

Syntactic Errors in Saudi EFL Learners' Writings: Types, Sources, and Remedial Strategies

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الملخص

تبحثُ هذه الدراسة النوعية الأخطاء النحوية الظاهرة المتداولة بين متعلّمي اللّغة الإنجليزية السعوديين في الامتحانات الورقية، وتكشف عن مصادر تلك الأخطاء، مُقترحةً استراتيجيات علاجية لها. لتحقيق هذه الأهداف، تمّ اختيار نموذج تحليل الأخطاء لـ (Gass & Selinker, 2008) إطاراً لهذه الدراسة، حيث تمّ جمع الأخطاء النحوية المتداولة من عيّنة مكوّنة من سبعين ورقة اختبار نصفي ونهائي لخمسين طالباً من قسم اللّغة الإنجليزية بجامعة بيشة بالمملكة العربية السعودية. كما تمّ حصرُ الأخطاء الشائعة وتصنيفها وتحليلها تحليلًا نوعيًا بناءً على أنواعها ومصادرها، واقتراح استراتيجيات عملية لتقليل تلك الأخطاء. علاوةً على ذلك، أُجريت مقابلات مُنظّمة مع عشرة أساتذة جامعيين ممّن لديهم خبرة متراكمة لأكثر من ثماني سنوات في تدريس مقرّرات اللّغة الإنجليزية في نفس الجامعة. أظهرت النتائج أنّ من الأخطاء النحوية لدى الطلاب الاستخدام غير المناسب لصيغ الفعل، عدم توافق الفعل مع الفاعل، غياب الفاعل، واستبدال بعض أجزاء الكلام بأخرى. وترجع أسباب هذه الأخطاء بشكل أساسي إلى عوامل التداخل اللّغوي مع اللّغة الأم، وكذلك عوامل اللّغة الثانية المتمثّلة ب (التعميمات المُفرطة، المعرفة غير الكافية بقواعد اللّغة الثانية، والاستخدام غير المناسب لتلك القواعد). إنّ استكشاف هذه الأخطاء، وتحليلها يساعد الأساتذة الجامعيين وواضعي السياسات، وكذلك الطلاب على اتّخاذ إجراءات فورية لمعالجتها.

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the overt syntactic errors made by Saudi EFL learners on paper-based exams. It also reveals the sources of these errors and suggests remedial strategies. To achieve these objectives, the error analysis model of Gass and Selinker (2008) was chosen as a framework for this study in which the data were collected from naturally occurring errors in a sample of 70 mid-term and final exam papers of 50 learners from the English Department at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. Specifically, common errors were identified, classified, quantified, and qualitatively analyzed based on their types and sources. Remedies for minimizing these errors were also suggested. Furthermore, structured interviews were conducted with ten teachers who have accumulated experience of more than eight years in teaching English courses at the same university. The results showed that among the students' syntactic errors were the inappropriate application of verb forms, subject-verb agreement, the subject, parts of speech, and substitution of content words. The causes of these errors were rooted in the students' interlingual (first language interference) and intralingual (overgeneralization, inadequate knowledge of second language rules, and inappropriate application of such rules) factors. Detecting and analyzing these actual errors helps teachers, policymakers, and students take immediate actions to remedy them.

Keywords: interlingual; intralingual; remedial strategies; Saudi EFL learners; syntactic errors; writing skill

Introduction

Writing is an indispensable skill for expressing opinions and thoughts effectively. Batstone (1994) emphasized that language without grammar can be confusing and can lead to the same communication problems as grammatical errors in writing and speaking. Likewise, Aleraini (2020) argued that "successful second language acquisition and mastery comprise a recognition of different grammatical constructions in the target language" (p. 143). Learners are expected to make errors regardless of whether the language being learned is a Second Language (L2) or a Foreign Language (FL). Hence, making errors is considered normal in language learning.

Scholars made a distinction between errors and mistakes in language learning (Brown, 2014; Corder, 1973; James, 2013). Brown (2014) demonstrated that an error is a "noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker" and is not 'self-corrected', while a mistake can be "repaired if the deviation is pointed out to the speaker" and is correctable (pp. 249-250). Therefore, this study accounts for overt errors that learners make inadvertently and that are not self-corrected. To analyze errors in language learning, Corder (1967) coined the term Error Analysis (EA), a basic strategy that helps teachers and linguists identify students' shortcomings and work on them accordingly. EA is a branch of applied linguistics (Corder, 1981; Gass & Selinker, 2008; James, 2013) since it is concerned with students' language-related issues. It is an approach used systematically to identify and analyze the errors made by language learners. James (2013) defined EA as "the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language" (p. 1). James (2013) also stated that EA is of relevance "to a good many important and vexatious issues" among them the issues that face people who speak English as an L2 or FL" (p. 25).

The present study mainly consists of two important parts: theoretical and practical. The theoretical part highlights the research problem, objectives, significance, and research questions. Furthermore, the literature review outlines the importance of the EA, models of the EA, sources of the errors, and remedial strategies. Previous studies are also examined and related to the research topic. The practical part addresses the research design, respondents, research instruments, data collection and analysis procedures, and results and discussion. The study ends up with a conclusion summarizing the most important findings and recommendations.

Research Problem

Public school students in Saudi Arabia take English as a compulsory subject from the fourth grade and, more recently, they study English from the first grade. However, it has been noticed that some university students do not understand the basics of English, which indicates that there is a gap in English teaching/learning between the school and higher education phases. In other words, English is not given the attention it deserves in school (Farooq & Wahid, 2019). English-major students at colleges usually study language skills and advanced courses in linguistics, applied linguistics, literature, and translation.

Compared to the simultaneous speaking skills, students in writing practices have more time to think about sentences before writing them on paper. In other words, advanced-level students' writings are expected to be error-free and well-formed; however, they apply the grammatical rules and sentence structures improperly. Specifically, they tend to produce unacceptable forms, i.e., syntactic errors, in the exam papers. In addition, students' writing performance is far from satisfying course instructors and achieving course objectives. Course instructors run into these vexing errors that should have been resolved in high school long before university admission. Moreover, course instructors, especially those teaching advanced

courses, are sometimes unable to teach or revise language basics. They are hampered by time constraints and instructed to give strict priority to implementing the items listed in the course descriptions. Therefore, the researcher believes that this alarming issue is worth addressing and has immediate importance for bridging the gap between expectations and reality.

