

An Analysis of Undergraduate Saudi EFL Female Students' Errors in Written English Essays

Roaa Abdullah Mohammed Hussain

English Department, Faculty of Languages and Translation
King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the common errors made by 130 undergraduate Saudi female students at King Khalid University (KKU) in English writing and to trace the ratio of the frequency of different categories and types of errors. The significance of this study is to identify the reasons for the weakness of academic writing and thus find appropriate solutions and proposals for it. This study seeks to find answers for What are the most common English writing errors that are made by EFL Saudi female learners at the faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU? What is the ratio of the frequency of different categories and types of errors? What are the possible identified reasons behind those errors? The sample is chosen randomly from level four (elementary), five (intermediate), and six (upper-intermediate). This study uses a quantitative method as there were a close-ended questionnaire and an analytically quantitative design in which statistical and numerical data are investigated and analyzed for results. The analysis of written essays is derived from Corder's (1967) method on error analysis. The findings of the study indicate that the common errors were committed under four categories as grammar, lexis, semantics, and mechanics. Most of the errors were committed in the mechanics' category (51.5%) which included punctuations, capitalization, and spelling errors. Furthermore, spelling was highly committed by all the students. The findings also revealed that the highest percentage was related to the teacher with much negative criticism due to students usually feel alienated and hate material when the teacher is bad (37.4%). In light of the findings, recommendations were made to improve the writing skills of Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) students.

Keywords: error analysis, exam, female students, KKU, spelling, writing skills, written errors

Cite as: Hussain, R. A. M. (2019). An Analysis of Undergraduate Saudi EFL Female Students' Errors in Written English Essays. *Arab World English Journal, Special Issue: The Dynamics of EFL in Saudi Arabia*. 241-258.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/efl1.17>

Introduction

Writing is one of the most important and essential skills that must be practiced effectively (Byrne, 1993). In the language learning process, it is necessary to develop learners' writing skills in order to enable them to communicate. Moreover, the ability to write well is not an inborn skill. It is usually learned through a set of instructional practices. It involves formulating new ideas and transforming information (James, 1988).

Learners of English as a foreign language in their various stages of study try to make their writing correct and clear to the readers. Therefore, the so-called error analysis has been used to help learners discover their errors, correct their errors, and avoid errors in their writing. Thus, "a number of researchers began to take a different approach to analyze learners' errors... which involved a detailed description and analysis of the kinds of errors made in the second language". (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 73). Error analysis (EA) is one of the most influential processes in second language acquisition (Alhaysony, 2012).

In addition, there are many definitions that are developed by other linguists. Corder (1967) views errors valuable information for three beneficiaries: teachers, researchers, and learners themselves. He lists three advantages of EA in indication of the progress of students for teachers, it provides evidence as to how language is acquired or learned, and this helps researchers; and for learners themselves where it gives them resources in order to learn (as cited in Maicusi, Maicusi, & Lopez, 2000, p. 170).

Considering that English writing skills play an important role in communicating and interacting with the world effectively, the findings of this study contribute to the benefit of society because it helps the students to improve their skills in writing which will make them ready to get their future job and contribute to improving their society. Therefore, several previous studies and articles are searched that have been published in several universities in different countries of the world.

Considering the abovementioned, the current study is intended: to investigate the errors in the writing of level four EFL female students at KKU, and to determine some possible factors that may contribute to committing certain errors in writing. In particular, the role of the first language (L1) and its impact on EFL writing are investigated. Other possible factors that may cause difficulties for Saudi learners, such as teachers and students themselves, lack of motivation, curriculum, teaching environment, and methods of instruction are discussed and investigated to trace the reasons which lead to the existence of these errors for Saudi female students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha, and pinpointing the best methods to be followed by both teachers and students to enhance writing skills.

Statement of the problem

Having good writing skills has become a very important factor for success in the academic and professional world nowadays. However, this skill is viewed by many linguists as the most difficult of all the four skills (Corder & Allen, 1974). It is not an easy task for both native and non-speakers as well to master this skill. Most EFL learners find it more frustrating and intimidating to acquire second language (L2) writing skills compared to other linguistic skills. Brown (2010) indicates that a substantial number of children who had received writing instruction in some developed countries cannot write in a clear and organized way. This difficulty is even more real when it comes to L2 writing. Ahmed and Abou Abdelkader (2016) mention that

Arabic writers of English are known to face problems in developing their writing skill in their university English composition courses. Recently, there have been several studies that have addressed some important issues about the processes of L2 composition. One of these important issues is analyzing the errors of L2 writing. English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL writings of learners from different L1 backgrounds have been investigated. (p. 9)

The following hypotheses are tested in this project:

1. The most common errors for KKU female students are committed in the mechanics' category as capitalization, spellings, punctuations ...etc.
2. The most frequent causes of writing errors for KKU female students are teachers and students themselves, lack of motivation, curriculum, instructions, teaching environment, and negative interference of L1 research.

The significance of the study

Up to my knowledge, there is no research that has been done to investigate the errors in the writing of Saudi females' students EFL at the faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha. The aim of this study is to systematically investigate the common errors made by Saudi female students at level four KKU in English writing. The significance of this study is to identify the reasons for the weakness of academic writing and thus find appropriate solutions and proposals for it.

The objectives of the study

This study aims to achieve the following goals:

1. To analyze the common writing errors of Saudi female EFL learners at level four at the faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha.
2. To trace the ratio of the frequency of different categories and types of errors.
3. To determine some possible reasons that may contribute to committing certain writing errors of Saudi female students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha.

