

An Investigation of Writing Errors Made by Saudi English-Major Students

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore writing errors made by Saudi foreign language learners of English. The study seeks to address the following questions: a) to what extent do Saudi English-major students face difficulties in English writing; and b) what types of errors do Saudi English-major students make in their writing. Addressing these will facilitate an examination of the role of the first language and the difficult nature of writing in English. Twenty-four male English-major students attending a Saudi university participated in the study (aged 19–22 years). The participants wrote 48 compositions over a two-week period, from which the data for this study were collected. These written compositions were analysed manually by the researcher. The findings of the study reveal that: a) the targeted participants had difficulty in writing accurately in English, given the high rate of errors they made; and b) capitalisation, spelling and use of articles were the top three types of errors accounting for around 50 per cent of overall errors. The writing difficulties that students face require Saudi universities to revise their writing courses materials and teaching approaches.

Keywords: writing skills, errors, EFL, learning, English-major

1. Introduction

The importance of learning English has motivated educational institutions in Arab countries to make English a compulsory subject in the school curriculum (Alghizzi, 2017). There are four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) that should be mastered by second/foreign language learners. Students who study English as a second/foreign language are expected to master the skill of writing it (Hammad, 2016; Sawalmeh, 2013), as it is considered as one of the main skills when learning a target language (Fageeh, 2011). Yet, writing in a second/foreign language context is one of the most challenging skills (Ahmed, 2010; Al Shammari, 2018; Alsahafi, 2017; Seitova, 2016; Tahaineh, 2010). According to the natural order hypothesis (Krashen, 1983), writing is the last of the four skills that learners master.

Silva (1993) proposes that first language (L1) writing teaching methods have inspired those of second language (L2) ones. However, L2 methods are different due to the fact that L2 learning varies in terms of context and learners' motivation for writing. In fact, it is twice as difficult to write in L2 than in L1 (Seitova, 2016). The difficulty lies in the fact that writing in L2 requires deeper cognitive analysis than that required for L1. Ferris (1994) suggests that even advanced learners of English seem to have poor writing skills. According to Rao (2007), the importance of writing for English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) learners (regardless of their level of proficiency) is twofold: a) to improve students' skill in organising ideas; and b) to boost L2 acquisition. Conversely, writing helps university-level learners to: a) rely on their creative skills rather than memory; and b) improve their marks in all courses.

Brown (2000) maintains that errors can be interlingual (related to L1) or intralingual (related to incomplete learning of the target language). Examining Arabic L2 learners of English will allow us to investigate whether their problems are related to their L1 or other factors. Corder (1967) assumes that learners' errors can be used to investigate how a language is learned. The present study adopts an error analysis approach to examine Saudi students' writing errors in L2. Error analysis is defined as 'the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language' (James, 2013, p. 2).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Teaching English writing is one of the aims of English departments in Saudi Arabian universities. Regardless of the intensity of writing courses, it seems that Saudi undergraduate students who are learning English have difficulty in writing in English (Grami, 2010). Grami (2010) found that Saudi ESL learners scored very low in the IELTS writing assessment (4.83 out of 9). Their scores were among the lowest in comparison to learners from other nationalities. The motivation and inspiration for conducting the study stem from studies conducted on Saudi students who reported that they had problems writing accurately in English (e.g., Al-Khairi, 2013; Althobaiti, 2014; Grami, 2010; Javid & Umer, 2014), and these studies will be discussed later in this paper.

1.2 Questions of the Study

The present study addresses writing errors by examining written texts composed by freshmen English-major students at a Saudi university to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent do Saudi English-major students face difficulties in English writing?
- 2) What types of errors do they make?

2. Literature Review

The majority of studies that have addressed writing issues in Arabic-speaking contexts relate to students' perspectives towards writing (e.g., Al-Khairi, 2013; Al-Khasawneh & Saleh, 2010; Grami, 2010; Javid & Umer, 2014). The present study sheds light on a number of such studies to discover whether Arabic speakers find English writing difficult, before discussing works related to their actual writing.