Research Objectives

With this in mind, the present study aims to identify Saudi EFL learners' overt syntactic errors committed in exam papers. Moreover, it uncovers the sources of these errors and suggests remedial strategies for minimizing such errors. To achieve these objectives, Gass and Selinker's (2008) model of EA was applied in which the data were collected from a corpus of the students' exam-paper samples. The common errors identified were classified based on their types. Furthermore, the sources and reasons behind these errors were identified, and possible remedial strategies were proposed depending on the errors committed and the course instructors' recommendations.

Research Significance

This study is significant because writing skills are among the most important skills that should be mastered by language learners. They help learners communicate their ideas and thoughts effectively. The study deals with an alarming issue that should be addressed at the school level. Corder (1981) confirmed that "it is important that the teacher should be able not only to detect and describe errors linguistically but also understand the psychological reasons for their occurrence" (p. 35). Therefore, the systematic analysis of learning-related errors and the reasons behind their occurrence lead stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of students' learning process and work accordingly. Moreover, students need to be able to form grammatically correct sentences. This competency is demanded at any given point during their learning career and after entering the work environment. Hence, they need to be exposed to more writing tasks and activities to produce syntactically correct sentences. This study focuses on the applied error analysis of students' errors, the objective of which "is purely pragmatic and pedagogical such as organizing remedial courses and devising appropriate materials and strategies of teaching based on the findings of error analysis" (Keshavarz, 2012, p. 64).

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the common syntactic errors Saudi EFL learners commit in their exam papers?
2. What are the possible sources of these errors?
3. How can such errors be minimized?

Literature Review

Error Analysis: An Overview and Significance

Previously, errors were considered unwelcome and a hindrance to the language learning process. With the advent of the EA approach, as a reaction to contrastive analysis, making errors came to be seen as motivating and an integral part of the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) process. The EA approach added intralingual factors that were neglected in contrastive analysis to L1 interference as the main source of errors. Scholars acknowledged that making errors is a strategy and an indicator of learners' progress in language learning, which in turn helps teachers identify the students' linguistic areas that need to be reinforced (Almahameed & Al-Shaikhli, 2017; Brown, 2014; Candling, 2001; Corder, 1967, 1974, 1981; Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 1983, 2008; Hendrickson, 1987; Sompong, 2014). Corder (1967) argued that

errors are valuable sources of information, not only for students, but for teachers and researchers too: they provide teachers with indications about the progress of the students; linguists can understand how learners acquire or learn the language; and learners can get resources to learn and develop their language learning. Supporting Corder's positive viewpoint of errors, Brown (2014) illustrated that the students' SLA process will be hindered if they neither make errors nor receive any feedback. Additionally, Hendrickson (1987) emphasized that errors are "signals that actual learning is taking place, they can indicate students' progress and success in language learning" (p. 357). Furthermore, Gass and Selinker (2008) described errors as "red flags" that warn and provide "evidence of the state of a learner's knowledge of the L2" (p. 102).

Making errors is an inevitable part of the learning process, especially when the linguistic systems of L1 and L2 are different. Students can learn from their errors with the help of their teachers' corrective feedback. Errors provide teachers with evidence of the learners' linguistic progress and the linguistic areas that should be reinforced. Al-husban (2018) highlighted the importance of EA in identifying "what students still need to learn; and how to improve their process of learning; the strategies and methods they should use when learning the language; why students add, omit, use wrong forms or words, or disorder structures and sentences; and how to eliminate the use of the mother language in learning a second language" (p. 29). Therefore, errors need to be analyzed to identify their types and sources, and to devise remedial strategies so that students can avoid those errors in advanced levels of language learning.

Models of Error Analysis

This section reviews three different models of EA: Corder's (1967) model, Ellis's (1994) model, and Gass and Selinker's model (2008). Corder's (1967) model went through the stages of collection of a sample learner language through determining the sample that will be utilized and collecting the data from that sample. The second step described the identified errors by classifying errors into different categories. The third step explained these errors by determining their sources.

Ellis (1994) created a four-step model in which a corpus of language is selected and errors are identified, classified, and explained based on their types. Gass and Selinker (2008) developed a six-stage model in which the data are collected and errors are identified, classified based on their types, and quantified based on their frequency. Moreover, the sources of these errors were analyzed and remedial strategies were proposed. These three models are similar in handling EA, but differ somewhat in the sequential steps of dealing with errors, causes of these errors, and the remedial strategies that could minimize such errors.

Sources of Errors

The EA approach added the intralingual factors that were ignored in contrastive analysis to the L1 interference as the main sources of errors. Sompong (2014) unveiled that error analysis "can reveal the sources of these errors and the causes of their frequent occurrence" (p. 110). Scholars classified the sources of errors into interlingual and intralingual factors (Brown, 2014; Corder, 1967; Farooq & Wahid, 2019; Noor, 1996; Richards, 1974; Selinker, 1974). Following Corder's (1967, 1971) taxonomy of the sources of errors, Richards (1974) stated that the learner language errors resulted from three sources: Interlingual, intralingual, and errors caused by faulty teaching techniques.

On the one hand, James (2013) confirmed that it is "impossible to deny totally the effects of MT on TL, since they are ubiquitously and patently obvious" (p. 5). Corder (1971)

pointed out that interlingual errors occur when the learner's native language patterns, structures, and rules are carried over to the TL. They stem from the L1 interference, in which language learners transfer L1 habits into L2, despite the linguistic differences. Moreover, word-for-word translation plays a negative role in error generation. On the other hand, intralingual errors arise from the target language (TL) use and the learning process itself. Overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and hypothesized false concepts were identified as causes of the intralingual errors (Collins, 2018; Corder, 1967; Richards, 1974). Farooq and Wahid (2019) revealed that syntactic errors can be attributed to many factors, such as L1 interference, insufficient knowledge of basic grammatical rules, little or no knowledge of parts of speech, inappropriate use of the dictionary, and overgeneralization. Moreover, students' carelessness and hastiness, especially during exams, can play a role in making errors. Mohammed (2012) conducted a study to identify the sources of errors in Yemeni EFL students' usage of relative clause. He found that most of these errors were interlingual with special reference to intralingual.

