

Paragraph Writing of Iraqi EFL Preparatory Students: Error Analysis

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كتابة الفقرات لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في العراق تحليل الأخطاء

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المستخلص

يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على مهارة الكتابة التي تلعب دوراً مهماً في النظام التعليمي. يواجه متعلمو اللغة الانكليزية كلفه اجنبية العديد من الصعوبات في كتابة الفقره بطريقة صحيحة. تبحث الدراسة الحالية في نوع وتكرار الأخطاء في 70 فقرة كتبها 70 من طلاب الصف السادس الاعداي العراقيين من متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلفه اجنبية والذين تم اختيارهم بصورة عشوائية في ثانويتين في محافظه نينوى. تهدف الدراسة إلى التحقق فيما إذا كان هناك اختلاف في أنواع وتواتر الأخطاء الكتابية بين الطلاب الذين يدرسههم مدرسين حاصلين على شهادةبكالوريوس والطلاب الذين يدرسههم مدرسين حاصلين على شهاده الماجستير .دقت الباحثة النصوص المكتوبة بدقه و تم تصنيف أنواع الأخطاء وتحليل العوامل التي ساهمت فيها. أظهرت النتائج أن أكثر أنواع الأخطاء شيوعاً التي ارتكبتها المشاركين كانت: الكتابة بالأحرف الكبيرة ، وعلامات الترقيم ، والأخطاء الإملائية ، وأخطاء حروف الجر ، وأخطاء بالادوات ، وصيغة الفعل الخاطئة ، وصيغة الكلمات الخاطئة على التوالي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، تجيب النتائج على أسئلة البحث وتشير إلى أن الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية صعبة على الطلاب متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية لأسباب عديدة.

Abstract

This research sheds light on the writing skill that plays an important role in the educational system. EFL students face many difficulties in writing a paragraph in a proper way. The current study examines 70 paragraphs written by 70 of sixth grade Iraqi EFL preparatory students who were selected randomly of two secondary schools in Nineveh governorate. It aims at investigating whether there are any differences in the types and frequencies of errors committed in writing between students taught by B.A. and students taught by M.A. English teachers. After checking the written texts thoroughly, types of errors were categorized and the factors that contributed to them were analyzed. The results showed that the most common types of errors committed by the participants were: capitalization, punctuation, spelling errors, preposition errors, article errors, wrong verb tense, and wrong word form respectively. In addition, the findings answer the questions of the research and indicate that writing in English is difficult for EFL students because of many reasons.

Key Words: EFL, Writing, Errors, Error Analysis

Introduction

Language is a way of communication that is based on four main skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Sweet (1992:45) defines language as a means for expressing ideas throughout speech sounds that are combined into words, words are combined into sentences and combination of sentences gives explanations to ideas. Being able to write in English has been thought of as a critical factor in FL learning. Students read and write English as a foreign language so writing is a complicated task. It is a productive skill, which involves the cognitive process of formulating ideas in the mother tongue and then translating them into the target language i.e. English language. The written paragraphs should be grammatically corrected, comprehensible and syntactically precise. The most important thing for students is to learn how to write paragraphs accurately to pass their school exams.

Writing has always been a crucial part of the syllabus of English for academic purposes in Iraqi schools. The students of different levels of writing in English as a foreign language are found to commit many errors. Errors are natural for EFL. Committing errors can be considered because of the cognitive activity of a learners and it tells us about the internal process of language production. It is important to lessen the occurrence of errors in the students' written texts for their language efficiency. (Coffin et al.:2003, 67) Error Analysis is a corrective technique that supports effective teaching of English as a foreign language. It is a tool for explaining errors committed by EFL. By investigating students' written texts, it will help English teachers to lessen the occurrence of errors, which is one of the challenging issues in teaching English as a foreign language. (Net 1) In sum, committing errors in writing is unavoidable. Ellis (1997:67) indicated that fossilization of learners' grammar does not occur in second language (L2) acquisition but is unique in L2 acquisition. English teachers may face a difficulty in the classrooms in how to teach writing, particularly nowadays when FFL are becoming digital and visual learners.