The research questions

In order to achieve the study objectives, this study aims at addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the most common English writing errors that are made by level four EFL Saudi female learners at the faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha?
2. What is the ratio of the frequency of different categories and types of errors?
3. What are the possible identified reasons behind those errors?

Review of related literature

Language assessment

Language assessment plays a key role in pointing out students' weaknesses and strengths to be either solved or enhanced. According to Frank (2012), assessment is perhaps "one of the most difficult and important parts of our jobs as teachers. Ideally, it should be a means to help us guide students on their road to learning" (p. 32). Assessment paves the way for teachers and researchers to deal with students' weaknesses in any skill or aspect of language. L2 Errors made by students while being tested can reflect a student gap, incompetence, or the inappropriateness of teaching method, as mentioned in Ulla (2014), "assessment of students is the way to determine if curricular content is appropriate and teaching methods are successful" (p. 41). However, to achieve the best results, it is important to clarify the difference between mistakes and errors. According to Sobahle (1986), "if a language learner

unconsciously breaks the rules of the target language as a result of faulty learning, he makes an error” (p. 25). On the other hand, he argues that making a mistake happens “when a learner breaks the rules of the language as a result of non-linguistic factors, he makes a mistake” (p. 25).

Definitions of error analysis

EA is defined as “the first approach to the study of second language acquisition (SLA) which includes an internal focus on learners’ creative ability to construct the language” (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 40). According to Ulla (2014), error analysis is “the process to observe, analyze, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by learner” (p. 22). As stated in Mezrag (2013)

From the analysis of the learner’s errors, teachers are able to assume the nature of his knowledge at that point in his learning and discover what he still has to learn. By describing and classifying his errors, teachers may build up a picture of the features of the language which causes him learning problems (p. 15).

As stated by Abi Samara (2003), EA can be viewed as “a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on errors committed by learners”. Brown (as cited in Ridha, 2012, p. 26) defines EA as the process that observes, analyzes, and classifies the deviations of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by the learner. According to James (2001, p. 62), EA refers to “the study of linguistic ignorance and the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance”. Crystal (1999, p. 108) explains EA in language teaching and learning as the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language especially a foreign language.

Errors taxonomy

Brown (2002, p. 224) states that there are two main sources of errors. First, interlingual errors are those errors that are traceable to L1 interference, so errors occur as results of confusion between two languages. These errors are attributable to negative interlingual transfer. The term interlingual was first introduced by Selinker (1972) who uses this term to refer to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learners and target language (Abi Samara, 2003, p. 5). According to Kavaliauskiene (2009, p. 4)

Transfer of errors may occur because the learners lack the necessary information in the L2 or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate L2 routine. Second, intralingual errors which imply that the learner is processing the second language in his own way. These errors occur within the same language, for example, *I and she* study hard instead of *she and I* study hard.

Richards (1971, as cited in Mezrag, 2013) studies errors of learners from different language backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, Maltese, Indian, and West African Languages). His study shows different types of errors related to production, distribution of verb groups, prepositions, articles, and the use of questions. Subsequently, he distinguished three sources of errors.

First, interference errors: errors that resulted from language transfer of the learner's native language. Second, intralingual errors: errors which resulted from faulty or partial learning of L2, rather than from language transfer, “such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply” (p. 32). Third, developmental

errors: "errors occurring when learners attempt to build up a hypothesis about the target language on the basis of limited experience" (p. 32).

Reasons behind the weaknesses of writing in English

Most of the students were failed in the writing because of several reasons. In particular, the role of L1 and its impact on EFL writing is investigated. Other possible factors that may cause difficulties for Saudi learners, such as lack of motivation, curriculum, teaching environment, and methods of instruction are discussed and investigated. Huwari and Al-Khasawneh (2013) try to understand the reasons for the weakness of students' writing at Taibah University, Yanbu branch, Saudi Arabia. They use a qualitative method. The participants were 10 male students. They invite them to talk freely about the reasons behind their weakness in writing in a face-to-face semi-structured interview of 20 minutes. They find that many students faced many problems when they are writing in the English language:

1. Grammatical weakness: all the 10 students agreed on their grammatical weaknesses in writing a short paragraph, article, or passage. They were unable to write without grammatical mistakes and errors due to many reasons such as they cannot express their ideas in the context, they do not know how to write even single sentences.
2. Less knowledge and understanding: some of them misunderstood the requirement of writing, they do not know how to write the main idea, or they cannot paraphrase easily. Huwari and Al-Khasawneh (2013) agree with Ansari (2012) by saying that the first and the most important reason is that the Arab students have no knowledge of basic English although they are taught English in schools (p. 6).
3. Less practice: most of the students do not ever write outside the classroom even for homework due to their hate of writing skills and English language.
4. Educational background: students believed they do not have full focus on writing at the early stages of school, for example, teachers have rarely asked them to write in English and curriculums are focused on reading and grammar rather than writing and speaking in English.

These weaknesses in writing clearly make mastering writing far more complicated than it is. Teachers and researchers must be cautious when generalizing the reasons for errors in writing.

Error types cross-linguistically

Saudi learners

Sawalmeh (2013) investigates the errors in a corpus of 32 essays written by 32 Saudi male learners of English at the preparatory year program at the University of Ha'il (city in the north of Riyadh, capital city). He uses the participants' written essays to collect his data. He follows Corder's way of error analysis as he starts with collecting written samples, identifying errors, then describing these errors. He finds that the Saudi Arabic speakers had made ten common errors. These errors are: tense, word order, a singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spelling, capitalization, articles, sentence fragments, pronouns, and prepositions; for more examples see Sawalmeh (2013, p. 10-15). He suggests some pedagogical implications which might assist ESL/EFL teachers with some helpful suggestions and teaching strategies that will reduce future problems regarding writing English essays among Arab learners. Also, he suggests that teachers must be careful of the students' mother tongue influence on their writing performance in the target language.