Alkhairy (2013) conducted a study on the academic writing problems faced by Saudi students. The subjects were 75 students majoring in English at Taif University. The participants completed a 32-item questionnaire about whether they face difficulties in writing in English. They reported having weak writing skills. Similarly, Javid and Umer (2014) conducted a study on 194 university-level Saudi EFL learners to investigate their views regarding their writing skills. A 40-item questionnaire was distributed and it revealed that students had a negative view of their writing skills. Another Saudi-based study that examined students' English writing errors was conducted by Alharbi (2018). The participants of the study were 55 students majoring in English. Both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. The results showed that the participants experienced difficulties in English writing, which was attributed to the complexities of the language's syntax and morphology.

One of the studies that examined materials written by Arab students was that by Sawalmeh (2013), who conducted a study on 32 male Saudi students enrolled in a preparatory year at Hail University. After asking the participants to write essays, the researcher found they made a significant number of errors, particularly in their use of verb tenses, spelling and articles. Similarly, Al Mubarak (2017) studied graduation projects completed by 15 Sudanese EFL learners in order to examine their writing ability. He found that they had poor writing skills and the majority of errors were made when using prepositions and punctuation marks. The following issues can be found in these studies: a) Sawalmeh's (2013) participants were freshmen who had different backgrounds and levels of English language proficiency, given that they were to specialize in different fields at the university; b) Al Mubarak's (2017) data were based on possibly edited pieces of writing, as the graduation projects were not written in real time, students could write them at home; and c) Al Mubarak (2017) overlooked two major errors that L2 learners make in writing, namely, spelling and capitalisation. Neither study stated explicitly whether their participants had any experience of learning English in an ESL context, where they could have received ample L2 input.

Althobaiti (2014) carried out a study on 60 university-level Saudi students at Taif University. They were categorised into two groups: beginners (30) and advanced (30). The categorisation was based on the beginners being in their preparatory year (it is a transitional year between secondary school and university). During this year, students do not specialise, they take skills courses, such as computer and information technology, communication skills and English. The advanced students were English-major students in their second year. The beginners group was asked to write paragraphs of around 100 words, whereas the advanced group wrote essays of around 200 words. The findings showed that the beginners group made the highest number of errors in verb tenses, followed by spelling and word order. The advanced group made the highest number of errors in the use of articles, followed by verb tenses and prepositions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted on 24 male English-major students (aged 19–22 years). The students were freshmen in their second semester. They had already taken four courses in their first semester (reading, writing, listening and speaking, and grammar) and were taking the upper level of these courses in the second semester. None of the students had attended an English course abroad or lived in an English-speaking country. This precaution was taken to make the data homogenous.

3.2 Procedure

The participants signed consent forms, and they were told that their information would be kept confidential. The data consisted of 48 written compositions. The participants were asked to write 150–300-word compositions in one hour. They wrote the first 24 compositions during the first week (the topic was *their favourite city*) and the other 24 compositions during the second week (the topic was *smoking*). Over the following weeks, they were asked to compose additional pieces of text; however, due to the participants receiving corrective feedback for their errors during these weeks, these pieces were not included in the present study. Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that the participants were English-major students who received feedback from their course instructors for other courses they took or were taking. However, to minimise the effects of corrective feedback, only the compositions they wrote during the initial two weeks were considered. The participants were not allowed to use dictionaries and or ask the researcher about anything that would help them in their writing. This was to eliminate any factors that might give a false impression about their writing. This was not the case with Al Mubarak's (2017) study (previously discussed in the literature) where he evaluated written projects written outside the classroom.

3.3 Coding

After some consideration, the researcher decided to analyse the 48 compositions manually, rather than electronically. Indeed, Alghizzi (2017) states that electronic analysis may yield inaccurate results and that manual revision is always recommended, even if electronic analysis has been carried out. As a precaution, the compositions were also checked by another coder whose L1 is Arabic and who holds a PhD in applied linguistics. This second pair of eyes was useful in spotting a few errors missed by the author.

Following Sawalmeh's (2013) error analysis, 10 types of errors were considered. Other types of errors, such as punctuation errors, were not included. The following table illustrates these errors with real examples.