Previous Studies

Noor (1996) reviewed several studies to identify the common syntactic errors made by Arabic-speaking learners of English. He found that the most common syntactic errors were related to prepositions, verbs, articles, conjunctions, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and sentence structure. L1 interference was the most common source of these errors.

Almahameed and Al-Shaikhli (2017) investigated the EFL Jordanians' salient syntactic and semantic errors in essay writing. The results showed that the respondents' syntactic errors were related to the verb-tense agreement, auxiliaries, conjunctions, word order, resumptive pronouns, null-subject, double-subject, as well as superlative, comparative, and possessive pronouns. Verb-tense errors were the most frequent ones.

Many related studies were conducted among EFL learners at Saudi universities (Ababneh, 2017; Alghammas & Alhuwaydi, 2020; Al-khatib, 2012; Al-Sindy, 1994; Farooq & Wahid, 2019; Hafiz et al., 2018; Khatteer, 2019; Othman, 2017; Sawalmeh, 2013; Younes & Albalaw 2015). They aimed to investigate the syntactic errors committed by Saudi EFL university students in written compositions from which the data were extracted. They also identified the sources of errors made, and the remedies for these errors. Most of the above-mentioned studies found that the common syntactic errors were mainly related to the incorrect use of the verb forms (verb tenses, subject-verb agreement), content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), and functional words (articles, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns). Furthermore, these studies pointed out that the sources of these errors could be ascribed to the interlingual factors, namely L1 negative transfer, followed by the intralingual factors of overgeneralization, simplification, limited knowledge of L2, improper application of rules, and the learners' lack of seriousness and focus. Sompong (2014) stated that "once the sources and causes are revealed, it is possible to determine the remedy, as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instructions" (p. 110). Therefore, as part of the remedial strategies, it is proposed that the teachers' primary responsibility is to increase the students' syntactic awareness by filling the linguistic gaps that impacted negatively on students, providing feedback on the students' errors, showing the differences between the linguistic systems of L1 and L2, exposing students to a variety of writing activities and tasks, and employing effective teaching methods tailored to the students' learning needs. Additionally, students were urged to master the syntactic rules and practice writing skills regularly.

To summarize this section, one can state that making errors is inevitable and healthy for language learners, teachers, and linguists. The most common syntactic errors were generally

related to verb forms, subject-verb agreement, and content and functional word classes. Othman (2017) attributed the sources of errors to the intralingual factors. Except for Othman's study, the reviewed studies traced the errors back to the interlingual errors, i.e., students' L1 negative interference, followed by the intralingual errors of overgeneralization, inadequate knowledge, and improper application of rules. Furthermore, errors could be overcome with the help of teachers, who can raise students' syntactic awareness of the considerable parallels and disparities between the linguistic systems. Learners also have a role in minimizing intralingual errors by avoiding overgeneralization and simplification, and applying the correct and complete rules in frequent writing activities.

Methodology

Research Design

This descriptive qualitative case study employed a content analysis technique derived from Gass and Selinker's (2008) matrix of EA as a framework for the study, in which the data were collected from a sample of 70 mid-term and final paper-based exams of 50 students. Students' erroneous responses to open-ended and multiple-choice questions and syntactic analysis of sentences using tree diagrams were detected based on the deviation from the syntactic rules. The errors identified were classified based on their types, qualitatively analyzed, and supported with a comprehensive list of examples for each category. The frequency of common errors was also counted and represented in tables. The errors were traced back to their expected sources depending on intralingual and interlingual factors and in the light of the errors detected and the teachers' perspectives. Finally, applicable remedial strategies were devised based on the results elicited from the students' erroneous responses and teachers' perspectives to help students avoid these errors in future writings

Compared to Corder's (1967) model and Ellis' (1995) model of EA, it is noticed that Gass and Selinker's (2008) model is an extension of these models. What is also distinctive with Gass and Selinker's (2008) model is considering the frequency of errors and proposing remedial strategies for such errors. Therefore, it is assumed that this model is suitable to achieve the research objectives.

Participants

The participants, who were purposely chosen, were Saudi English-major students in their second and fourth academic years at the University of Bisha. Their native language is Arabic and their second language is English. They studied English in school for eight years. Among other English courses, they took six compulsory writing courses, namely Writing-1, Writing-2, Writing-3, Writing-4, Writing for Specific Purposes, and Research Methods. These courses focused on improving their writing skills, starting with sentences, paragraphs, short and long essays, and ending with hands-on skills such as personal and business letters, emails, application forms, reports, curriculum vitae, and research proposals and papers, with a view to the work environment. Moreover, ten teachers, who have had cumulative experience of more than eight years in teaching several courses at the University of Bisha, participated in structured interviews.

Research Instruments

Making errors is "habitual and can be found in any text written by a learner of a foreign language" (Al-Sindy, 1994, p. 42), regardless of time restrictions. Therefore, the data were collected from a corpus of 70 samples of midterm and final exam papers of the Syntax, Applied Linguistics-2, and Introduction to Linguistics courses taken during the first semester of the

academic year 2021-2022. In addition, structured interviews were conducted with ten teachers of English to form a more comprehensive picture of the syntactic errors that students commonly made in writings. The teachers were asked about the possible sources of these errors and the expected remedies that could help students avoid them.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Ellis (1994) considered “free compositions and examination papers” as a type of the “spontaneous or unplanned data” collection procedures that is more common in the EA than the intentional one and that conveys the actual level of the students’ writings (pp. 49-50). James (2013) called eliciting errors from the students’ exams a ‘controlled elicitation’ of the experimental techniques of EA data collection that involves “the use of **cloze tests**, **dictations**, and even **multiple choice** items” (p. 21, boldface in original). Therefore, as the researcher taught Syntax, Applied Linguistics, Introduction to Linguistics, and Translation courses, students’ midterm and final exam papers were selected as the cross-sectional data source for the study at hand. These papers were chosen as the data sources because the learner’s focus during exams is “on the content rather than the form of what he wants to say or write” (Keshavarz, 2012, p. 80).

