

GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN ENGLISH WRITING MADE BY SENIOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT JUBAIL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE-: PROBLEM ANALYSIS, REASONS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Grammatical knowledge plays a crucial role in the writing process. It is viewed as the most important aspect of language learning at Jubail University College. Although the senior students of English Department at JUC have reached an advanced level, they tend to make grammatical errors in their writing. The focus of this study is to analyze the grammatical errors in English writing, explore the possible sources and finally propose some corresponding solutions to improve senior students' English writing.

The research incorporates techniques taken from both the qualitative and quantitative research methods. A sample size of 30 senior level students of the English Department was chosen. The data was gathered from the written assignments of the senior level students from the previous semester. Using checklists, the students' samples were evaluated for the identification and classification of errors.

The focus of this study is to help the researchers in analyzing and determining different patterns and sources of grammatical errors that keep emerging with work of senior level students at Jubail University College. Moreover, it will propose solutions that will aid future English major students to perfect their writing skills and be up to par when they reach their senior year.

Keywords: Grammatical Mistakes, Senior English Major Students, Reasons, Solutions

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Basically, the process of learning English cannot be isolated from learning grammar. It includes writing as the main productive skill for EFL learners and serves as the embodiment of developing accuracy and fluency in grammar. The senior students of English Department at Jubail University College are expected to write competently; however, they tend to make grammatical errors when they create a piece of writing. The weakness of the senior students in writing is believed to be the result of the influence of their native language and insufficient knowledge of grammatical concepts. Improving the writing skills of the students at JUC is a serious issue that needs to be tackled. A piece of writing is considered accurate when the language learner follows the rules of the target language; it includes a good usage of grammar, arrangement and punctuation. Batstone (1994) points out, "Language without grammar would be chaotic and cause the same communication problem, such as grammatical errors in writing and speaking."

Due to the low proficiency of Saudi students in grammar, it is essential for them to improve their knowledge of grammar. Previous research papers recommend that the students need to have a full command of grammatical concepts in order to avoid grammatical errors in writing. It is noteworthy here that EFL teachers should have a high level of awareness of grammatical mistakes that students make in their work. Thus, the current paper aims to examine the types of grammatical errors made by senior students of English Department at Jubail University College.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study is carried out based on the following objectives:

1. To explore the most common grammatical errors that the senior students of the English Department at Jubail University College commit in their writing assignments
2. To investigate the sources that affect the writing quality of the senior students of the English Department at Jubail University College
3. To propose remedial techniques to minimize students' errors

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Saudi students in general and the senior students of the English Department at Jubail University College in particular find it very challenging to write in English. Despite their exposure to English language, they still struggle. Nunan (1999) states that the most problematic task in writing is to create a clear piece of writing. This is particularly true when it comes to writing in a language that is not your native language. Hence, students exhibit weaknesses in their writing assignments; these weaknesses are observed in the structures they create and also in the expression of their ideas.

This type of research will be particularly beneficial to overcome the grammatical errors Saudi students make while writing in English.

1.3 Research Questions

The study is conducted in reference to the following research questions:

1. What are the common types of grammatical errors that the senior students of the English Department at Jubail University College commit in their writing assignments?
2. What are the sources of errors made by the senior students of the English Department at Jubail University College?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study aims to provide a brief account of the most common grammatical errors made by the senior students of the English department at JUC. The senior level students of the English department need more tutoring on the common errors they make. Furthermore, in order to propose remedial action, it is important for teachers to be aware of the sources of these errors. The grammatical errors should be classified to develop strategies in relation to the senior level students of the English department at JUC. The teachers should highlight the grammatical items that most affect their students' ability to write effectively, and provide extra coaching and more practice time to the students. This research hopes to provide an awareness among the English teachers of JUC that teaching writing skill is not demanding if grammar is used in an appropriate manner that is beneficial for the students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Error Analysis

Concerning the learners' errors, Error Analysis is one of the most significant notions of second language acquisition. Corder (1967) defined it as a process in which the researcher gathers samples of the learners' language in order to identify, describe and categorize the errors based on their sources and types (as cited in Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). In Corder's opinion, amethodical error analysis can empower teachers to determine the type of implementation needed in teaching.