Table 1. Examples of participants' errors

Type of error	Example	Correction
Using articles	I smoked cigarette .	I smoked a cigarette .
Double negative	My dad did not have no time.	My dad did not have time.
Wrong verb tense	We go to Riyadh last month.	We went to Riyadh last month.
Subject/verb agreement	Places is good.	Places are good.
Using prepositions	In Monday	On Monday
Using pronouns	Me will go.	I will go.
Wrong word order	My favourite person my is brother.	My favourite person is my brother.
Fragments	Went to Riyadh.	I went to Riyadh.
Spelling	Sukcesful	Successful
Capitalisation	i took a car.	I took a car.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

Descriptive and inferential statistics for the participants' writing are presented in this section. The errors in the 48 writing compositions were counted and combined before being converted into percentages. A total of 1,966 errors were made by the learners. The chart below illustrates the percentages for each type of error.

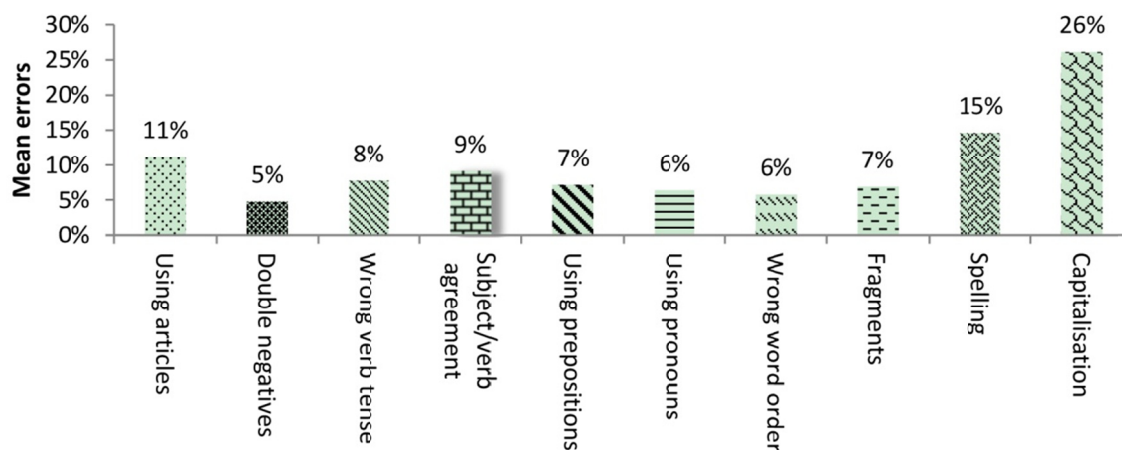


Figure 1. Means of errors made by the targeted students

The figure above reveals that the highest percentages of errors were in capitalisation (26%) followed by spelling (15%) and using articles (11%). Other types of errors had lower percentages, ranging from 5% to 9%.

The errors were compared statistically using a one-way ANOVA test. The test found that the errors were statistically different ($F(9, 470) = 52.401, p < 0.001$). As recommended by Larson-Hall (2009), Tukey post hoc tests were run to identify the location of differences. Capitalisation errors were made statistically more frequently than all other types of errors ($p < 0.05$). The participants made more spelling errors ($p < 0.05$) than all other errors (except articles and capitalisation). Errors in using articles were more ($p < 0.05$) than other types (except capitalisation, spelling, verb tenses and subject/verb agreement). Errors related to subject/verb agreement and using verb tenses were statistically more ($p < 0.05$) than errors in using double negatives. Other comparisons were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

4.2 Discussion

Studies that addressed EFL and ESL Arabic learners' attitudes towards writing in English (e.g., Al-Khairi, 2013; Alharbi, 2018; Javid & Umer, 2014) have found that students experience difficulties in writing in English. Al Mubarak's (2017), Althobaiti's (2014) and Sawalmeh's (2013) studies examined English compositions written by Arab students. However, Sawalmeh's (2013) study struggled to recruit participants with different educational backgrounds, whereas Al Mubarak's (2017) examined students' projects that were written at home and might thus have more editing. The present study attempts to address the following questions: a) to what extent do Saudi English-major students face difficulties in English writing? b) what types of errors do they make? For study question 1, the findings of the present study reveal that freshmen English-major students in Saudi Arabia face difficulties in writing in English. This can be observed in the high frequency of errors (1,966) made in the 48 compositions (an average of 41 errors per composition). Given that the compositions were short (150–300 words), this is considered high. These findings are surprising, as the participants were specialising in English.