1.1 The Problem of the Study

The researcher noticed throughout her teaching in different schools that Iraqi EFL students do not have the ability to write correctly and they commit many errors. Therefore, she needed to assess their weaknesses in the writing skill. In spite of Iraqi EFL students study English for many years, they are still weak in English in general, and in the writing skills in specific. Darus (2009:486) states that teachers who analyze and treat errors effectively are better equipped to help their students to be aware of their errors.

1.2 Research Questions

The current study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What are the most common types of error found in the paragraphs written by EFL Iraqi preparatory students?
2. What are the reasons behind the recurrence of such errors?
3. Are there any differences in the types and frequencies of errors between students taught by B.A. English teachers and students taught by M.A. English teachers?

1.3 The Procedures of the Study

The procedures to be followed here are as follow:

1. Presenting a general background of paragraph writing and the method of analyzing errors i.e. error analysis
2. Selecting a sample of Iraqi EFL preparatory students from a number of secondary schools in Nineveh governorate.
3. Giving the participants a title to write a good paragraph, this aims at classifying the kinds of errors and reasons behind them.
4. Analyzing the data of the written texts, drawing conclusions and formulating recommendations.

1.4 The Significance of the Study

The researcher hoped that this study is beneficial for:

1. The students in order to identify and understand how to develop their writing skill.
2. The teachers in order to develop methods for teaching writing skill that are used by English Iraqi teachers.

1.5 Limits of the Study

The present research is limited to Iraqi sixth class EFL preparatory students in two secondary schools in Nineveh governorate during the academic year (2021-2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Writing Skill

Writing has always been seen as an important skill in English language acquisition because it reinforces grammatical structures and vocabulary that teachers try to teach their students. It is the area in which EFL need to be offered adequate time to develop their writing skill, therefore more time should be devoted to it in the classrooms so that they will be prepared to write paragraphs effectively (Ismail, 2007:45) As far as the writing skill is concerned, a great amount of literature was conducted by using the method of error analysis. For example, Sawalmeh (2013) investigated the errors of 32 essays written by 32 Saudi learners of English at the university preparatory year program. The study uncovered that the essays contain ten common errors: verb tense, word order, singular/ plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spelling, capitalization, article, sentence fragment and prepositions. Sawalmeh also attributed the committed errors to Arabic –the mother tongue- English interference. Faisal's study (2013) focused on the syntactic errors committed by 50 participants from the 4th year university students of Educational and Psychological Sciences Department, College of Education for Human Sciences /University of Babylon. She classified the errors into syntactic

categories: omission, substitution, addition and word order. She linked the errors made to Arabic English interference, the rarity of feedback and focus on sentence components in their earlier years of learning, and to the rarity of practicing writing in their learning process. As reviewed above, all the studies stated that the reasons of committing errors in writing are due to the interference between the native and non-native languages, the lack of practice and feedback from the early years of learning. As far as the current research is concerned, the researcher noticed that in spite of adopting different strategies of teaching and learning through the long study years, starting from the elementary school passing through the intermediate and the preparatory, students still committing errors.

2.2 What is a Paragraph?

AL-Hamash and Rhim (1977:175) indicate that a paragraph is a group of sentences concerned with one idea. The lines that should be included in a paragraph are at least three to five, not more. It includes topic sentence, supporting sentences as well as concluding sentence that refer to an overall structure. Paragraph writing is not just expressing your views about the topic in a group of sentences. It is all about structuring ideas in a clear format to make the reader fall in love with the topic and continue their studying till to an end of the topic. Paragraphs are often thought of as a 'unit' of thought.

2.3 Error VS. Mistake

It has been argued that there is a difference between an error and a mistake. Richards and Schmidt (2002:184) define an error as "the use of language in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as faulty or incomplete learning". Richards (1984:95) states that a mistake is made by a learner when writing or speaking which lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness or other aspects of performance cause. Errors can be classified into two types:

1. Errors of competence (the result of the application of rules by first language (L1) learner, which do not correspond to the norm of the (L2).
2. Errors of performance (the result of a mistake in language use and manifest themselves as repetition, false starts, corrections or slips of the tongue). (Ibid.)