Brown (2014) defined an error as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, which reflects the competence of the learner." (p. 249). By correlating the learners' attained models with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors, Error Analysis deals with the examination of errors produced by L2 learners (James, 1988). Crystal (1999) states that error analysis refers to the study of the unacceptable forms produced by a foreign language learner.

Three main causes explain the significance of Error Analysis in SLA: (1) it is considered a warning signal of the learners' L2 knowledge; and (2) it can be used as a device by the learners to discover the L2 rules; and (3) it assists the researchers to perceive the L2 learning processes (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994 as cited in Hamid and Doan, 2014).

Thus, error analysis can support teachers to implement an efficient teaching plan of a particular grammar concept. In addition, teachers can benefit by devising approaches in order to assist students tackle their difficulties and develop their language performance (Muhari & Wan Mansor, 2008).

2.2 Frequency of Grammatical Errors

Hsu (2013) states that grammar is considered the basic framework of a language. It includes the three aspects of morphosyntax (form), (meaning) and pragmatics (use). The errors that are made by EFL learners are different from those produced by the native learners (Weaver, 1996 as cited in Ferris, 2002). Hsu (2013) asserts that grammatical errors refer to incorrect form, semantics, meaning and use. For instance, EFL learners' errors have forms that occur repeatedly. However, it should be noted that these patterns differ from one learner to another depending on several elements such as the first language, the aptitude level, the time span devoted to learn English, and students' behavior, e.g., motivation, learning styles, time, and energy (Ferris, 2002). Therefore,

Ferris (2002) cautioned not to overgeneralize the errors of ESL/EFL students by depending heavily on the error analysis charts that contain a list of the common errors.

2.3 Difference between Error and Mistake

There is a difference between an error and a mistake. However, the EFL learners continue to commit errors and mistakes repeatedly. Without a thorough understanding, the learners usually find no difference between an error and a mistake. Brown (2007) suggested that all native speakers make mistakes, or have a "performance lapse"; they are classified as non-systematic errors. He also mentioned that a mistake is basically an error in performance. It could be a random guess or a "slip". Since the learners are unable to use a known system appropriately, they make non-systematic makes. Furthermore, Brown pointed out that both the L1 learners and EFL learners make mistakes. Hence, it does not matter whether they are native speakers or second language learners. In contrast, errors originate from the learners' systematic knowledge of the foreign language. Brown (2007) claims that an error discloses a learner's proficiency in the target language. Because of the weakness of the EFL learners to find their errors themselves, teachers are needed for correction. According to Corder (1967) errors are usually made by foreign language learners who are not yet proficient in the language. As a consequence, the EFL learners are more likely to make errors. Therefore, the analysis of errors plays a pivotal role to demonstrate the challenges faced by EFL learners and to specify the competence level of EFL learners.

2.4 Reasons and Sources of Errors

In relation to the sources of errors, learner's errors do not merely result from the native language. The reason is that many errors do not have the same parallel with the native language structures (Khansir, 2012). Richards and Schmidt (2010) and Shekhzadeh and Gheichi (2011) differentiate between two sources of errors: interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. "Interlingual errors are those which are related to the native language" (Hongyi, Jia & Fengjie, 2016). When a learner's L1 interferes to a certain extent and obstructs him/her from acquiring the L2, interlingual errors occur. Interlingual errors are centered on the fact that the habits of the learner's native language have a strong influence on his/her language proficiency (Corder, 1987). Such errors are the result of the language transfer of similar rules from the learner's native language to the foreign language. As an example, the incorrect English sentence 'Aisharead Qurandaily*' was produced as a result of the negative transfer of native (Arabic) language rule 'Aisha taqra alquran kullo yaum' in which Arabic does not have subject-verb agreement.

In contrast, according to Keshavarz (1994), intralingual transfer refers to the errors that are caused by the mutual interference of items produced by the learners and overgeneralization. Overgeneralization occurs when the learner is aware of a general rule, but he/she is not familiar with all the exemptions to that rule (Ziahosseiny, 1999). For instance, a learner may produce 'Omar must to go to school*' based on the overgeneralization of the English structure 'Omar wants to go to school'.

