

Error Analysis of Written English Paragraphs by Jordanian Undergraduate Students: A Case Study

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Abstract

The present study aims at analyzing in a corpus of 26 English paragraphs written by 26 participants. The participants are from different academic majors who are studying at Ajloun National University in Jordan. The participants were 16 female students and 10 male students. All of the participants come from non-English speaking environment and hardly communicate in English outside the university campus. The instruments used in the present study was the participants' written paragraphs. All the errors committed by the students were checked and categorized into different categorizations. The findings of the study reveal that that the students of Ajloun National University have committed several errors such as: spelling, word order, and subject-verb agreement. The results also showed that the most frequent error committed by the students was the improper use of English articles. In light of the obtained results, several recommendations and pedagogical implications were suggested in order to help EFL teachers in their attempt to reduce the difficulties concerning writing English paragraphs among English learners.

Keywords: Error analysis, Writing paragraphs in English, Grammatical errors.

1. Introduction

English is one of the most dominant languages in the world. It is used widely in many fields and industries such as politics, science, arts, tourism, and economics. In order to understand what happening in the world, one should learn English language (Zawahreh, 2012). Brown (2000) states that languages consist of four main skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. Learners should be exposed to the all mentioned skills to successfully master English language (Brown, 2000). In the writing skill, learners produce sentences in a particular order and connected together in specific ways. However, learners encounter many difficulties when trying to produce sentences or to write English paragraphs. Therefore, written production is one of the most difficult tasks for many ESL/EFL learners (Harris and Cunningham, 1994).

In addition, mastering writing skill is a complicated process as it involves a number of backward and forward movements between the ideas of the writer and the written text (Harris & Cunningham, 1994). Murcia and Olshtain (2000) claim that writing skill requires a high level of language control, problem-solving form, generating ideas, planning, goal setting, monitoring, and assessing what has been produced. Therefore, writing skill is still rated to be a hard task for most first and foreign language learners (Ingels, 2006). Taking into account the aforementioned points, it is important to understand the learners' problems in writing skill in order to improve the quality of second or foreign language writing (Hammad, 2012).

To better understanding the learners' problems in composing sentences, Error Analysis (EA) become a preferred tool of second or foreign language analysis. Error analysis is one of the best tools of linguistic studies that concentrate on the learners' errors. Error analysis tool compares the errors made by the learners in the target language and within the target language itself (Zawahreh, 2012). The error analysis field was first established in the 1960s by Corder and his colleagues. Corder (1967) points out that error analysis encompasses two types: the theoretical type and the applied type. The theoretical type deals with understanding what and how learners learn a second

or a foreign language. The applied type focuses on enabling learners to learn more effectively through using the knowledge of his language for pedagogical purposes (Corder, 1967).

In Jordan, English is considered as a foreign language in the Jordanian education system in both primary and secondary schools and it is a compulsory subject for all university students (Al-Khasawneh, 2013). However, the English proficiency among Jordanian students is relatively low despite learning English for many years. Jordanian students are still weak in English, particularly in their writing skills (Zawahreh, 2012; Al-Khasawneh, 2013). Previous research works on written tasks of EFL learners have revealed that their written works are full of errors. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the studies carried out on the errors committed by Jordanian university students when writing English paragraphs are very limited. Consequently, this study comes to shed light on the errors made by Jordanian university students at Ajloun National University (ANU). This study seeks to identify the types of errors made by Jordanian university students and the frequency of committing these types. by achieving the purposes of this study, Jordanian teachers and lecturers would be in a good position to recognize the writing errors of their students and attempting to overcome these errors by applying the suitable teaching methods.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main objectives of the present research are as follows:

- To investigate the writing errors performed by Jordanian university students at Ajloun National University when writing English paragraphs.
- To identify the frequency of writing errors performed by Jordanian university students at Ajloun National University when writing English paragraphs.

1.3 Research Questions

The present study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What type of writing errors committed by Jordanian university students at Ajloun National University when writing English paragraphs?