James (2013) revealed that in the EA “we assemble a line-up of utterances produced or processed by a learner and ask the ‘witness’ or knower to pick out the one or ones that look suspicious, that is, those which are potentially erroneous” (p. 91). Therefore, the researcher carefully studied the exam papers to detect the students’ overt syntactic errors. Any deviation from the norms and L2 grammatical rules was considered an error that should be analyzed. Specifically, the unit of analysis in this study is students’ error-containing responses to open-ended and multiple-choice questions and their syntactic analysis of sentences using tree diagrams. The identified syntactic errors were described and classified based on the types of errors: tense and form, subject-verb agreement, word choice, run-on sentences, articles, prepositions, word order, and conjunctions. Then, the syntactic errors were explained and discussed thoroughly, and supported with illustrative examples of each type. The common errors were also quantified and represented in tables to identify the most frequent ones that students and teachers need to reconsider.

To triangulate the elicited data from the students’ exam papers, ten teachers were also interviewed using an Imo application, a free application used for audio/video calling and instant messaging, to obtain more information about their students’ writing errors, the possible sources behind these errors, and the proposed remedies that can help students avoid such errors. The interview results were transcribed, grouped into similar themes, and analyzed qualitatively.

Results and Discussion

RQ1: What are the common syntactic errors Saudi EFL learners commit in their exam papers?

To answer the first research question, the students’ syntactic errors were classified into the following categories. Some sentences contained more than one error, so they were analyzed in their respective categories. The errors are shown in italics and boldface in each example. The following examples are just samples; there are many more not mentioned here due to space limitations. The frequency of students’ errors is shown in Table 8.

Types of Syntactic Errors

The Use of Verb Tense

Based on the examples 1-13, students' syntactic errors in the use of the verb forms can be classified into verb omission, improper use of verb forms, addition of unnecessary verbs, incorrect use of infinitive form, improper use of modal verb forms, and run-on sentences juxtaposing verbs and ignoring conjunctions and punctuation.

The predicate is one of the main constituents of a sentence that is always identified by a verb phrase (VP). Nevertheless, the omission of verbs is common in the students' writings, as noticed in example 1. Such errors could be attributed to the intralingual factors of the students' inadequate understanding and incomplete application of grammatical rules. They might get confused because of the various uses of the verb 'to be' as a lexical or auxiliary verb in its simple and progressive aspects.

1.*Syntax \emptyset the internal structure of phrases and sentences.

In the final exams, students were asked about what they have learned from the courses they have taken. Examples 2 and 3 show that they incorrectly used the verb forms. Their use of the '-ing' form and the omission of the auxiliary verb 'to be' occurred neither in the progressive nor in the simple aspects. They did not differentiate between the aspects of the present tense, namely simple, progressive, and perfect. The verb 'to be' in its progressive and perfect aspects is not used in the students' L1. The causes of these errors could also be ascribed to the intralingual factors of the students' incomplete knowledge and inappropriate application of the rules.

2.*We **learning** about the language . . .

3.*I **learning** from this course . . .

Examples 4-6 illustrate the students' incorrect use of the infinitive form. Their syntactic errors were represented by either the omission of 'to' or the use of the wrong forms. Arabic does not have a "to (infinitive)" form, so the source of the incorrect use of the infinitive form is intralingual due to the students' incomplete knowledge of the rule.

4.*. . . how **correct** my mistakes.

5.*Smartphone apps help us to **learning** vocabulary.

6.*I learned how to **understood** the structure of sentence.

Examples 7 and 8 reveal that the students committed syntactic errors represented by the improper use of the verbs that follow the modal auxiliary verbs. They either used the wrong form after the modal verbs, which should be followed by the infinitive form, or dropped the modal verb altogether. Such incorrect use is traceable to the intralingual factors of incomplete knowledge and inappropriate application of rules. Students' L1 does not affect their responses as it does not have modal verbs.

7.*how I can **analyzed** the sentence.

8.*VP-adverbial can **comes** like PP or NP. *In the future the learning \emptyset **become** by smartphone.

As is observed in examples 9-12, students sometimes simplified certain verb forms and resorted to the use of the basic form irrespective of the tense of the action. They added unneeded linking or auxiliary verbs in unnecessary positions, used inappropriate forms, or blended two base forms in the same position. Specifically, they complicated the structure of the sentences as they repeatedly used the unnecessary copula verb with the lexical verb to talk about actions that happened in the simple present or past, where they were supposed to use one or the other

form. Students' failure to apply the correct rules is ascribed to the intralingual factors of overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, and false concept of hypothesis.

9. *VP-adverbial *is come* clause, PP, adv, NP.
10. *I *have learn* how to do a good sentence.
11. *Second, I *am understand* the syntax.
12. *It *is includes* two or more bound morphemes.

The use of run-on sentences was also obvious in the students' writings. They made various errors switching between different verb forms and the inappropriate use of conjunctions and punctuations to connect clauses or separate distinct thoughts, as shown in example 13. These errors are traced back to the interlingual factors as long sentences can be applied in Arabic using different punctuation marks in one sentence.

13. *We *learning* about ambiguity and learning about category..... *And learning* about the lexical and finchical *and* what is the different between both of them.