In a similar study, Albalawi (2015) investigates the academic writing spelling errors of the introductory year male students at the English language center at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia (a

city in the north of Saudi Arabia (SA)). The study included 45 participants. He uses a qualitative-quantitative method. He also uses random sampling. According to his study, students committed several spelling errors which involved three main categories: omission, addition, and substitution. Also, he finds that these spelling errors may be attributed to mother tongue interferences in which they relate to the differences between the systems of both native language and foreign language. He recommends that future investigations be conducted in the area to confirm the results of the current research in order to examine from other perspectives such as age and grade.

Siddiqui (2015) evaluates capitalization errors in Saudi female students' EFL writing in the College of Applied Medical Sciences at Bisha University in Saudi Arabia (a city in the south of SA). She collects data through a mixed method. Moreover, there were 20 female students who are enrolled in Bachelor of Science in Nursing and are taking English language preparatory program. She asks them to write approximately 600 words consisting of five home-written assignments, two classroom written paragraphs, and one paragraph written in the final examination. She also interviews 10 of them. She analyzes and classifies the errors according to Ellis (1994, as cited in Troike, 2006) which have been used in the study: first, collection of the sample of the learner language, second, identification of errors, third, description of errors, fourth, explanation of errors (Interlingual and Intramural factors), and finally, evaluation of errors (Troike, 2006, pp. 39-40). The term "category" throughout the study has been used to refer to the rules of capitalization. She finds that the highest numbers of errors of capitalization are found in category nine which deals with malformation of individual letters and words. She also finds that the errors in forming the letters are due to the unfamiliarity of distinctions between upper case and lower case. She suggests that the curriculum of English language in Saudi Arabia should implement new pedagogical techniques in capitalization teaching to develop mastery in the principle rules of capitalization.

Recently, Nuruzzaman, Islam, and Shuchi (2016) examine the paragraphs written by ninety Saudi non-major undergraduate students from three different colleges namely College of Medicine, College of Engineering, and College of Computer Science. This study conducted at King Khalid University in Abha during the first semester in the academic year 2016-2017. This comparative study intended to find out the common errors made by those learners and categorize these errors into different types. The researchers use qualitative methods. They ask the participants to write one paragraph in 100-150 words in the final exam papers. They think that students answered the questions of the exam in a better way. They follow the steps which were followed by Corder (1974). First, they examine each paragraph word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence to ascertain the types and number of errors. Second, they put these errors under different categories by using coding and thus converted into percentage to examine the frequency. After analyzing the types of errors, the researchers compare the categories and number of errors made by the students of three faculties for similarities, differences, and connections. They classify the errors into four categories: grammatical, verb tense, word order, singular/plural, relative clause, subject-verb agreement, subject/verb omission, and sentence structure, lexical, noun, pronoun, verb, preposition, adverb, article, and word form, semantic, e.g., word choice, and mechanics, punctuation, capitalization and spelling (for more details see Nuruzzaman, Islam, & Shuchi, 2016, p. 34-38). They find that Saudi EFL learners made different types of errors namely grammatical (7.97%), Lexical (5.93%), semantics (1.02%), and mechanics (4.92%). They assert that grammatical errors especially verb tense and subject-verb agreement were the most common errors among the students. The researchers recommend students to be more aware of the difference between the structure of Arabic and English sentences.

Arab learners

Hourani (2008) explores the common types of grammatical errors made by Emirati secondary male students in their English essay writing. He conducts his study in five leading schools on the Eastern Coast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as Fujairah, Khorfakkan, and Kalba. All the students who participated were in their third year of secondary education. All the participants were male students chosen randomly. The researcher thinks that science students are expected to write in more detail than arts students whose writing skill ability is limited, so he has chosen them. He uses a mixed-method design. He asks them to write essays about 'The Danger of Smoking to Health' in 120 to 200 words. Moreover, 105 students and 20 teachers participated in completing two separate questionnaires reflecting their attitudes towards English writing skills. He finds the most common grammatical errors in the students' essays included passivation, verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, word order, prepositions, articles, plurality, and auxiliaries. He classifies and tabulates these errors according to their number of frequencies in the students' essays. There were 472 errors (38%) in interlingual grammar errors and 658 errors (62%) in intralingual ones. The highest one is subject-verb agreement, for more details see (Hourani, 2008, p. 26-50). He finds that intralingual transfer errors were more frequent than interlingual ones. Furthermore, he suggests reinforcing and develop the English writing skill of the secondary male students in the UAE state schools.

In a more recent study, Atashian and Al-Bahri (2018) investigate the grammatical errors in academic writing that the Omani students of Nizwa University. They collect data from 200 students of Bachelor of the Arts (BA) who majored in English at the University of Nizwa in Oman. They ask them to write argumentative essays. They form a table of frequency to list the type of grammatical errors and the number of times the mistake was observed. Atashian and Al-Bahri (2018) find three grammatical errors made by participants namely, tenses, adverbs, and pronouns were students' most frequent errors, subject/ verb agreement, misplaced apostrophes, passive voice, and punctuation, (for more details see Atashian and Al-Bahri, 2018, p. 140-145). Then, they interview the students to figure out their perception of the mistakes in their academic writing skills. The researchers suggest some techniques and strategies that might help students to improve their writing.