2) How frequent do writing errors occur in the students' written paragraphs?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The results of the present study could be beneficial in many ways. It identifies the causes which stand beyond the students' low achievement in English. By doing this, students would be aware of the errors they commit when writing English paragraphs, and they would be in a better position to avoid committing these errors in the future. Error analysis assists teachers to identify the common language errors systematically, so they can pay more attention on these types of errors. Generally, the present study informs students, teachers, and curriculum designers about the types of writing errors committed by students. Therefore, proper strategies, techniques, teaching methods could be taken into consideration to avoid the committed errors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Writing

After the thorough review of the past literature, it is obvious that there were several attempts to define 'writing'. Byrne (1996) defines writing as encoding of a certain message or idea through writing it in a shape of a sequence of sentences put together in a systematic way. The way of ordering the written sentences should include some conscious mental effort such as making notes, drafting, and revising (Byrne, 1996). Furthermore, White and Arndt (1991) define 'writing' as "a form of problem-solving which involves such process as generating ideas, discovering a voice with which to write, planning, goal setting, monitoring and evaluating what is going to be written, and searching with language with which to express exact meanings"(p.3). In light of the aforementioned definitions, the current study defines writing as a mental process which includes generating ideas, writing these ideas in ordered sentences, and revising these ideas for evaluation purpose. Good writing must include a sufficient knowledge of grammatical rules, lexical items, and logical connections.

2.2 Error Analysis (EA)

A number of previous research provided different definitions for 'error analysis'. Crystal (1999, p. 108) defines EA in language teaching and learning as "the study of the unacceptable forms

produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language”. Moreover, James (2001, p. 62), points out that EA refers to “the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance”. For AbiSamra (2003), EA is defined as that kind of linguistic analysis that concentrates on errors performed by ESL or EFL learners. Ridha (2012, p. 26) views EA as "the process to observe, analyze, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second languages and then to reveal the systems operated by learner".

According to Hasyim (2002, p.43) error analysis is carried out in order to:

- (a) find out how well someone knows a language,
- (b) find out how a person learns a language, and
- (c) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials.

2.3 Classification of Error Analysis

According to Richard and Schmidt (2002), language errors can be classified into two main parts: interlingual and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors can be detected as transfer errors caused by a learners’ mother tongue merits such as lexical errors, grammatical errors, or pragmatic errors. Intralingual errors can be attributed to the ignorance of rule restrictions, imperfect implementation of rules, and false concepts assumed which all lead to overgeneralization (Richard and Schmidt, 2002). Ellis (1996) states that overgeneralization errors are caused when learners provide irregular structures unlike the target language structures, whereas unawareness of rule restrictions is related to the rule implementation in improper contexts. Ellis (1996) also added that imperfect implementation of rules appears when learners fail to evolve a full structure, whilst false concepts assumed arises when learners misunderstand the distinction in the target language.

2.4 Benefits of Error Analysis

Error analysis is significant for all the parts involved in learning process (Kwok, 1998). Corder (1974) affirms the significance of identifying errors committed by second or foreign language learners. He states that,

The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process (Corder, 1974, p.125).

He adds that, Remedial exercises could be designed and focus more attention on the trouble spots. It is the learner who determines what the input is. The teacher can present a linguistic form, but this is not necessarily the input, but simply what is available to be learned (Corder, 1974, p.125).

Error analysis is not only useful to students, teachers, and curriculum designers, but it is also beneficial to researchers through showing them the strategies learners employ to learn a target language. In addition, error analysis identifies the types of errors committed by learners and attributes the reasons of making those errors (Nation and Newton, 2001). To conclude, error analysis helps linguists to facilitate second or foreign language learners through training teachers and assisting them to identify and categorize learners' writing errors, as well as helping them employing appropriate strategies (Kwok, 1998).

2.5 Previous Studies on Writing Error Analysis

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the writing errors committed by students. Simbwa (1987) investigated the causes of syntactic errors in the English essays among Taiwan univeristy students. The sample of the study contained 94 males and 14 females' students of the academic year 1985. The participants were chosen randomly from four schools in Kambala (the capital city of Uganda). The results of the study showed that the predominant errors among male students were prepositions, pronouns and tense, the most predominant error type for females was prepositions.

Salebi (2004) investigated Saudi college students' perception of their errors in written English. The participants of the study were 32 Saudi females aged 22–24 years old who were in the fourth level at the Department of Foreign Languages at King Faisal University. They had attended an error analysis course where they were taught how to identify, classify, and describe errors in

English committed by second-language learners. The research used two instruments: a test and students' comments on their errors. The results of this study revealed that the percentage of subject-verb agreement was 44.03%. Also, it showed that the percentage of errors caused during translation from Arabic was 18.75%. Further, it showed that the main reason for errors was the difficulty of the target language, which resulted in generalization of rules. In the first composition, 31, 58% (omission = 5 times and misinformation = 21 times) in the second composition, and 40, 62% (omission = 3 and misinformation = 16 times) in the third composition.

