The option (*b. where*) introduces an entirely unrelated grammatical structure. (*where*) refers to location, not objects or people, and does not fit the syntactic needs of the sentence. Other students select (*c. whom*), which sounds overly formal and unnatural in contemporary English. More critically, (*whom*) is used for people, not inanimate objects like "book." This dual error of referent misidentification and formality misuse reflects confusion about both context and grammar.

Item 16: "They ___ finished their work before the deadline."

70 students answer incorrectly (63.6% error rate). This item tests students' command of the past perfect tense. The use of "before the deadline" implies that the action of finishing was completed prior to another past reference point, justifying the use of the past perfect. Some students choose (*a. have*), which incorrectly uses the present perfect tense. While "have finished" denotes a completed action, it is appropriate only when the time frame is connected to the present. Other students select (*c. are*), introducing a double mistake. First, "are finished" is a passive

construction that implies a state rather than an action; second, the present tense (*are*) is incompatible with the past-oriented context of “before the deadline.” This double error shows misunderstanding in both voice and tense. The choice (*d. were*) is also incorrect, as “were finished” again misuses the passive voice and does not capture the sequencing required by the phrase “before the deadline.” Like the “are” option, this reflects confusion between active and passive constructions, as well as insufficient attention to tense logic.

Item 17: “She ___ play the piano very well when she was younger.”

72 students answer incorrectly (65.5% error rate). This sentence examines students’ knowledge of modal verbs to express past ability. The choice (*a. can*) is inappropriate because it expresses present ability. This tense mismatch suggests students may not recognize the need for the specific function of “could” in referencing past capabilities. Some students choose (*c. may*), which introduces a double mistake. First, (*may*) typically expresses possibility or permission, not ability. Second, (*may*) is present tense, which contradicts the past time frame of the sentence. This double error indicates a misunderstanding of both modal function and tense agreement. The option (*d. might*) also reflects an incorrect modal choice. While (*might*) can indicate possibility, it does not naturally convey ability. Its use in this sentence weakens the meaning and creates a semantic mismatch, suggesting that students may confuse different modal meanings and contexts.

Item 18: “___ moon looks beautiful tonight.”

29 students answer incorrectly (26.4% error rate). This item tests article usage with unique, specific nouns. “The moon” is a specific astronomical body known to both speaker and listener, so the definite article “the” is required. Choosing (*a. A*) indicates a misunderstanding of the definite article’s role in identifying unique nouns. “A moon” would imply one of many, which is inappropriate for a celestial body that is singular in context. The option (*b. An*) introduces a double mistake: the wrong article

type and an incorrect application of the vowel/consonant rule. (*An*) is used before vowel sounds, but the word “moon” begins with a consonant sound. This dual mistake shows confusion in both specificity and phonetic rules for article selection. Selecting (*d. No article*) (leaving the noun bare) omits the necessary determiner entirely. In English, singular countable nouns require an article or determiner. Omitting it results in a grammatically incomplete phrase. This suggests a breakdown in understanding basic noun phrase structure.

Item 19: “She is very good ___ playing tennis.”

51 students answer incorrectly (46.4% error rate). This item tests the correct preposition usage following adjectives such as “good.” The phrase “good at” is a fixed expression used to describe skill or competence. Many students incorrectly choose (*b. in*), which does not collocate naturally with “good.” While “in” can refer to general involvement in a field, it does not function with adjectives of skill. This reflects a collocational error, likely due to L1 transfer or overgeneralization. The selection (*c. on*) also reveals faulty collocational understanding. This suggests that students are applying surface-level associations without understanding idiomatic structures. The option (*d. to*) introduces a double mistake. Not only is (*to*) not the correct preposition after “good,” but “good to playing” is ungrammatical as it violates verb-preposition collocation norms. This suggests poor familiarity with both prepositional patterns and gerund constructions.

Item 20: “She likes ___ books in her free time.”

45 students answer incorrectly (40.9% error rate). This sentence examines verb patterns following verbs of preference such as “like.” In English, such verbs are typically followed by gerunds when discussing general preferences, making “reading” the correct choice. The choice (*a. read*) is incorrect because using “read” alone here produces a non-standard or incomplete construction. Choosing (*b. to reading*) reflects a double mistake. First, the infinitive marker “to” should be followed

by the base form of the verb; not a gerund. Second, combining “to” and “reading” creates an ungrammatical hybrid. This double error indicates misunderstanding of verb complements and the structure of infinitives. The option (*d. reads*) is also incorrect, as it shifts the sentence from a general preference to a habitual statement. The mismatch in structure suggests that students may misinterpret aspectual meaning or default to simpler constructions.

7 Conclusions

Looking at the discussion of the results, it can be concluded that:

1. A large number of Iraqi EFL university students continue to make grammatical errors even after receiving formal instruction in English grammar.
2. The study identifies high error rates in subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, auxiliary verb usage, articles, prepositions, and relative pronouns.
3. Many errors reflect the influence of the students' first language (Arabic), especially in tense usage and article omission, indicating strong L1 interference.
4. Several incorrect responses involve double mistakes, showing that students struggle simultaneously with verb form, tense, and sentence structure.
5. Some students appear to select answers based on familiarity or surface patterns, rather than applying grammar rules accurately.
6. Results highlight a gap between students' theoretical grammar knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge in context.
7. The analysis suggests that current teaching methods may overemphasize rule memorization and testing rather than contextual usage and grammar in communication.

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استقصاء الأخطاء النحوية لدى طلبة الجامعات العراقية دارسي اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنية: دراسة حالة

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الملخص:

يحاول البحث استقصاء اغلب الأخطاء النحوية لدى طلبة الجامعات العراقية دارسي اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنبية. ان مشكلة البحث هي ان الأخطاء النحوية تجعل الجمل غير واضحة ولا تنسجم مع قواعد النحو الانجليزي، حيث يواجه الطلبة العديد من هذه المشاكل اثناء تعلمهم اللغة الانجليزية. تتضمن اهم هذه المشاكل الاستعمال الخاطئ للارمنة، ادوات التنكير والتعريف، حروف الجر، والتوافق بين الفاعل والفعل. وعادة ما تكون هذه الأخطاء نتيجة الانتقال الضعيف من العربية الى الانجليزية او الاستخدام الضعيف للانجليزية. تحاول الدراسة معرفة كفاءة الطلاب النحوية عن طريق تحليل إجاباتهم على الاستبيان الذي يتكون من 20 نقطة، حيث تم تقديم الاستبيان الى طلبة المرحلة الثانية/ الدراسة الصباحية في قسم اللغة الانجليزية وآدابها/ الجامعة المستنصرية. ووضحت الدراسة ان رغم سنتين من دراسة اللغة الانجليزية، الا ان كثير من الطلبة يرتكبون الكثير من الأخطاء النحوية في الارمنة والتوافق بين الفاعل والفعل.

اثبتت الدراسة ان الطلبة يعتمدون بصورة اساسية على التوقع واللغة الام في اختيارهم للنموذج النحوي، حيث يبين تحليل النتائج ان 69 طالب فشلوا في الاختبار بينما نجح 41 طالب فقط. وهذا الاداء تتطلب خطة مستقبلية لتحسين مستوى الطلبة حيث ان الطريقة التقليدية في تدريس النحو ربما لا تستهدف صعوبات التعلم لدى الطلبة خصوصا حفظ قواعد نحوية جديدة وتطبيقها، وهذا ما يحتاجه الطلبة من مهارات لغوية.