Hamed (2018), moreover, investigates recently the most common types of linguistic errors and their frequency occurrence in writing. He chooses 40 non-English major Libyan students in the Language Centre at Omar EL-Mukhtar University, EL-Beida Campus, Libya. He asks them to write 150 words. He follows what Ellis (1997) and Gas and Selinker (2001) follow to analyze the data. The following four steps were followed: data collection, identification of errors, classification of errors, and a statement of error frequency. He divides errors into four categories as grammatical errors, syntactic errors, substance, and lexical errors, for more details see (Hamed, 2018, p. 226-229). Then, he divides grammatical errors into seven subcategories: tenses were the most common errors, followed by article errors, preposition errors, singular/plural nouns, adjectives errors, and possessive case and relative clauses had the least percentage of errors. Moreover, there are three subcategories of syntactic errors; the highest one was subject/verb agreement, followed by nouns and pronouns, and word order. He finds that spelling errors had the highest frequency (38.8%), followed by capitalization errors and punctuation errors. He thinks that these errors could be due to overgeneralization in the target language, resulting from ignorance of rule restriction and incomplete application of rules and interference resulting from L1 (Arabic) negative transfer.

Learners from other countries

Abushihab (2014) investigates grammatical errors in writing made by twenty students at the Department of English Language learning English as a foreign language in the Gazi University of Turkey. All the students were enrolled in a writing course during the first semester of the academic year 2011 – 2012. He asks them to write well-organized essays about the difficulties they face while learning English between 200 – 250 words. He classifies the errors into four categories according to Dulay et al. (1982), "there are four major linguistic categories of errors. These are orthography (spelling), lexicon, and semantics (vocabulary and meaning), syntax and morphology (grammar), and discourse (style)" (p. 215). Then he identifies errors into tenses, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, and morphology. He finds that the highest figure was in tenses errors and the lowest one was in the use of passive and active voice (for more examples see Abushihab, 2014, p. 216-221).

Ho (2015), in addition; examines whether extensive writing helps to enhance students' writing fluency. The participants were around 115 first- and second-years students in English-major. He assigns students to write journals every week, so they composed in five writing journals every week for 15 weeks. He finds that the four most common errors frequently occur in students' writing journals are relating to tenses, collocations, spellings, and verb forms. Also, he confirms that extensive writing practices affect the students' writing fluency in terms of length of writing. He finds nine common errors: tenses, spellings, articles, collocations, word forms, verb forms, subject-verb agreement, and adjective-noun orders. He finds that writing journals are a beneficial activity to encourage students to write correctly.

Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn (2017), in a recent study, examine the language errors in the writing of English major students in a Thai University and explored the sources of these errors. They select 26 participants (2 males and 24 females) who were in second-year English major students in a Thai university. They ask them to write sentences because they find that errors in Thai EFL students' sentence construction may lead to miscommunication. They collect and analyze 104 pieces of writing essays. They find that the most frequently committed errors were punctuation, articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and fragment. They also find that interlingual interference, intralingual interference, limited knowledge of English grammar vocabulary, and carelessness of the students were to be the major sources of the errors. They said, "errors found in EFL students' writing are not wrong, but useful tools to help EFL students make fewer errors and write better in English" (p. 109).

Methodology***Design of study***

A study is a quantitative method as an analytically quantitative design in which statistical and numerical data are investigated and analyzed for results is used in this research. It conducts in the second semester of the academic year 2018. The sample is chosen randomly because it is regarded as one of the most reliable methods to obtain a representative sample.

Participants

The study sample includes 40 female students who specialized in English at level four. There are two reasons for selecting this level. First, the first levels will not have academic experience in writing, while the higher levels are expected to be the opposite. Second, they have completed four specific courses in writing which support this selection. Moreover, they are between 20 and 21 years of age.

All of them are homogeneous in terms of their nationality, native language (Arabic), linguistic, educational, and social background. Moreover, all of them have experienced approximately the same number of two years and half of the education at the Faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha. They enrolled in the Writing-4 course (ENG-2 217). The reasons for choosing this course are to examine and analysis EFL female learners' writing errors in the final exam as well as to trace the ratio of the frequency of different categories and types of errors. Thus, the number of participants 90 female students from the fifth and sixth levels. The reason for the selection of two different levels is that the study plan for female students who tested writing in 2018 were not followed the plan and were therefore chosen from two different levels depending on their university numbers also to gather as many of the views as possible of students who had tested writing-4 in the second semester of the year 2018. In total, there were 130 participants in the current study. This study is carried out at the Faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha.

Tools

After reviewing the previous studies related to the subject of the study, the two tools are used. One of the writing long essays and the second one is a questionnaire. The sample is collected, there are around 80 writing sample essays from the final second-semester 2018 exam papers of the participants as well as 50 writing sample essays from the first and second midterms second-semester 2018 exam papers of the same participants. Moreover, the questionnaire is chosen for this issue in order to answer the study questions and achieve its objectives. The questionnaire contained 30 sentences to measure several factors, including the students' psychology and motivation to write correctly, the relationship of students with their colleagues or with the teacher, some factors related to teachers, concerning the educational environment and its objectives, and the teaching methods and books used. The statements employed a five-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), for a sample of the questionnaire used.