Subject-verb Agreement

Students also faced difficulty in the appropriate application of subject-verb agreement to generate grammatically correct sentences. Specifically, they overgeneralized the omission of 's' for the third person singular in the simple present tense, as shown in examples 14-17, or addition of 's' for the third person plural, as in example 18, where the student was supposed to omit 's' attached to the verb 'make' or use the verb 'increase'. Students also substituted the verb 'to be' for the verb 'to have', as shown in example 22. The source of these errors is the intralingual influence, as the agreement system in English differs from that in Arabic. Specifically, the conjugation in Arabic sentences should be by number and gender, while in English it is only by number. Students' incomplete application of rules and insufficient knowledge are also apparent in these examples.

- 14.*Morphology *study* . . .
- 15.*Applied linguistics *talk* about . . .
- 16.*Desuggestopedia is a teaching method that *help* students
- 17.*Ali *go* to Abha.
- 18.*I think smartphone apps *makes* my vocabulary increased.
- 19.*There *is* two type of ambiguity.
- 20.*The methods *has* . . .
- 21.*The dog *have* one eye.
- 22.*My house *is* four rooms and two bathroom.

The Use of the Subject

Subject and predicate are the main constituents of every complete sentence. However, the inappropriate use of the subject was common in the students' writings, in which they either omitted the subject, as in example 23, or used double subjects (the subject with the pronoun) concurrently, as in examples 24-26. The omission of the subject is ascribed to the students' L1 as it allows the use of the tacit subject pronoun or the attachment of the subject to the verb of the sentence. On the other hand, the subject can either be a noun or a pronoun, but not concurrently in the same position. The source of the application of dual subjects is also intralingual due to the students' incomplete knowledge of L2 rules, as the double subjects (noun and its pronoun) are allowed neither in Arabic, as the students' L1, nor in English.

- 23.*In this course \emptyset learned many things about syntax.

- 24.*Desuggestopedia *it* is a teaching method . . .
- 25.*Morphology *it's* study the function of the word in the sentence.
- 26.*It *is they* can learn so many things from it in every fields.

The Use of the Adjective

The following examples show the students' syntactic errors in the placement of adjectives. Students' disorder and permutation of the adjective after the noun it describes was clear in examples 27-29. They also incorrectly used the comparative and superlative adjectives, as in examples 30-31. In example 30, the student omitted the definite article that should be used before the superlative adjective 'best'. In example 31, the adjective 'cheap' is monosyllabic, but the student used both 'more' before it and added the suffix '-er' to the adjective. The sources that led to the adjectives' incorrect placement were the students' L1 interference represented by the use of the adjective after the noun it describes. Word-for-word translation was also present in this regard. The students' inadequate knowledge of the correct use of the comparative and superlative adjectives was another source of these errors.

- 27.*Phonology is the study of systems *sounds*.
- 28.*Ambiguity *lexical* . . .
- 29.* . . . to get *new* a word
- 30.* . . . and know which of this methods is *best*.
- 31.*Smartphone apps are *more* cheaper than books.

The Use of Pronouns

Subject and object pronouns substitute the nouns they refer to. In the following examples, it is noticed that the students generally got confused in the use of subject, object, and reflexive pronouns. In example 32, the student erroneously replaced the subject pronoun 'I' with the object pronoun 'me'. In example 33, the student substituted the male third-person singular pronoun 'He' for the neutral subject pronoun 'it'. In example 34, the student substituted the reflexive pronoun 'yourself' for 'themselves'. It is thought that L1 interference does not play a role in this regard. Instead, the sources of these errors are attributable to the students' insufficient knowledge of the use of L2 pronouns.

- 32.*How can *me* learn from these apps
- 33.*Complementizer: *He* gives . . .
- 34.*The students can find the information by *yourself*.

The Use of Definite and Indefinite Articles

Learners' errors in examples 35-37 were in the form of omission, addition, or the improper use of articles. In examples 35-36, the necessary articles were not used before the countable nouns. In example 37, the definite article 'the' was unnecessary. Such errors could be ascribed to L1 interference because the non-existence of indefinite articles in Arabic led the learners to omit them in English.

- 35.*Desuggestopedia is \emptyset teaching method.
- 36.*Translation is about transferring \emptyset meaning from \emptyset source language to \emptyset target language.
- 37.*Seeking *the* knowledge . . .

The Use of Prepositions

As in the case of articles, students added, omitted, or used prepositions inappropriately. Such errors distort the intended meaning of sentences as the meaning of some expressions

changes depending on the prepositions they use. In examples 38-40, the students removed the necessary prepositions, whereas in examples 41-43, they added unnecessary prepositions. Specifically, there was also redundancy in using the preposition 'of'. The students erroneously substituted some prepositions for others, as in examples 44-46. L1 negative transfer and L2 inadequate knowledge of the proper use of prepositions played an important role in the students' errors. Students' literal translation also played a role in the inappropriate use of prepositions.

- 38.*Phonetics is a branch \emptyset linguistics.
- 39.*Morphology is the study \emptyset forms.
- 40.*I learned \emptyset this course . . .
- 41.*Syntax: the structure and ordering of components within *of* sentences.
- 42.*Seeking *in* knowledge \emptyset obligation on every Muslim.
- 43.*Syntax is a branch of study *of* structure *of* sentence.
- 44.*The messenger *to* Allah.
- 45.*Audiolingual method is teaching method that focus *in* . . .
- 46.**On* my opinion....

The Use of Conjunctions

Conjunctions are used to connect words, phrases, and sentences. In examples 47-49, it is obvious that the students committed syntactic errors in the omission, addition, or improper use of conjunctions. In example 47, the student omitted the conjunction 'and' that should be used to connect phrases. In examples 48-49, it is clear that there are redundant conjunctions. Students were supposed to use one conjunction before the last entity at the end of the sentence, but they were influenced by Arabic, which uses multiple conjunctions in one sentence. Inadequate knowledge of the proper use of conjunctions in L2 could also be another source of errors.

- 47.*Semantics study structure of phrases \emptyset the sentence.
- 48.*The grammar translation method *and* direct method and audio lingual method...
- 49.*VP-adverbial can come in adverb *or* clause *or* PP or NP.