We can conclude that a mistake refers to a performance error that is a random guess or a slip. An error is a deviation from the standard grammar of the native speaker. A mistake is accidental and the learner knows it is incorrect. It can be self- corrected, but an error occurs due to a lack of knowledge and weak background information.

2.4 Error Analysis

Corder and his colleagues established the field of Error Analysis in 1970. They indicated that the learners produced errors by misunderstanding the rules of the new language. Brown (1987:17) defines error analysis as a process through which researchers observe, analyze, and classify learners' errors to elicit some information about the system operating within the learner. Many linguists discuss error analysis and each one gave a different point of view. Corder (1967 as cited in Darus, 2009:487) said that language learners' errors are important to study because it shows the state of the learners' knowledge.

2.5 Sources of Errors

Brown (2000:224) classifies the sources of errors into the following categories:

1. Interference transfer i.e. the negative influence of the mother tongue.
2. Intralingual transfer i.e. the negative transfer of items within the target language.
3. Context of learning which overlaps with both types of transfer.
4. Communication strategies: the conscious employment of verbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when linguistic forms are not available to the learner.

2.6 Steps of Error Analysis

Corder (1974:158-171) proposes five steps in error analysis. These steps are:

1. Collection of a sample of learner language.
2. Identification of errors.
3. Description of errors.
4. Explanation of errors.
5. Evaluation of errors.

3. Research Design and Method of the Study

3.1 Population and Sample of the Study

The population of this research was the sixth class preparatory students in two secondary schools in Nineveh Governorate. The total number of the students enrolled in the two schools was (127) students. The participants

in this research were (70) Iraqi EFL preparatory students who were randomly chosen during the academic year (2021-2022). The study sample in both schools was students aged 18 years old and they share the same background knowledge. Half of the participants students in each school were taught by M.A. English teacher and the other half were taught by English B.A. teacher.

Table (1) The Number of participated students in the paragraph writing

First School			Second School		
Section A	SectionB	Total number	SectionA	SectionB	Total number
17	18	(35) students	19	16	(35) students

3.2 The Instrument

To answer the questions of the research, the participants were assigned to write a paragraph of about 75 words. The researcher gave them a title to write a good paragraph. The selection of the topic depends on the students' syllabus. The writing was done inside the classroom. The method that is used to analyze the data collected from the students is error analysis that is considered as a part of the descriptive research method. The errors that students committed were analyzed according to Corder's (1974) model: collecting the data and identifying the errors carefully by checking all erroneous sentences that students wrote in the paragraph. Then, the researcher described the errors and classified them into different categories. Finally, discussion and findings were concluded from the analyzed data.

3.2.1. Validity of the Instrument

The researcher asked four academic college lecturers to evaluate the given topic to ensure the content of the study instrument. The lecturers agreed that the title of the paragraph was appropriate to students' level of learning. So the validity of the instrument was maintained in this way.

3.2.2 Reliability of the Instrument

The researcher used a retest device to check the reliability of the instrument. A pilot study was conducted through selecting 20 students from the target population in a random way. These students did not participate in the actual study. They were asked to write on that topic twice within a two-week interval. Accordingly, the results of the students showed consistency in the answers.

3.3 Statistical Means

In order to fulfill the goals of the research and to analyze the data of this study, the researcher calculates the frequency and percentage of all types of errors committed by EFL students. In addition, this method is used also to determine if there are any significant differences between EFL preparatory students taught by M.A. English teacher and EFL preparatory students taught by B.A. English teacher.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Data Analysis

The 70 collected paragraphs for the current research were analyzed based on three classifications in order to identify the errors. The researcher in this study adopted Chanquoy (2001)'s classification that includes the following categories:

1. Grammatical errors that include errors related to subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, agreement of nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, adjectives, articles.
2. Spelling errors that deals with orthography errors in the written paragraphs. The researcher dealt with the errors in two steps.
3. Punctuation errors, which discuss the errors in using punctuations and capitalizations. At the beginning, all types of errors were classified and their frequencies as well as their percentages were written in lists. Then, a comparison made between EFL preparatory students taught by M.A. English teacher and EFL preparatory students taught by B.A. English teacher to detect if there is any significant differences between them. The analysis showed the teacher the areas of difficulties where the learners need more careful explanation and guidance.

