

## Towards Arab Students' Grammatical Errors in Academic Writing & their Perceptions

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### Abstract

Writing plays an integral role in English students' academic life. Background study reveals that 'grammar' is one of the most significant challenges concerning students' academic writing performance. The present paper aims to find out the grammatical difficulties that university students face in their academic writing and to identify the causes of this problem. Furthermore, the study seeks to investigate the strategies and solutions to tackle this problem. Data in this research were collected from 200 students of B.A. in Education (with the sub-major in English) at the University of Nizwa in Oman. The samples were students' assignments throughout the semester. A table of frequency was formed to list the type of grammatical errors and the number of times the mistake was observed. Three grammatical points, namely, tenses, adverbs and pronouns were students' most frequent mistakes. Then an interview was conducted with the students to figure out their perception of the mistakes in their academic writing skill. Students' perception was looked into against their actual mistakes in writing. Finally, the sources of these errors were investigated in the background study and the related literature, and some pedagogical implications were made. The method of research in this study is qualitative.

**Key Words:** academic writing, error, grammar, perception, tenses

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## 1. Introduction

Grammar is an essential aspect of any good piece of writing. Many students who are studying English as a second language face difficulties in their writing because of several factors throughout their learning. Many studies agree that grammar is one of the most significant parts which is considered the main obstacle ESL students face in their writing because of the difference between their mother tongue and second language systems.

## 2. Problem statement

Grammar difficulties in academic writing among students at Nizwa University, is one of the urgent problems of our time. University students have to know that writing skill is important for academic and social fields. It has been observed that some students are facing many difficulties in grammar and it affects their performance and scores.

## 3. Literature Review

Many researchers have thoroughly conducted and investigated grammar difficulties in academic writing that a great number of ESL students face. These difficulties show their impact on students' performance in writing skills. Davidson (2005) states that there are difficulties that SL student face in their writing because of many reasons during their learning process. According to English language, it has a lot of irregularities and idiosyncrasies which create several difficulties in academic writing that Second Language students face. Moreover, Farooq (2012) claims that ESL students face difficulties in grammar which is considered as the most difficult field in writing. There are many problems that students face when they write sentences, structures, and paragraphs correctly. Grammar skills consist of a set of sentences, the use of various types of sentences, subject verb agreement, parallel structure, placement of modifiers and tense agreement. Al Fadda (2012) finds that ESL students encounter many difficulties to distinguish between spoken and written words, and they face grammatical problems in using subject-verb agreement and how to combine sentences to write a paragraph correctly. Besides that, he suggests that another challenge could be faced which is creating ideas to write their topics, so that will be an obstacle to succeed in their writing. Moreover, Amin and Alamin (2012) assert that reading and then writing by using their own words can guide students to commit grammatical errors, so they will tend to copy others' work to avoid their mistakes. Some researchers believe that the main reason for the mistakes is the transformation of the forms and meanings of the sentences from students' first languages into English language. That's what the researcher Abisamra (2007) claims in his study; he believes that Arab students, who learn EFL, make many inter-lingual mistakes because of depending on their first language all time. Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2012) agree that SL students are influenced by their first language rules that guide them to make errors in their academic writing. According to this, many studies agree that first language is the main factor that affects students' performance in writing. Many studies recommend that teachers should keep in mind many useful ways and strategies to improve students' writing. Consequently, it is important when teachers help students to succeed in their writing skill by working as one team and that will make a difference in students' performance later. Chin (2000) adds that during editing and revising students' writing, teachers have to provide grammar instruction which lead them to recognize their mistakes, correct wrong sentences and write in appropriate structure. So when the teacher notices many students making mistakes and misusing the rules in sentences, they can provide more lessons to give their corrective feedback to students, advising students to write more than one draft to reduce their mistakes in grammar.

#### 4. Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the grammatical errors in academic writing that the students of Nizwa University depicted. 90 students were observed in writing-themed courses to explore their common mistakes in English grammar. Then the students were interviewed in order to look into their perception of the difficulties they generally face regarding English Grammar.

##### 1. Students' writing samples:

The type of the writing activity students performed was 'argumentative'. This type of writing was specifically implemented, given that it is a common type in academic writing and international examinations e.g. IELTS or TOEFL.

##### 2. An interview:

An interview was conducted in this paper to investigate students' perception that was looked into against their actual mistakes in writing. Moreover, this method seems to be a suitable method for collecting data because it provides an explanation for the answers of interviewees which lead to the answers of the research questions. This research aims to find the common grammatical difficulties and the reasons of this problem. Some research objectives were achieved by collecting the data through students' writing samples, but the other objectives need to apply the open-ended questions to know students' perception of the mistakes in their academic writing skill.

Furthermore, "In interviews, there is interactivity, which not only enables the researcher to explain any confusing issues to the interviewees but most importantly, it allows for a deeper insight to be obtained by using a probing technique, that is asking follow-up questions to provide a more complete and comprehensive explanation of the studied phenomenon." (Berg & Lune, 2014, pp. 116-128).

#### 5. Procedures:

The writing samples were taken from 90 students who are studying Advanced English or Grammar-2 which show their grammatical mistakes they had made. These samples will identify three common grammatical mistakes that students had made in their writing. The interview was conducted to the students and it will identify students' perception about the common difficulties and the reasons for facing these difficulties. It included four questions.