Data collection procedure

The data was collected in the second semester of the academic year 2019. The following procedures were used. First, a letter of request is asked to the chosen female department at the faculty of Languages and Translation, English department, at KKU in Abha to inform them about the nature of the study. Second, after getting approval from them, the permission to see the exam papers of the writing-4 course which was held in the second semester of 2018 is obtained from the department of English in the Faculty of Languages and Translation. The reason behind choosing this method is as Nuruzzaman, Islam, and Shuchi(2016) point out that

In exams, students deployed their utmost efforts to secure good grades. So, the exam papers projected their real skills and knowledge in writing. If the participants were asked to write paragraphs just for the research, they might not have taken it seriously. So, samples taken from English writing exams gave true pictures of the participants' writing errors (p. 34).

Moreover, only one question was selected from all the exam papers, namely the question of writing an essay that asked the students to write a five-paragraph essay. The essays should be long and contain an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion without specifying the number of words. There were four suggested topics (my favorite memory, my first trip, how to make a dessert, and the importance of friendship) where students were asked to choose only one of them and write about it extensively. Third, the essays are read and marked for all the 40 participants' written works word-by-

word. After that, all errors were recorded and categorized according to Corder's (1967) taxonomy of writing errors which consist of finding errors, identifying errors, describing errors, and classifying the types of errors. Then, all the recorded errors are analyzed and labeled according to their types to get the frequency of numbers and their percentages of the total. Fourth, a questionnaire is given to the students, which is conducted in the Arabic language because one of the aims of this study was to identify exactly the causes of English writing weakness in Saudi female students at KKU from their point of view. Therefore, it is better to conduct the questionnaire in Arabic to avoid any misunderstanding. 100 questionnaires were distributed between the fifth and sixth-grade students with the help of their doctors and teachers. However, 90 students answered the questionnaires. Also, students' repeated opinions are merged and translated them into English.

Data analysis

The analysis of written essays is derived from Corder's (1967) method on error analysis. This method has three steps: a collection of sample errors, identification of errors and description of errors. Furthermore, the questionnaire data were analyzed using the SPSS program and Excel.

Results

The frequency of different error categories and types

The findings of this study indicated that there is a difference in the number of errors made by Saudi female level four students.

Table 1. *Frequency of error analysis categories*

Category	Type	Ratio of the frequency	Percentage	Rank
Grammatical (n=123) = (29.4%)	Verb tense	26	6.2%	7
	Singular/ plural	10	2.4%	10
	Word order	7	1.7%	11
	Subject/ verb omission	23	5.5%	9
	Subject/ verb agreement	28	6.7%	6
	Relative clause	5	1.2%	13
	Sentence structure	24	5.7%	8
Lexical (n=77) = (18.4%)	Preposition	37	8.8%	4
	Word form	6	1.4%	12
	Articles	34	8.1%	5
Semantic (n=3) = (0.7%)	Word choice	3	0.7%	14
Mechanics (n=216) = (51.5%)	Punctuation	51	12.2%	2
	Capitalization	44	10.5%	3
	Spelling	121	28.9%	1
Total		419	100%	

The highest percentage was for mechanics category especially for spelling errors ($n=121$) = (28.9%) and the lowest percentage was for semantic category, word choice ($n=3$) = (0.7%).

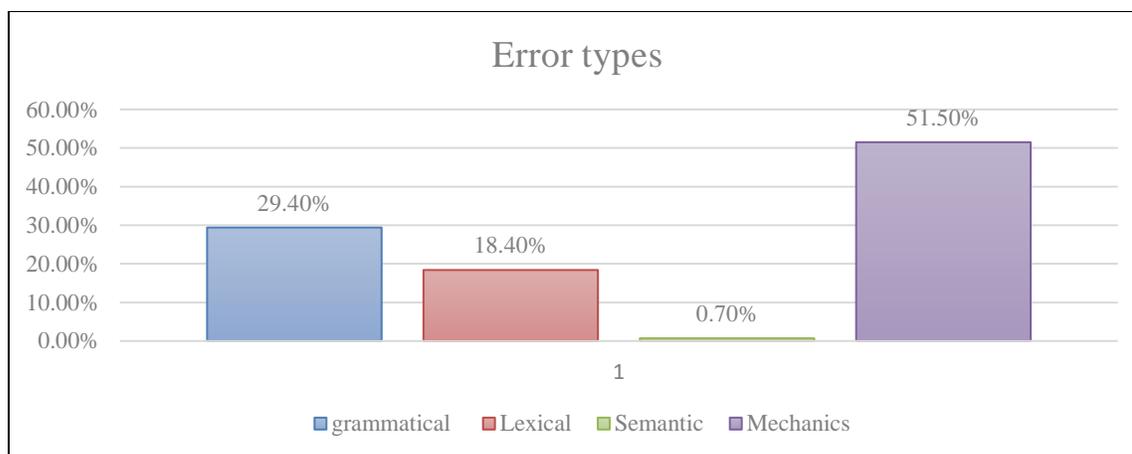


Figure 1. Percentages for each category of the errors in writing

Questionnaire results

After completing the questionnaire from the fifth and sixth levels of Saudi female students, 100 questionnaires were distributed which examines the reasons for the weakness of academic writing, of which 95 were answered. After reading it, there are five incomplete data that are excluded. Thus, the number of participants 90. The statements of the questionnaire are divided into six main factors: students themselves, teachers themselves, teaching method, external environment, curriculum, time and rule of study. The percentages differed between supporters and opponents for each statement of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Mean percent (Std Deviation) and percentage of responses on factors related to the students themselves