2.5 Classification of Errors

Brown (1994) classifies the sources of errors as:

- 1) **Interlingual Errors:** These type of errors occur as a result of the L1 interference.

2) Intralingual Transfer: These errors occur as a result of difficulty in the structure of EFL and they are made by learners at the phase when they are not fully competent in the target language.

Intralingual errors are a reflection of the learners' competence at a particular stage and portray some of the general characteristics of language acquisition. Iamsiu (2014) states that there are four main causes of intralingual errors namely overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized.

1. *Over-generalization:* The learners create a deviant structure based on other structures of the target language. They tend to use one form in one context and apply it to other contexts as well where it should not be applied.

Example: Omar can writes/ They are wish.

2. *Ignorance of rule restrictions:* When the learners fail to follow the rules of the existing structure, they tend to apply rules to the contexts where they are not applicable.

Example: Teachers can motivate the students to work hard by * encourage them.

3. *Incomplete Application of Rules:* The errors occur when the learners fail to use a fully developed structure. They tend to use a statement form instead of a question, or a question word to the statement.

Example: Teacher: Do you study much? Student: Yes, I study much.

False Hypothesis: The learners do not completely understand target language distinctions.

As an example, the form "was" may be understood as the member of the past tense and "is" as a member of present tense.

Example: Sara *is speaks English.

2.6 Significance of Errors

Various researchers have commented on the significance of error analysis. Corder (1974) mentions that Error Analysis is a useful tool in second language learning since it emphasizes the problematic areas of language learning to syllabus designers, and teachers. Highlighting the importance of errors, Corder (1967) points out three significant aspects of errors. Firstly, they educate and inform the teachers about the progress level of the learners, and the area that needs students' attention. Secondly, errors provide information about how language may be acquired, and the techniques the students employ while learning the language. Third, errors prove to be useful for the learners in a way that the committing of errors can be seen as an indicator for them to learn. Light bown and Spada (2000) suggest that when the causes of repeated errors are discussed and shared by the students in a classroom, it proves to be useful for teachers as the students are made aware of the problems. "Errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. So, student errors are valuable feedbacks" (Xie & Jiang, 2007). As proven by research, the finding of learners' errors can be utilized as an effective way of improving grammatical accuracy (Carroll and Swain, 1993). As noted by Jamil and Kamran (2016), "Knowing more about how grammar works is to understand more about how grammar is used and misused". Therefore, students should realize the importance of errors in their writing so as to understand the nature of the errors completely. This process requires English language teachers to be well equipped and more knowledgeable about the students' difficulties in grammar.

According to James (1988) errors in prepositions, tenses, and vocabulary comprise the largest part of errors committed by English language learners. The English learners face problems while

learning the grammatical portions of the Target Language (TL), such as in the use of preposition, subject-verb agreement, articles and the use of correct tense.

Radwan (1988) examined the grammatical and lexical errors. The findings of his study revealed that most of the errors made were related to the use of articles. This was followed by relative-clause errors, genitive errors, number errors, word class errors, and then other miscellaneous errors. Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) studied the written errors of Jordanian students. They observed that the highest percentage of errors made by the learners were tense errors. Abushihab et al (2011) analysed the grammatical errors of students in Jordan. They pointed out that the most problematic areas of the students in paragraph writing were verbs, prepositions, morphological errors, passivisation, articles, and tense.

A six step model was suggested by Gass et al. (2013) to explore the grammatical errors committed by the L2 learners. These six steps include collection of data, identification of errors, classification of errors, quantification of errors, analysis of the sources of errors, and remediation. The present study examined the research data by following the steps of error analysis mentioned above.

3- METHODOLOGY

This section addresses the research design, procedure, participants and the method of data collection. The research design was qualitative throughout the whole study.

3.1 Participants

The population of the study consisted of 30 senior level students chosen randomly from the English Department at Jubail University College.

The learners' had been studying English for 4 years, at JUC where English is a foreign language, and Arabic is the national language.