#### 6. Results

##### Students' samples:

According to samples of students' assignments, the results can be seen by a table of frequency below that shows a list of grammatical errors and the number of times the mistake was observed.

Table 1. Frequency of Errors

The grammatical errors	Frequency
Tenses	56
Adverbs	52
Pronouns	45
<i>Subject/ verb agreement</i>	37
Misplaced apostrophes	33
Passive voice	31
Punctuation	19

**a. Tenses:**

Tenses are considered as one of essential elements to make a sentence; many of SLA students face difficulties to use them in their writing. This is due to Arabic structure where a sentence can be without a verb, unlike English sentences. For example, SLA students have problems in understanding the perfect tense since it has no equivalent verb in Arabic, and it is usually confused with the simple past. This tense describes a past event that is related in some way to the present. Students find that the rules in grammar are not always understandable, and it is difficult to analyze the difference between past tense and the present perfect. According to the table of frequency above, making mistakes in using tenses was observed 5 times.

**b. Adverbs:**

Using adverbs is another common problem that Nizwa University students face in their writing. The problem is that students cannot recognize adverb placement, because adverbs of frequency come after the verb 'be' or with other verbs and they usually come before the main verb. For example: She's always studying, or: \*He always clean his room". Furthermore, Students misunderstand the adverb function, thus lead them to misuse it in writing meaningful sentences. They face problem to use adverbs that describe verbs and adjectives. According to the table of frequency above, making mistakes in using adverbs was observed 3 times.

**c. Pronouns:**

The third common error that Nizwa University students make frequently is how to use singular and plural pronouns in sentences. For example: "Someone lost *his* bag". Some students may misuse the possessive pronoun "*his*" and replace it by "*their*". Some students misuse the word "*its*" which is the possessive pronoun for the pronoun "it", and they get confused with the word "it's" which shows means "it is". According to the table of frequency above, making mistakes in using pronouns was observed 6 times.

**Results of students' interview:**

An interview was conducted with the students to figure out their perception of the mistakes in their academic writing skill. Students' perception was looked into against their actual mistakes in writing. The results were as follows:

**1. How often do you write in English?**

The majority of students said that they usually write from 2 to 5 days during their classroom. Some of them said that they write in English 4 times per month. That means the students write in English in their classrooms and for doing their assignments.

**2. What is your main grammar mistake?**

Most of students have the same answer that they make a grammatical mistake in tenses; they make common mistakes in using present perfect, past simple and present progressive.

**3. What do you find difficult in grammar?**

All of students find difficult in usage of tenses, they said that they get confused to choose the suitable tenses to describe the actions and write correct sentences.

**4. What are the reasons?**

Some students believe that the lack of practice and knowledge are the main reasons. While, others said that the difference between Arabic language and English language could be another

reason of grammatical difficulties. Other students claim the method of teaching grammar could be another reason.

## 7. Discussion

The qualitative method of this research aimed to investigate more details about the grammatical difficulties that the students' of Nizwa University face in their writing. Thus, these results showed that tenses was the most frequent grammatical error, that is what Al-Buainain (2007) confirmed in her study which was mentioned in this research. Adverbs and pronouns were other frequent errors that students made in their assignments throughout the semester. Using an interview was a great decision to know more about students' perception in grammar difficulties. It showed that students had difficulties in using tenses and they said that the reasons related to their first language and the lack of practice in writing as Darus and Subramaniam (2009) claimed.

Furthermore, students should practice their writing skill and keep in their mind that grammar is the main part to make correct sentence and deliver their ideas. Also, they should be encouraged and motivated by their teachers to help them decrease their errors.

## 8. Recommendations

1. Students should enrich their knowledge in English and differentiate between their first language's rules and the English language they learn.
2. Students should be encouraged to read widely whether in classroom or at home, because reading is considered as the main source of knowledge.
3. Students should practice in writing, try to correct their grammatical mistakes by themselves first, and find the way to reduce committing errors.
4. Students should avoid transformation of the forms and meanings of the sentences from their first languages into English language.
5. Students should avoid copying others' work in order to avoid making mistakes.
6. Students should not be afraid of making grammatical errors, but they should learn from their errors and know how to prevent making them again.
7. Teachers should aim to improve students' confidence in their writing by their teaching strategies, giving them correction feedback and making students aware that making grammatical errors and mistakes should not discourage them from writing.
8. Teachers should write frequent errors down and give them special attention, with a period set aside for the feedback and correction of such errors.
9. Teachers should provide appropriate academic writing courses and teaching strategies which have significant impact on students' performance.

## 9. Conclusion

This research investigates grammatical difficulties in academic writing and it discusses the reasons of this problem that the researchers and students claimed. The researchers found that the main reason is students' first language which has a strong impact on English language. The researchers confirm that the students should deal with grammar as an essential part in writing, enhancing their knowledge in English. Furthermore, they should distinguish between the first and second language rule to be aware how to deal with both languages to avoid making more errors later.

Moreover, this research provides some solutions to reduce the negative impact of grammatical errors on students' performance. The teacher has a great role to improve the writing skill for his/her students

by finding such strategies which suit students' levels to learn grammar and use the rules in correct way.

#### About the Author:

**Soheil Atashian** holds an M.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. He has published several articles, and presented at international conferences. His research interests are Pragmatics, Technology in Education and ESL. Atashian is currently a lecturer and the quality assurance officer at the Department of Foreign Languages in the University of Nizwa in Oman. ORCID ID 0000-0002-8592-8902.

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