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Rank
1. Lack of previous experience	3.044	1.21	30.4%	10
2. Writing in order to pass the exam only	2.633	1.24	26.3%	18
3. Dislike writing in English	2.122	1.09	21.2%	22
4. Lack of motivation	2.822	1.18	28.2%	15
5. Non-compliance with instructions during writing	1.667	0.94	16.7%	26
6. Do not link grammar and spelling	2.6	1.04	26%	19
7. Negative psychological factors such as fear and frequency while writing	2.789	1.14	27.9%	16
8. Not doing homework and hiring other people to do it	1.933	1.09	19.3	25

9. The Effect of Arabic on English in writing	3.022	1.15	30.2%	11
10. Confusing the grammar of Arabic and English	2.6	1.20	26%	19
11. Do not find vocabulary easily	3.189	1.06	31.9%	7
12. Poor planning, unifying ideas and arranging them	3.156	0.99	31.6%	8
13. Accept collaborative learning during writing	2.9	1.53	29%	14
14. Confusing similar words and thus mistake in writing them	2.933	1.12	29.3%	13
15. The knowledge that the student has a weakness in writing	3	1.07	30%	12

Table 3. Mean percent (Std Deviation) and percentage of responses on factors related to the teachers themselves

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Rank
16. Teachers do not have good teaching experience	2.644	1.08	26.4%	17
17. Teacher negative criticism affects the student's desire to learn to write negatively	3.744	1.48	37.4%	1
18. The teacher does not alert the student to his mistakes	2.044	1.08	20.4%	23

Table 4. Mean percent (Std Deviation) and percentage of responses on factors related to the curriculum

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Rank
19. There is no correlation between goals, skills and curriculum	2.033	1.01	20.3%	24
20. The selected topics in the curriculum are neither useful nor needed	3	1.21	30%	12
21. Curriculum does not contain activities that contribute to the development of writing	3.3	1.09	33%	6

Table 5. Mean percent (Std Deviation) and percentage of responses on factors of writing errors of Factors related to teaching methods

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Rank
22. There are no effective methods and teaching methods	3.411	1.07	34.1%	5
23. Class activities are appropriate	3.033	1.15	30%	12
24. The blurring of the steps and the misunderstanding of the subjects led to weak writing	3.689	1	36.9%	3
25. Objective tests cause weakness in writing	2.467	1.23	24.7%	20
26. The lack of high marks of the writing part of the writing caused the weakness of writing	2.256	1.23	22.6%	21

Table 6. Mean percent (Std Deviation) and percentage of responses on factors related to the external environment

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Rank
27. There is no encouragement to write outside the classroom	3.733	1.20	37.3%	2
28. Frequent errors in the media have contributed to increasing awareness and urging to write correctly	3.444	1.16	34.4%	4
29. There is no encouragement to write outside the classroom	3.733	1.20	37.3%	2

Table 7. Mean percent (Std Deviation) and percentage of responses on factors related to the classroom and time

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Rank
30. Poor lighting and air conditioning and lack of time affect the student negatively while writing	3.1	1.28	31%	9

The highest percentage was in the factors related to the teacher which is teacher negative criticism affects the student's desire to learn to write negatively (37.4%) and the lowest proportion of the factors related to the student which is non-compliance with instructions during writing (16.7%).

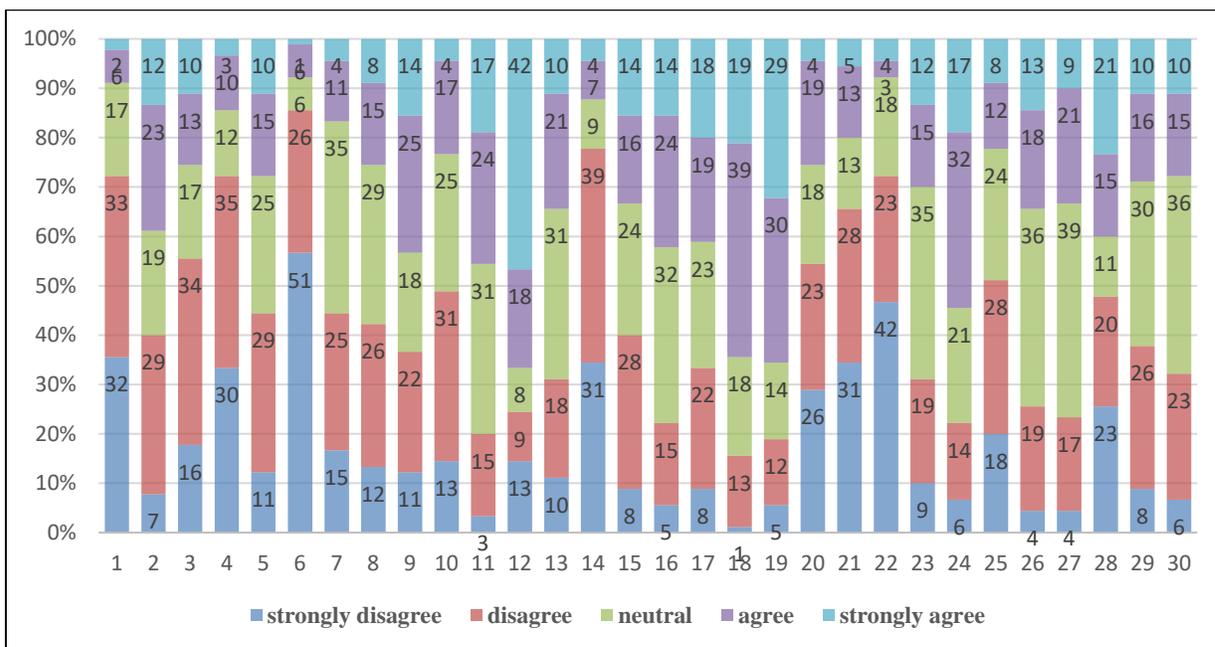


Figure 2. The number of repetitions in each statement of a five-point Likert Scale ranging