3.2 Data Collection

The method of data collection applied the documentary method by using the written assessments of the students. In order to find answers to the research questions, essays, written assignments and paragraphs of the 30 participants were examined. This research was constructed on the grammatical errors found in the essays/assignments. The design was chosen to provide a clear framework for collecting, analyzing, discussing, and interpreting data to address the research goals (Creswell and Clark, 2011).

3.3 Data Analysis

The written samples of the selected students were evaluated. The data obtained from the students' work was recorded in descriptive terms using a checklist. Errors were classified into ten types of errors: subject- agreement, word choice, tense and form, plurality, subject verb agreement, tense and form, plurality, sentence fragments, run-on, article, to be verb, word order and connectors. After the identification, the frequency of each kind of error was calculated and the results were displayed in the form of a table to present the number of errors and percentage. The errors were then discussed in detail with examples of each type.

4-INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings of the study. The table below displays the classification and analysis of each type of error committed by the senior students of the English Department at Jubail University College.

Table 4.1. Errors committed by Senior Students of English department at JUC

Error Type	Frequency of Errors	Percentage
Subject-Verb Agreement	48	14%
Verb Tense	35	11%
Word Choice	79	24%
Preposition	46	14%
Plurality	31	9%
Run-on Sentences	23	7%
Article	15	5%
Word Order	13	4%
“To be “ verb	14	4%
Sentence Fragments	28	8%

4.1 Subject-Verb Agreement

From the senior students' written samples, it was observed that most of them were unable to construct correct sentences because of the incorrect usage of the subject-verb. The senior students of the English Department still face problems in subject-verb agreement as explained in the sentences below.

Table 4.2 Subject-Verb Agreement errors

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Subject-Verb Agreement	Obesity <u>lead</u> to an unhealthy life.	Obesity <u>leadsto</u> an unhealthy life.
	Studying in a group <u>develop</u> the communication skills of students.	Studying in a group <u>develops</u> the communication skills of students
Sources: L1 interference		

4.2 Verb Tense

Based on the results of this study, the students were not confident about using the correct verb tenses. As a result, they faced issues in selecting the correct tenses.

Table 4.3 Verb Tense

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Verb Tense	I <u>go</u> to Dubai last year.	I <u>went</u> to Dubai last year.
	Students <u>does not</u> realize how dangerous it is to plagiarize.	Students <u>do not</u> realize how dangerous it is to plagiarize.
Sources: Inadequate understanding about grammatical rules		

4.3 Word Choice

Among all types of grammatical errors pointed out in this study, the most common kind of error was word choice. Most of the senior level students used inappropriate vocabulary.

Table 4.4 Word Choice

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Word Choice	Students should always manage <u>there</u> time carefully.	Students should always manage <u>their</u> time carefully.
	Maria is <u>similarly</u> to her sister.	Maria is <u>similar</u> to her sister.
Sources: L1 interference		

4.4 Preposition

A large number of students displayed their inadequate knowledge regarding the correct use of prepositions.

Table 4.5 Preposition

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Preposition	It depends <u>to</u> the teacher.	It depends <u>on</u> the teacher.
	I felt proud <u>in</u> myself.	I felt proud <u>of</u> myself.
Sources: L1 interference		

4.5 Plurality

The frequency of errors in plurality was comparatively low as only 35 errors were reported in students' samples.

Table 4.6 Plurality

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Plurality	<u>Student</u> who copy or plagiarize assignments should be punished.	<u>Students</u> who copy or plagiarize assignments should be punished.
	A lot of <u>family</u> travel during the summer break.	A lot of <u>families</u> travel during the summer break.
Sources: L1 interference, Intralingual interference		

4.6 Run-on Sentences

As a result of inadequate knowledge about grammatical concepts, 23 errors were found in the student samples.

Table 4.7 Run-on Sentences

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Run-on Sentences	Online education is cheaper people can upload their courses online.	Online education is cheaper, <u>and</u> people can upload their courses online.
	Students don't have enough time to finish their homework they plagiarize.	Students don't have enough time to finish their homework, <u>so</u> they plagiarize.
Sources: Inadequate knowledge about grammatical rules		

4.7 Article

Misuse of articles were found in the student samples. This misuse occurs a result of confusion between "a" and "an".