Substitution of Word Classes

The proper use of the word classes plays a crucial role in sentence structure. However, students' word choice was inappropriate and did not match the word functions in examples 50-54. Students erroneously substituted some content words for others. In example 50, the student substituted the verb 'advise' for the noun 'advice'. The noun 'life' was replaced with the verb 'live' as in example 51. The noun 'difference' was replaced with the adjective 'different' as in example 52. In example 53, the student substituted the adjective 'English' for the noun 'England'. In example 54, the noun 'analysis' was replaced with the verb 'analyze' despite using the definite article that precedes the noun. This indicates that the students did not differentiate between the content words and their functions in sentences. Such errors can be attributed to the students' inadequate knowledge of L2 and inappropriate application of the rules.

- 50.*I *advise* them to use and download the following apps.
- 51.*Culture is a complete way of *live*.

52.*The *different* between lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity ...

53*Syntax is a branch of linguistics that studies the formation of structure of *England* sentences.

54*We learned the *analyze* \emptyset the sentences.

The Use of Nouns

Substituting singular with plural and vice versa was also one of the most common syntactic errors committed in the students' writings. Examples 55-58 reveal that an 's' for the plural was left out or added to the singular. On the one hand, examples 55-57 represent the omission of the necessary 's' that should be added to the countable nouns. On the other hand, example 58 shows that the student added an unneeded 's' despite the use of the indefinite article 'an' before the noun. The intralingual influence was apparent in these examples as students did not apply the rules correctly. They didn't take these errors into account because they may have concentrated on the content and forgotten the form, thinking that such errors were of no consequence.

55.*There can be many auxiliary *verb* and one lexical *verbs*.

56.*In this course I learned many important *point*.

57.*Blending is to put two or more *word* together.

58*Seeking knowledge is an *obligations* on every Muslim.

In one of the syntax midterm exams, students were asked to classify the elements of the term 'determiners', as modifiers of nouns. Two students classified the article 'the' as a demonstrative. Another student identified the adverb 'there' as a demonstrative. Moreover, some students classified 'here', 'me', 'have', and 'mine' as possessive pronouns. Another student classified 'were' and 'was' as examples of quantifiers. These errors resulted from the students' insufficient knowledge of the word classes, specifically the determiner elements.

In Syntax final exam papers, students were asked to choose the best answer for the underlined words in the following sentences. Their errors are shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Students' Erroneous Answers to Some of the Multiple-choice Questions*

The sentences	Erroneous answers	Correction
I know <u>that</u> you work hard.	determiner, coordinator, auxiliary verb	complementizer
He gets <u>in</u> .	preposition, complementizer, pronoun	adverb
He lives <u>in</u> Abha.	pronoun, determiner, article	preposition
He manages his company <u>honestly</u> .	verb, noun, adjective	adverb
He <u>has</u> a comfortable car.	auxiliary verb, preposition	main verb
<u>Can</u> can can the can easily.	main auxiliary verb, modal auxiliary verb, lexical verb	proper noun
Total of errors	17	

The students' responses, shown in Table 1, indicate that they did not distinguish between demonstratives and complementizers, adverbs and prepositions, adjective and adverbs, and main and auxiliary verbs. In the last sentence, the teacher's goal was to confirm the idea that an English word can have multiple functions in a sentence, such as 'can', which can be analyzed differently as a proper noun, modal auxiliary verb, lexical verb, and noun, depending on its position in the sentence. Students have limited knowledge of the elements of the word classes, which constitute the basis for mastering syntax.

In the final exams of the syntax course, students were also asked to analyze the following sentences syntactically using top-down tree diagrams. Their analysis is reported in the tables below.

Table 2*Polite students opened the door quietly.*

Constituents	Students' errors	Frequency	Correction
Polite students	noun, adjective phrase (AdjP), subject, pronoun	5	noun phrase (NP)
students	subject, adverb	4	noun
door	pronoun	1	noun
quietly	adjective, noun	4	adverb
Total of errors		14	

Table 3*The weather in Al-Namas is very interesting.*

Constituents	Students' errors	Frequency	Correction
weather	adjective, verb	3	noun
in	pronoun	1	preposition
very interesting	noun phrase (NP)	1	adjective phrase (AdjP)
very	adjective, main verb	4	degree adverb
interesting	verb, noun	4	adjective
Total of errors		13	

Table 4*The white cat slept deeply under the red mat.*

Constituents	Students' errors	Frequency	Correction
white	noun, preposition	2	adjective
cat	verb	2	noun
slept	adjective, noun	5	verb
deeply	adjective, noun phrase (NP)	6	adverb
under	adverb, determiner, verb	3	preposition
red	noun	5	adjective
mat	adjective, object, adverb, auxiliary verb	5	noun
Total of errors		28	

Table 5*Gently, he repaired the mobile for his son.*

Constituents	Students' errors	Frequency	Correction
Gently	adjective	1	adverb phrase (AdvP)
he	determiner, preposition, noun	6	pronoun
the	preposition	1	determiner
mobile	adverb	1	noun
for	determiner	1	preposition
his son	prepositional phrase (PP), preposition, pronoun, auxiliary verb	6	noun phrase (NP)
Total of errors		16	

Table 6

Unfortunately, his car stopped in the main street.

Constituents	Students' errors	Frequency	Correction
his	pronoun (<i>without specifying whether it is a possessive pronoun or a subject pronoun</i>)	3	determiner
the main street	adjective phrase (AdjP)	2	noun phrase (NP)
the	adjective	1	determiner
main	noun	3	adjective
street	adjective, adverb	3	noun
Total of errors		12	

Table 7

My friend sends his passport very quickly.

Constituents	Students' errors	Frequency	Correction
sends	adjective, noun	2	verb
his passport	complementizer phrase (CP), prepositional phrase (PP)	2	noun phrase (NP)
his	pronoun, verb, preposition	4	determiner
passport	adjective, verb	4	noun
very	adjective	5	degree adverb
quickly	adjective, noun phrase (NP)	6	adverb
Total of errors		23	

The students' responses, shown in tables 2-7, reveal that they did not differentiate between the adjectives and adverbs, the main and auxiliary verbs, the prepositions and pronouns, and the adjectives ending in '-ing' and the progressive verb forms. They overgeneralized that any word ending in '-ly' is an adverb, neglecting that many words ending in '-ly' are analyzed as adjectives. They also overgeneralized that any word ending in '-ing' is a verb regardless of the adjectives ending in '-ing' used to describe things and situations. They also did not consider the differences between the constituents and their functions in the sentence.