Discussion

Based on these results, the grammatical category of Saudi female students scored (29.4%). The highest percentage in this category was in subject/ verb agreement (6.7%). Then verb tense (6.2%) which immediately is followed by sentence structure (5.7%). As for subject/ verb omission (5.5%), it was the fourth one. The fifth one was single/ plural (2.4%) then word order (1.7%). the lowest percentage was in the relative clause (1.2%). These results are consistent with that of Nuruzzaman et al. (2018). They found that Saudi EFL learners made different types of errors namely grammatical (7.97%). They asserted that grammatical errors especially verb tense and subject-verb agreement were the most common errors among the students (p. 34).

Table 8. Examples of grammatical errors category

Types of error	Student's incorrect sentence	The correct sentence
Verb tense	when we <i>arrive</i> in Istanbul.	when we arrived in Istanbul.
Singular/ plural	Everyone <i>have</i> a first trip.	Everyone has a first trip.
Word order	I have a <i>party big</i> .	I have a big party.
Subject/ verb omission	<i>Everyone happy</i> .	Everyone was happy.

Subject/ verb agreement	My sisters <i>gives</i> me a gift.	My sisters give me a gift.
Relative clause	I like this cake <i>who</i> is very delicious.	I like this cake which is very delicious.
Sentence structure	<i>Many things I Like to do.</i>	There are many things that I like to do.

In the lexical category, most of the errors were committed in the prepositions and articles. In this category, the highest percentage was in the preposition (37 = 8.8%) and the second one was in the article (34 = 8.1%). The lowest percentage was for word form (6 = 1.4%). Similar findings were found in the study of Sawalmeh (2013), he found students made errors in lexical category especially article (12.4%) and preposition (8.4%). The results of his study indicated that most of the students face confusion for the correct usage of prepositions and articles (p. 13).

Table 9. *Examples of lexical errors category*

Types of error	Student's incorrect sentence	The correct sentence
Preposition	We go out <i>in</i> night.	We go out at night.
Word form	Friendship is <i>importance</i> in our life.	Friendship is important in our life.
Articles	<i>On other hand,</i>	On the other hand,

The highest number of errors were committed in the mechanics' category which included punctuations, capitalization, and spelling errors. As can be seen from the table (1), the spelling errors were the highest (121 = 28.9%). Results are in line with the study of Nuruzzaman et al. (2018). In the study, spelling was highly frequently committed by all the students (college of medicine 2.03%), (college of engineering 6.27%) and (college of computer science 5.93%) in total (14.23%) (p. 35-34). The second area of difficulty is for punctuation; the Saudi female students scored (51 = 12.2%). In capitalization, the students committed (44 = 10.5%) errors.

The last category is the semantic category which is related to the students' word choice. The errors in this type were not significant compared to the other types of errors. The female Saudi students made (3 = 0.7%) errors. The findings match the study of Nuruzzaman et al (2018). Word choice was the lowest frequently committed by all the students (college of medicine 1.02%), (college of engineering 2.03%) and (college of computer science 1.86%) in total (4.91%) (p. 35-34).

Table 10. *Examples of mechanic and semantic error categories*

Types of error	Student's incorrect sentence	The correct sentence
Punctuation	I mix the <i>flour and sugar, oil and eggs</i> in the mixer.	I mix the flour, sugar, oil, and eggs in the mixer.
Capitalization	I traveled to <i>makkah</i> .	I traveled to Makkah.

Spelling	<i>Bealiful.</i>	Beautiful.
Word choice	<i>In the last,</i>	Finally,

As for the results of the questionnaire, 30 statements are divided into six main factors to be the exact reasons for the weakness of academic writing among the female Saudi students. Furthermore, to make all the similar statements under one reason as students themselves, teachers themselves, teaching method, external environment, curriculum, time and rule of study.

The proportions were varying. Moreover, the approval and rejection ratios were calculated, and the neutral responses were excluded. The highest percentage was related to the teacher with much negative criticism. Students usually feel alienated and hate material when the teacher is bad (37.4%). Followed by the lack of encouragement to write outside the classroom (37.3%) which was a factor related to the external environment as some students believe that writing is a school duty only and does not like writing at home. The third one was factors related to teaching methods, especially the lack of clarity of the steps and the misunderstanding of subjects (36.9%). It is normal for students to make mistakes and errors in writing when the steps and instructions are not clear to them. The lowest percentage was related to the student factor (16.7%). The students responded that they always follow the guidelines while writing. This leads us to believe that students are following the instructions incorrectly or they do not fully understand it, so they make mistakes and errors.

A statement is added in the questionnaire to see if the students knew that they had a weakness in academic writing or not because knowledge of the imbalances and weaknesses will help them solve the problem easily. The answers vary it got (30%), so the problem is solved from one person to another, where 36 students replied that they do not know whether they are suffering from a lack of academic writing or not. Twenty-five students admitted that they had a weakness in their academic writing. Surprisingly 29 students answered that they had no problems with academic writing.