Zawaherh (2012) investigated the writing errors committed by tenth-grade students who were studying at Ajloun governorate schools-Jordan. The sample of the study consisted of 350 students selected randomly from a group of schools in Ajloun. They were asked to write an essay about "a journey to the ancient city of Jerash in Jordan" in an ordinary English-language exercise in the class. The results of the study showed that the most dominant error among tenth-grade students in Ajloun schools was lack of agreement between the subject and the main verb. Also, the results of the study suggested that the cause of students' writing errors might be attributed to Arabic interference.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study aims at investigating the types and frequency of writing errors committed by Ajloun National University students. The study adopts the quantitative research design in order to achieve its objectives. Nunan (2001) defines quantitative research as techniques employed to collect a large number of data or any measurable things. In addition, quantitative research enables us to summarize vast resources of data and helps in comparisons with other studies (Kruger, 2003).

3.2 Participants

Twenty-six students (16 female and 10 male students) who are studying at Ajloun National University participated in this study. All of students had their primary education at public schools, in which Arabic was the main medium of instruction. English was taught as a compulsory subject within the school curriculum. The students come from different majors being taught at Ajloun

National University (5= English major students, 14= Psychological Counseling, 7= Special Education). The students' age ranges from 20 to 42 years.

3.3 Research Instrument

The main source of data used to find answers to the research questions is the written paragraphs of 26 participants who are studying at Ajloun National University. The students were asked to write a short paragraph about "The importance of education". Then, the written paragraphs were collected in order to be analyzed.

3.4 Research Procedures

All of the 26 participants were administered a writing assignment involved paragraph writing. The participants were required to write a short paragraph about "The importance of education" within a period of 20 minutes and a minimum of 80 words. The corpus used in this study is collected from written paragraphs of 26 students who are enrolled in one of the English compulsory subjects (i.e. English language skills, 102).

3.5 Data Analysis

The data collected for this study were analyzed according to Chanquoy (2001) classification of writing errors. These errors include the following:

- 1) Spelling errors: this category deals with the errors related to the orthography errors.
- 2) Grammatical errors: this category discusses the errors related to gender and number, agreement of nouns, verbs and adjectives, and subject-verb agreement.
- 3) Punctuation errors: this category deals with punctuation and capitalization errors.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results of the current study. The results will be revealed according to the research questions posed earlier in this study.

4.1 Types of Errors Committed by Students when Writing English Paragraphs

This section intends to show the results which aim to give answers to the first research question: What type of writing errors committed by Jordanian university students at Ajloun National

University when writing English paragraphs? The results obtained from this study revealed that the students committed many writing errors when writing English paragraphs (see table 1).

Table 1: Writing Errors Committed by Students when Writing English Paragraphs

Type of Writing Error	
1.	Wrong Use of Articles
2.	Wrong Use of Prepositions
3.	Subject-Verb Agreement
4.	Word Order
5.	Verb Tense
6.	Using Singular and Plural Forms
7.	Spelling
8.	Capitalization
9.	Fragment
10.	Demonstratives
11.	Irregular Verbs

As shown in table 1, the results revealed that Ajloun National University students have committed several errors when writing English paragraphs. These errors include: wrong use of articles, wrong use of prepositions, subject-verb agreement, word order, verb tense, using singular and plural forms, spelling, capitalization, fragment, demonstratives, and irregular verbs.

4.2 Frequency of Writing Errors Committed by the Students

This section presents the results which aim to give answers to the second research question: How frequent do writing errors occur in the students' written paragraphs? The results obtained from this study revealed that the students committed writing errors in a frequent way (see table 2).

Table 2: Frequency of Writing Errors Committed by the Students

	Type of Writing Error	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Wrong Use of Articles	57	13.3%
2.	Wrong Use of Prepositions	53	12.4%
3.	Subject-Verb Agreement	52	12.3%
4.	Word Order	44	10.3%
5.	Verb Tense	43	10%
6.	Singular and Plural Forms	40	9.4%
7.	Spelling	38	8.9%
8.	Capitalization	31	7.2%
9.	Fragment	27	6.4%
10.	Demonstratives	24	5.6%
11.	Irregular Verbs	18	4.2%
	Total	427	100%

As shown in table 2, the students committed several errors when writing English paragraphs. The most frequent error was “Wrong use of articles, while the least frequent performed error was “Irregular verbs”. Table 3 shows the frequency of each error committed by the students along with the identification and correction of the error.