Table 4.8 Article

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Article	For many reasons, students want to get <u>a</u> best grades in college.	For many reasons, students want to get <u>the</u> best grades in college.
	This is <u>the</u> beautiful painting.	This is <u>a</u> beautiful painting.
Sources: L1 interference, Overgeneralization		

4.8 Word Order

In the student samples, 13 errors were based on word order. The senior students found problems in syntactically arranging the words in sentences.

Table 4.9 Word Order

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Word Order	I go to the gym <u>morning early</u> .	I go to the gym <u>early morning</u> .
	Before the exam, you should <u>all information memorize</u> .	Before the exam, you should <u>memorize all information</u> .
Sources: L1 interference		

4.9 To Be Verb

For Saudi students, the use of "to be verb" is challenging because in Arabic, forms of *be* are not used in affirmative sentences and in questions when referring about the present or things that are valid all the time.

Table 4.10 The Verb “To Be”

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
To Be Verb	Omar’s parents ___ not satisfied with his progress in studies.	Omar’s parents are not satisfied with his progress in studies.
	Turn your mobile off while <u>you</u>	Turn your mobile off while <u>you are studying.</u>
Sources: Intralingual interference		

4.10 Sentence Fragments

This is one of the most serious grammatical committed by the senior level students at JUC. Due to lack of knowledge, in most of the situations, the subject or the verb was omitted.

Table 4.11 Sentence Fragment

Error Type	Identification of Error	Correction
Sentence Fragments	Using a list of important topics for the subject.	Using a list of important topics for the subject <u>proves to be helpful.</u>
	Kids who watch TV more than usual.	Kids who watch TV more than usual <u>get bad grades.</u>
Sources: L1 interference, Inadequate knowledge about rules		

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study suggest that the errors of the senior level students of the English Department of Jubail University College can be minimized through the following:

Generally, most of the English grammatical mistakes result from L1 interference. The majority of the students tend to use EFL through the class activities. However, when the Saudi students fail to use English effectively, the result is often in the form of interlingual transfer. Therefore, contrastive analysis of Arabic and English along with error analysis should be introduced in the early semesters at Jubail University College to inform the students regarding these errors. Moreover, teachers should teach the grammatical rules implicitly in order to avoid language interference and to create a positive impact towards language learning.

Secondly, it is evident from the intralingual transfer mistakes of the senior level students that the main problem is the lack of practice. Although the senior level students of the English Department are familiar with the grammatical concepts and rules, their mistakes demonstrate that the teaching of grammar at Jubail University College lacks enough practice. Therefore, English teachers should design a remedial program that emphasizes on grammar for real use. This method of teaching grammar will definitely leave a lasting impression in the minds of the students.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at identifying, classifying and analyzing the grammatical errors made by the senior level students of the English Department at Jubail University College. As presented in the data, there are ten kinds of grammatical errors made by the students. In most of the situations, errors resulted from what Richards (1973) suggested as overgeneralization and inadequate knowledge of grammatical rules. This study can address certain issues related to how the faculty

members at Jubail University College can assist their students by understanding their problem areas in grammar. Error analysis illustrated that the English teachers at Jubail University College should motivate their students to minimize their grammatical errors by modifying their teaching methods. They should implement effective teaching techniques based on the needs of their learners.

The first point to consider is to motivate the students to develop some good writing habits through the Writing Centre. Through this phase, the teachers should continuously provide guidance to the students and enable them to learn and practice English grammar step by step.

Secondly, in order to deal with Arab language interference, the teachers should explain the differences between Arabic and English to their students. Moreover, the students should be encouraged to think in English by practicing the sentence patterns, designs and other major areas in English grammar.

The use of modern technology can also help the students learn and use English in a natural way. The methods of teaching should be modified to a certain degree. In order to increase the students' interest in learning and their ability to use English efficiently, the grammar component should be included in the teaching scenario in an appropriate manner.

The results of this study prove to be quite significant despite the fact that it was conducted on a very small scale. They illustrate the possibility of faculty using different teaching techniques in order to assist learners in applying grammatical concepts.

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