4.2 Results

The results that the researcher obtained from the participants, answered the questions of the research that Iraqi

EFL preparatory students commit so many types of errors with different frequencies when they write a paragraph. The researcher examined the participants' writing after they have taken the test and categorized the types of errors, then fixed the frequency and percentage of errors. She discovers that the total number of the errors committed were (1182) errors. Table (2) below shows the findings that were interpreted by the researcher. Table (2) The errors committed by EFL students

No.	Types of Errors		Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Grammatical Errors	Subject-verb agreement	223	18.86 %
		Verb tenses	211	17.85 %
		Adjectives	60	5.07 %
		<i>Adverbs</i>	57	4.82 %
		Prepositions	145	12.26 %
		Nouns	44	3.72 %
		Articles	202	17.08 %
		Singular / Plural	51	4.31 %
2.	<i>Spelling Errors</i>		77	6.51 %
3.	<i>Punctuation Errors</i>	<i>Capitalization</i>	69	5.83%
		<i>Punctuation marks</i>	43	3.63 %
	Total		1182	100%

As shown in Table (2) above, the findings indicate that Iraqi EFL sixth class preparatory students of two secondary schools in Nineveh governorate made many errors in writing English paragraphs. These errors include the following types: subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, nouns, articles, singular / plural, capitalization and punctuation marks. This Table shows that the most committed errors were subject-verb agreement errors, which had the frequency of 223 (18.86%). The second and the third most committed errors were verb-tense errors and articles errors with the frequency of 211 (17.85%) and 202 (17.08%) respectively. The least committed errors were punctuation errors which had the frequency of 43 (3.63 %). Figure (1) below represents the percentages of each type of errors that have committed when writing English paragraphs.