Table 3: Most Frequent Errors and Examples of Errors

Error Classification and Definition	Error Identification	Error Correction
1. Use of Articles: An article is a word that is used with a noun to indicate the type of	I am studying at the Ajloun University	I am studying at Ajloun University

reference being made by the noun.		
2.		
3. Use of Prepositions: A preposition is a word that shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence.	Education is very important <u>at</u> my life.	Education is very important <u>in</u> my life.
4. Subject-Verb Agreement: Wrong combination of subject and verb.	He <u>study</u> doctor of philosophy	He <u>is studying</u> doctor of philosophy
5. Word order: is the syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence, clause, or phrase.	<u>Language specially English</u>	<u>Specially English language.</u>
6. Verb Tense: Error of constructing a verb.	I will <u>following</u> my study to pass	I will <u>follow</u> my study to pass
7. Singular and Plural Forms: A mistake with number (singular and plural).	I like to work many <u>job</u>	I like to work many <u>jobs</u>
8. Spelling: the act or process of writing words by using the letters conventionally accepted for their formation.	I want to be a <u>translatior</u>	I want to be a <u>translator</u>

<p>9. Capitalization: writing a word with it is first letter as a capital letter and the remaining letters in small letter.</p>	<p><u>education</u> is very important in our life</p>	<p><u>Education</u> is very important in our life</p>
<p>10. Fragment: The sentences misses a verb or a subject so it becomes disconnected.</p>	<p>English_very important to us to survive</p>	<p>English <u>is</u> very important to us to survive</p>
<p>11. Demonstratives: The demonstratives this, that, these, those, show where an object or person is in relation to the speaker.</p>	<p>These <u>thing</u> make me hopeful</p>	<p>These <u>things</u> make me hopeful</p>
<p>12. Irregular Verbs: verbs in which the past tense is not formed by adding the usual -ed ending.</p>	<p>I <u>writed</u> many CVs before</p>	<p>I <u>wrote</u> many CVs before</p>

5. Discussion of the Results

The present study aimed at investigating the writing errors committed by Ajloun National University students when writing English paragraphs. The results revealed that the students committed writing errors such as: use of articles, use of prepositions, subject-verb agreement, word order, spelling and fragment. These results concur with the previous results mentioned in the literature review section (Simbwa, 1987; Salebi, 2004; Zawahreh, 2012). Abdellatif (2007) claims that the reason of committing writing errors among non-native speakers of English is the lack of knowledge of second or foreign language structure. Hammad (2012) attributed the errors committed by students when writing in English to the insufficient exposure to English language input. Furthermore, the results of the present study showed that wrong use of articles, wrong use of prepositions, subject-verb agreement, word order, and verb tense were among the most frequent

errors committed by the students. These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Simbwa, 1987; Salebi, 2004; Zawahreh, 2012). One reason for these results might be related to Arabic interference and negative transfer of the mother tongue rules (Martin, 2008, Ferris, 2009). Mourtaga (2010) points out that the main reason of writing errors committed by second or foreign language learners is the lack of practicing English writing. Writing practice under guidance and encouragement could enhance the students' performance in English writing. Hence, it is advisable for Jordanian EFL university students to practice English writing frequently so that they can enhance their writing performance.

6. Conclusion

The current study aimed at investigating the types and frequency of writing errors committed by Ajloun National University students when writing English paragraphs. The findings of the present study reveal that the students committed several writing errors which were basically grammatical errors. Regarding their writing performance, the students show insufficient vocabulary knowledge and many sentences were incomprehensible. The students faced difficulties in employing the rules of English language structure. Thus, we can conclude that the students faced problems in acquiring the rules of English language. This study has also shed light on the importance of Error Analysis (EA) to identify the writing errors committed by learners. Error analysis can identify the writing errors and problems faced by students, so that they become aware of the writing errors they commit and pay attention to these errors. In addition, knowing writing errors is beneficial for teachers as it provides them the necessary information about language learning problems which can be employed to design and prepare effective teaching materials. Predicating writing errors would help teachers to be well-prepared to help students overcome or avoid committing writing errors.

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