Conclusion and recommendations

The current study aimed to answer the three research questions that revolve around the most common errors of English writing that are made by level four EFL Saudi female students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU in Abha, to analysis students' writing errors, and to know the ratio of the frequency of different categories and types of errors. The analysis of the participants' errors indicated that their errors vary according to the category of the error as well as the type of the error itself. The most common error committed by female Saudi students who are in level four was under the mechanics category especially the spelling errors. Moreover, the percentages differed between supporters and opponents for each statement of the questionnaire. The highest percentage was in the factors related to the teacher which is teacher negative criticism affects the student's desire to learn to write negatively and the lowest proportion of the factors related to the student which is non-compliance with instructions during writing. It is recommended that students must be more conscious of learning English correctly and positively. Also, it is recommended that more emphasis is placed on writing skills by increasing the number of hours of writing in universities. It is recommended to encourage the use of writing outside the classroom as homework or even as a dialogue in social media. It is also important to choose teachers who are well qualified to deal with students who take care of the psychological and educational aspects of their students.

Limitations of the study

The study has two major limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of the study. The first limitation is that the sample is limited to the faculty of Languages and Translation at KKU female section, so we cannot generalize the findings to the male section or to other universities. The second limitation is the small number of participants makes it difficult to overgeneralize the findings or even to claim that all areas of students' writing weaknesses were covered.

About the Author:

Roaa Hussain specializes in applied linguistics and teaching English. She did her undergraduate and master's degree at King Khalid University. Roaa has excellent communication skills, a good public speaker and a docile learner who respects and appreciates her superiors. She is interested in discourse analysis, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics.

ID ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3824-6626>

References

- Abi Smara, N. (2003). *An analysis of Errors in Arabic Speakers' English Writings*. American University of Beirut, 1-66.
- Abushihab, I. (2014). An Analysis of Grammatical Errors in Writing Made by Turkish Learners of English as a Foreign Language. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 6(4), 213-223.
- Ahmed, A., & Abou Abdelkader, H. (2016). *Teaching EFL writing in the 21st century Arab world: Realities and challenges*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Albalawi, M. (2015). The Academic Writing Performance and Spelling Errors of English as Foreign Language Students at Tabuk University: A Case of the Introductory Year Students. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities*, 4(1), 1-8.
- Alhaysony, M. (2012). An analysis of article errors among Saudi female EFL students: A case study. *Asian Social Science*, 8(12), 55-66.
- Ansari, A. (2012). Teaching of English to Arab students: Problems and remedies. *International Research Journals*, 3(6), 519-524.
- Atashian, S., & Al-Bahri, K. (2018). Towards Arab Students' Grammatical Errors in Academic Writing & their Perceptions. *Arab World English Journal*, 140-145.
- Bacha, N. (2002). Developing Learners' Academic Writing Skills in Higher Education: A Study for Educational Reform. *Language and Education*, 16(3), 161-177.
- Brawn, D. (2002). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (4th ed.). Addison Wesley Longman, Inc, a Person Education Company, White Plains: NY.
- Byrne, D. (1993). *Teaching writing skills*. Longman Group UK limited: England.
- Corder, P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5(1-4), 161-170.
- Corder, S. (1978). The Significance of Learners' Errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5(4), 161-169.
- Crystal, D. (1999). English as a Global Language. *Educational Research*, 3(6), 519-524.
- Ellis, R. (1986). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frank, J. (2012). The Roles of Assessment in Language Teaching. English. *Teaching Forum*, 3(50), 32.
- Hamed, M. (2018). Common Linguistic Errors among Non-English Major Libyan Students Writing. *Arab World English Journal*, 9(3), 219-232.

- Ho, P. (2015). Common Errors in Writing Journals of the English Major Students at HCMC Open University. *Journal of Science Ho Chi Minh City Open University*, 2(15), 52-61.
- Hourani, T. (2008). Analysis of the Common Grammatical Errors in the English Writing made by 3rd Secondary Male Students in the Eastern Coast of the UAE. The Institute of Education of the British University in Dubai, 1-78.
- Huwari, I., & Al-Khasawneh, F. (2013). The Reasons behind the Weaknesses of Writing in English among Pre-year Students' at Taibah University. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 38(14), 1-9.
- James, C. (1988). *Errors in Language Learning Use: Exploring error analysis*. Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Kavaliauskiene, G. (2009). Role of the Mother Tongue in Learning English for *Specific Purposes*. *ESP World*, 1(22), 1-12.
- Mezrag, M. (2013). *The Importance of Error Analysis in The Learners' Writing skill*. practices (Second edition ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Nuruzzaman, M., Islam, A., & Shuchi, I. J. (2016). An analysis of errors committed by Saudi non-English major students in the English paragraph writing: A study of comparisons. *Advances in language and literary studies*, 9(1), 31-39.
- Richard, J. C. (1971). *Error Analysis*. London: Longman.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2012). *Introduction to second language acquisition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sawalmeh, M. (2013). Error Analysis of Written English Essays: The case of Students of the Preparatory Year Program in Saudi Arabia. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 40(14), 1-14.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Internlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(3), 209-231.
- Sermsook, K., Liamnimitr, J., & Pochakorn, R. (2017). An Analysis of Errors in Written English Sentences: A Case Study of Thai EFL Students. *Canadian Center of Science and Education*, 10(3), 101-110.
- Siddiqui, M. (2015). Evaluating Capitalization Errors in Saudi Female Students' EFL Writing at Bisha University. *Arab World English Journal*, 6(1), 232-250.
- Sobahle, P. (1986). Error analysis and its significance for second language teaching and learning. *PER Linguam*, 2(2).
- Ulla, T. (2014). Analysis of the Language Errors in Writing among BSEE and AB English Students. *European Journal of Academic Essays*, 1(3), 39-47.