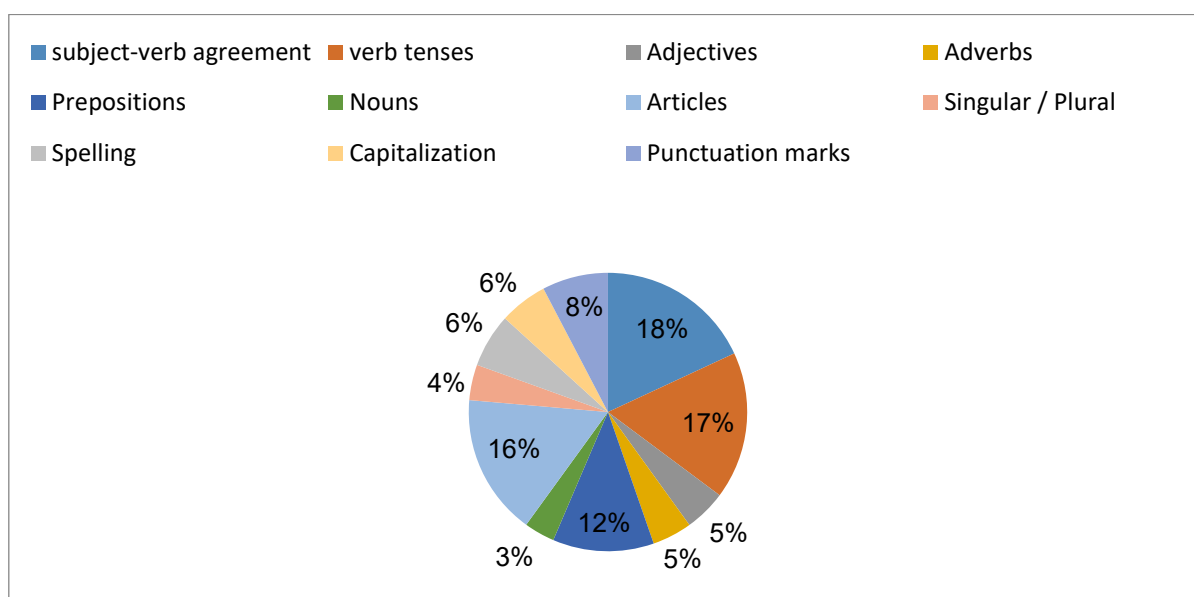


Figure (1) Percentage of errors committed by EFL students The results shown in figure (1) reveals that the errors that have been made by Iraqi EFL students at the preparatory level are: subject verb agreement (18.86%), verb tenses (17.85%), adjectives (5.07%), adverbs (4.82%), prepositions (12.26%), nouns (3.72%), articles (17.08%), singular/plural (4.31%), spelling (6.51%), capitalization (5.83%) and punctuation marks (3.63%). The number of the errors includes all grammatical errors adding to the errors of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization was (1182) in total. Table (3) Types and frequencies of errors committed by EFL students taught by M.A. English teacher and students taught by B.A. English teacher

No.	Types of Errors	Frequencies	Percentages
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		By M.A. teacher	By B.A. teacher	By M.A. teacher	By B.A. teacher
1.	Grammatical Errors	Subject-verb agreement	73	150	17.21%
		Verb tenses	65	146	15.33%
		Adjectives	23	37	5.42%
		Adverbs	21	36	4.95%
		Prepositions	49	96	11.55%
		Nouns	15	29	3.53%
		Articles	72	130	16.98%
		Singular/plural	23	28	5.42%
2.	Spelling Errors	36	41	8.49%	5.40%
3.	Punctuation Errors	Capitalization	28	41	6.60%
		Punctuation marks	19	24	4.48%
	Total	424	758	100%	100%

Table (3) above shows that students who were taught by M.A. English teacher committed fewer errors: (73) in subject-verb agreement, (65) in verb tenses, (23) in adjectives, (21) in adverbs, (49) in prepositions, (15) in nouns, (72) in articles, (23) in singular/plural, (36) in spelling, (28) in capitalization, (19) in punctuation marks. On contrary, these errors were (150) in subject-verb agreement, (146) in verb tenses, (37) in adjectives, (36) in adverbs, (96) in prepositions, (29) in nouns, (130) in articles, (28) in singular/plural, (41) in spelling, (41) in capitalization, (24) in punctuation marks for students who were taught by B.A. English teacher.

4. Conclusions

The current research aimed to investigate and classify the types and frequencies of errors committed in 70 written paragraphs by Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students at two secondary schools in Nineveh Governorate during the academic year 2021-2022. In addition, the study identified the differences between the students taught by M.A. and B.A. English teachers. The results of this study show that Iraqi EFL students who learn English as a foreign language cannot deal with the rules of writing an English paragraph. Depending on the findings and the discussion mentioned previously, the researcher concludes two points. The first one is that the participants have committed three types of errors in their writings: grammatical errors viz. (subject verb agreement, verb tenses, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, nouns, articles, singular /plural), spelling errors and punctuation errors. The second conclusion is that students who were taught by M.A. English teacher committed fewer errors in comparison with students who were taught by B.A. teacher. The results show that most of students' errors were on the grammatical level and the least committed errors were the spelling errors. The researcher indicated that the reasons behind committing such errors are due to many factors. The main factor is mother tongue interference. Committing errors could be related to the teachers themselves who do not have time to concentrate on the writing skill in the classroom because of the limitation of time also many teachers do not use effective methods in teaching English in general and the writing skill in specific. Another factor may be related to EFL students, as they do not have good background knowledge about how to write a paragraph in a proper way also they do not have the opportunity to participate and communicate with their teacher in order to develop their ability in writing, as there are so many students in the class. In sum, the researcher discovered that students' mastering of the rules of writing a paragraph in English is poor.

6. Recommendations

Writing is a complicated skill that needs so much time and efforts in order to master it. Teachers must concentrate on their students and encourage them to practice writing and use modern methods to teach them in order to enhance their writing skill. They also should help students increase their stock of vocabulary by asking them to read about different topics and they should provide their students with more time per week to teach them how to write a paragraph properly. Finally, to enhance students' writing, curriculum designers should add more exercises. Exploring errors provide valuable information that could be useful for teachers to develop better FL learning and teaching therefore, future studies on error analysis are recommended.

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