Table 8 shows the frequency of syntactic errors extracted from a corpus of 70 exam-paper models. Some of these examples were mentioned above and others are summarized in this table due to space limitations.

Table 8*Frequency of Syntactic Errors in the Students' Writings*

	Classification of errors	Frequency of errors	Percentage of errors
Errors committed in students' responses to open questions	The use of verb-tense and aspect	34	13.66 %
	Subject-verb agreement	23	9.24 %
	The use of the subject	7	2.81 %
	The use of the adjective	9	3.61 %
	The use of pronouns	4	1.61 %
	Definite and indefinite articles	6	2.41 %
	The use of prepositions	12	4.81 %
	The use of conjunctions	7	2.81 %
	Substitution of word classes	14	5.62 %
	The use of nouns	10	4 %
Errors committed in students' answers to multiple-choice questions	Determiners in multiple-choice questions	17	6.82
Errors committed in students' syntactic analysis of sentences using tree diagrams	Syntactic analysis using tree diagrams	106	42.6 %
Total		249	100 %

Supporting the results obtained from the students' exam papers, teachers agreed that the students' incorrect use of verb forms predominated in their writings. For example, one teacher reported that the common syntactic errors were "*incomplete sentence structure, subject-verb agreement error, improper use of conjunctions, prepositions, and articles.*" Teachers also pointed out that students made errors related to the improper use of conjunctions, prepositions, articles, punctuation, adverbs, and relative clauses.

The results of this study were in line with those of the previous studies (Ababneh, 2017; Al-khatib, 2012; Al-Sindy, 1994; Farooq & Wahid, 2019; Hafiz et al., 2018; Khatter, 2019; Sawalmeh, 2013; Younes & Albalaw, 2015). Most of the students' errors in sentence structure

were related to the use of verb forms and subject-verb agreement. Moreover, the teachers referred to the students' errors in using articles, conjunctions, prepositions, and words permutation. These errors were common among the Arabic-speaking learners of English.

Sources of the Errors

RQ2: What are the possible sources of these errors?

Since Arabic and English descend from different language families, they have widely differing linguistic systems. Therefore, the sources of the erroneous examples were mainly interlingual, i.e., L1 negative interference and habits transfer. The sources overlapped and their influence on students' writings was obvious. Students tried to match and transfer the habits they have acquired from L1 to the TL they are learning. Similarly, the influence of the intralingual factors on the students' writings was apparent in their inappropriate application of grammatical rules and their insufficient knowledge of the TL rules. These results were also compatible with those of the previous studies conducted in the Saudi context (Ababneh, 2017; Alghammas & Alhuwaydi, 2020; Al-khatib, 2012; Al-Sindy, 1994; Farooq & Wahid, 2019; Hafiz et al., 2018; Khatter, 2019; Sawalmeh, 2013; Younes & Albalaw, 2015) as the interlingual factors were more frequent and dominant than the intralingual ones. The results of this study were inconsistent with the results of Othman's (2017) study, which found that the intralingual factors predominated over the interlingual ones in influencing the students' errors.

Most of the teachers interviewed agreed that the sources of the syntactic errors were insufficient writing activities and practices in and outside the classrooms. One teacher said that "*the insufficient exercises in the classroom*" can cause such errors. Another teacher noted that:

Learners always want high grades without learning properly and without practicing more. Learners are also not interested in learning grammatical rules and lack self-instinctive motivation. They are greatly fossilized to memorize without understanding. Moreover, they are habituated to study in a limited syllabus.

This conclusion confirmed that of the previous studies of Hafiz et al. (2018) and Alghammas and Alhuwaydi (2020). Three teachers attributed the sources of errors to the teachers' use of the students' mother tongue in the classroom. For example, a teacher revealed that the sources of the students' errors were "*the use of mother tongue in the classroom by some teachers. Students try translating everything before writing, and because Arabic and English are structurally different, they commit mistakes.*" Likewise, some teachers referred to the teachers' use of inappropriate teaching methods in the classroom. This finding was in accord with Corder's (1967, 1971) and Richards' (1974) taxonomy of the sources of errors, and with the previous studies of Alghammas and Alhuwaydi (2020) and Younes and Albalaw (2015), which concluded that inadequate teaching methods played a role in the students' production of errors.

The teachers also clarified that the students' 'carelessness' played a role in their syntactic errors. Moreover, the bad habit of memorizing some texts and rewriting them during activities or exams can affect students' performance level in the writing process. Furthermore, teachers referred to the students' attitudes towards learning English, which could demotivate them and affect not only their ability to write well but also their inability to master other language skills. To summarize, a lack of the following: practice, in-class exercises, adequate knowledge, familiarity with grammar, inadequate teaching methods, as well as self-confidence, were strongly present in the teachers' minds as sources of the students' errors in writing.

Remedial Strategies for the Errors

RQ3: How can such errors be minimized?

As teachers have accumulated teaching experience, they proposed plausible remedial strategies to minimize the students' syntactic errors. They generally referred to the teacher's effective role in emphasizing grammatical rules, identifying problematic areas at the syntactic level, and teaching accordingly. They also focused on more writing practice, exercises, and effective assessment. One teacher suggested that *"teachers can use online and face to face as well as controlled/free writing activities to practice English grammar and writing knowledge."* *"Students should be enabled to self-assess, self-edit, and self-correct."*

The responsibility is not that of teachers only. Rather, students also have a great responsibility to avoid such errors, as they should be independent and responsible for their own learning. The teachers affirmed that students should practice writing, acquire sufficient knowledge, employ self-practice and self-editing, and collaborate with their peers. Interestingly, one teacher stated that students *"need to change their perspective and focus on obtaining knowledge, emphasize on perseverance, and avoid such errors as there is no any second word without practice as it makes a man perfect."* Technology employment was also present among the teachers' plausible remedies. One teacher urged students to use applications such as Google Docs and Grammarly for writing practice and editing.