With regard to question 2, around 50 per cent of the errors fell into three categories (capitalisation, spelling and article use). The participants made the highest number of errors in capitalisation (26%). Letters in Arabic do not have the upper-/lower-case distinction found in English, which may explain why they had a high rate of errors in capitalisation. As for spelling errors (15%), Al-Busaidi and Al-Saqqaf (2015) state that Arabic speakers find English spelling challenging because Arabic spelling is simply the drawing of sounds. Carney (2008) suggests that L2 learners assume that English spelling is rule-governed, which is not always the case. Concerning errors in using articles (11%), Arabic and English share a similar article system, except that Arabic lacks an equivalent to the English article *a*. It is noteworthy that Al Mubarak (2017) did not consider capitalisation and spelling errors in his study. Had he done so, the researcher assumes he would have reached different conclusions. Conversely, Sawalmeh's (2013) findings were generally similar to the present study, except that his participants made fewer capitalisation errors (6.3% compared to 26% in the present study). His participants made the highest rate of errors in using tenses (16.5% compared to 8% in the present study) followed by errors in article use (12.4% compared to 11% in the present study). Sawalmeh (2017) did not mention the topics on which participants focused. It is assumed that their high rate of errors in using tenses could be due to the nature of the topics given to the participants compared to the present study, whose topics were descriptive and not storytelling, so the tense tends to shift more frequently. In light of this finding, the researcher suggests that future research should vary the

types of topics. The findings are relatively similar to Althobaiti's (2014) findings (similar to his advanced group, as the beginners group were not English majors) concerning the use of articles (19.6% compared to 11% in the present study). However, Althobaiti (2014) found that spelling and capitalisation errors were 6.1% and 6.8%, respectively, which are fewer than the present study found (15% and 26%, respectively).

With regard to other types of errors addressed by the present study where Arabic and English differ, the question that arises is: why did the participants make fewer errors than those they made in capitalisation, spelling and articles? The answer may be that in every sentence capitalisation is used; and this applies, to a lesser extent, to the use of articles, whereas spelling is related to every word.

The high rate of errors that this study found supports Hyland's (2003) view, which assumes that L2 writers' bilingual and bicultural backgrounds affect their mastering of English writing skills. Moreover, Arabic learners of English, in particular, have problems with writing in English because they tend to translate their thoughts from Arabic into English, as instruction is primarily in Arabic (Al-Khasawneh & Saleh, 2010; Alghizzi, 2017). It seems that the errors the participants made can be attributed to both L1 and incomplete learning of the target language. This can be seen in that the target participants had high frequencies of errors in areas where Arabic and English are similar (articles) and different (capitalisation). It is not easy to determine which one (interlingual or intralingual) is more responsible for these errors, as the present study did not recruit participants with other L1 backgrounds or different levels of proficiency.

The pedagogical implication of the present study suggests that English departments in Saudi universities should consider tackling the problems encountered with writing in English, as the number of errors found in this study is alarming. This can be achieved by revising writing courses materials and teaching approaches. However, the present study's data were gathered from one university. Although researchers such as Grami (2010) made similar findings, more data are required before drawing any definitive conclusions.

5. Conclusion

The present study has investigated the extent to which writing errors were made by Saudi Arabic L2 learners of English who were English-major undergraduate students at a Saudi university. Twenty-four male English-major students were asked to write on descriptive mode topics. The participants' 48 written compositions were analysed. It is observed that the participants had a high rate of errors, most of which were in the areas of capitalisation, spelling and using articles.

The relatively small sample size and the nature of the topics used in the compositions are deemed to be limitations of the present study. With regard to the writing topics used, they were of a descriptive nature that probably limited the wider use of tenses. Future research should consider the nature of the topics used.

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