Based on the discussion of the findings and the erroneous examples given, the conclusion can be drawn that students tried to do their best in writing grammatically correct sentences, but they failed to apply the above-mentioned rules appropriately. They faced writing difficulties and, as a result, they deviated from the correct grammatical rules. Their syntactic errors were mainly manifested in the addition, omission, improper use, and permutation of verb forms, subject-verb agreement, content and functional word classes, and determiners. Specifically, their substitution of adjectives with adverbs, nouns with verbs, and vice versa, revealed that they did not distinguish between the functions and positions of words. Moreover, students mostly used the verb 'to be' along with infinitives in the writing tasks, thinking that the verb 'to be' should be used with every lexical verb.

It can also be deduced that such erroneous examples are attributable to the negative transfer of L1. Students also tended to think in, and transfer the habits of, their mother tongue and translated their thoughts into English. The examples mentioned above are evidence for the students' inadequate knowledge of L2 as they applied the L2 rules inappropriately. Therefore, teachers could play an effective role in helping students perform error-free writing tasks and activities by making them conscious of the word classes, and that some English words can perform different functions depending on their positions in sentences. Teachers should clarify more the differences between adjectives and adverbs, prepositions and pronouns, the subject pronouns and other pronouns, the adjectives ending in -ing and the progressive verb forms, and the degree adverbs. The influence of the interlingual and intralingual factors should also be generally highlighted so as to maximize correctly-structured sentences in students' writings. Effective teaching methods, corrective feedback, and guided teacher-supported writing practices in the classroom are recommended for the students to avoid these syntactic errors. Students also are responsible for their own learning, and should practice writing outside the classroom in their spare time with the help of the open educational resources on the Internet.

In addition to what has been reviewed in the previous studies, many important points are raised in this study. First, students usually used the progressive verb form without an auxiliary verb (examples 2-3). Second, some students blended two lexical verbs concurrently in the same position, especially the use of the verb 'to be' with other lexical verbs (examples 9-

12). They assumed that the verb 'to be' should be used with every verb in the sentence. Third, students inappropriately used the verb form following the modal auxiliary verb, forgetting that it should be in the infinitive (examples 7-8). Finally, the incorrect placement of adjectives after the nouns they describe is unique in the context of this study (examples 27-31).

This original study contributes to the existing body of knowledge since it is the first study contextualized among students enrolled at the University of Bisha. Following Keshavarz's (2012) linguistic-based classification of errors, this study casts light on one linguistic domain, namely, the authentic syntactic errors produced by EFL students in specific writing activities (exam papers) and a specific context (the Saudi context), drawing on Gass and Selinker's (2008) model of EA. Phonological, orthographic, morphological, and lexico-semantic errors were disregarded as they were beyond the scope of the present study. The current study identified the syntactic errors and the potential sources of these errors, along with suggesting some remedial strategies deduced from the results and the teachers' comments. Compared to the previous studies mentioned above, the data source of this study was the students' actual and spontaneous writings in exam papers, focusing on the analysis of open-ended and multiple-choice responses and the students' syntactic analysis of some sentences using tree diagrams. Furthermore, what is unique about this study is the triangulation of the students' data with their experienced teachers' opinions regarding students' errors, the causes of these errors, and the teachers' proposed suggestions for minimizing such errors. It is believed that the results of this study will be helpful to teachers, course designers, policymakers, and students, because being aware of such errors provides stakeholders with deeper insight and a better understanding of students' learning level.

Conclusion

Errors are a natural outcome of language use and an important source of knowledge for stakeholders. Error analysis, in turn, increases the teachers' and students' awareness of the syntactic errors to be avoided in the future. The present study examined the common syntactic errors produced by Saudi EFL learners in their exam papers. It also identified the sources of these errors and suggested remedial strategies that could maximize students' proficiency in English writings. The results of this study are summarized in the following points:

1. Saudi EFL learners' syntactic errors were categorized into the inappropriate use of verb forms, subject-verb agreement, content and functional words, and determiners. Most of the students' frequent errors were related to the inappropriate use of the verb forms and subject-verb agreement.
2. The interlingual influence of L1 negative interference and the intralingual influence represented by overgeneralization, inadequate knowledge of L2 rules, and inappropriate application of such rules, were the main contributing factors to the students' errors. Furthermore, the teachers traced these errors back to the lack of practice, inappropriate teaching methods, lack of confidence, and students' focus on good grades.
3. Teachers could engage students actively in writing activities and self-correction in the classroom. They could also expose students to the disparities between the Arabic and English linguistic systems for minimizing the negative transfer of L1 habits and for errors not to become fossilized. Teachers' selective strategy to deal with errors is also helpful for students to feel confident in using the language without fear of making errors. Being conscious of students' errors leads teachers to a better understanding of their students' needs and enables them to devise effective teaching techniques accordingly. Moreover, course designers could defer the complicated linguistic areas encountered by students to

the advanced levels or make them easier to understand. These considerations could lead students to create flawless writings in the future.

4. Writing is a complex skill that requires continuous practical effort on the part of the learners themselves. They should benefit from their errors, feel confident, practice writing extensively, and be mindful when applying the grammatical rules. They should step away from memorizing grammatical rules to practicing them. Additionally, since technology has made it possible for students to practice language independently and freely, employing learning applications, social networks, online tests and short quizzes, and self-study courses, could help students practice writing, be self-assessed, get corrective feedback, and become effective writers.

This study provides a solid basis for future research. Since English programs contain study plans with many writing courses, future researchers could examine the students' use of writing strategies in writing genres and their adherence to the writing norms. To meet the requirements of the job market, researchers could also investigate the syntactic errors made in students' research proposals, business letters, emails, job applications, cover letters, and curriculum vitae. Since speaking and writing are productive language skills, errors in students' speech could also be explored in future research.

Bio

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