

# Syntactic Errors Arab Learners Commit in Writing

**Ruba Ahmad Mustafa\***

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Jubail University Collage, Jubail, KSA

## Abstract

This study tackles the issue of the common syntactic errors that Arab learners' might encounter in the written form of language while using English as a second language. It aims to identify the most common syntactic errors in the writing of Arab learners. It also attempts to discover the reasons behind these problems. This research is conducted on a sample of prep-year students of Jubail University College. The methods used in this study are descriptive and analytic. Several questionnaires were handed to the prep year teachers who noticed these errors while they teach and mark portfolios. The major findings of this study were that the types of errors were classified differently according to different teachers although they follow the same rubric, and that the students actuate their previous linguistic knowledge in transferring a language to another, so they transfer from their first language to the second language. Some suggestions by teachers were listed to aid second language learners in writing. The reasons why punctuation marks are considered a weakness point for the students.

## Keywords

Syntactic Errors, Arab Learners, Writing

Received: October 30, 2017 / Accepted: November 14, 2017 / Published online: December 21, 2017

© 2017 The Authors. Published by American Institute of Science. This Open Access article is under the CC BY license.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

---

## 1. Introduction

In most Arabic-speaking countries, English language is required and used in various places such as companies, universities, hospitals and many more. Almost every person has to have the knowledge of the English language as it has become an essential part of job offers and communication. In some high-paying jobs, it requires the knowledge of English to be hired in terms of being able to speak and fully understand foreign customers. In communication, one needs to understand and be able to communicate using the language with foreigners in case of trouble or miscommunication. However, as English has become a part of our life, people have difficulties in learning the language and are committing mistakes. This makes it hard for every learner and worker to continue their studies or jobs. The reason for that varies from one person to another. Yet, they may have the same common mistakes and difficulty in learning while using the language. These mistakes can either be caused by the complexity of the

English language or the interference of Arabic with English.

In this research, the main focus is on Jubail University College in which all courses of different majors are taught in English. Some students do not prefer to study in this college as they are unfamiliar with the language. However, a lot of students who never had experience with English and studied in this college face difficulties in learning. Different types of errors were made either in spoken or written form; however, this is not the case. Prep year students, the focus of this research, commonly make a lot of syntactic errors in their essay exams and portfolios. As these errors became the focus of the research, several questions are attempted to be answered.

### *Questions of the Study*

- What are the different types of errors and how important are

---

\* Corresponding author

E-mail address: [ruba.mustafal@gmail.com](mailto:ruba.mustafal@gmail.com)

they in language learning?

- What are the main causes of syntactic errors in students' writing?

- What are the tips and suggestions to help improve students' writing and how such errors affect the students' performance?

-What are the most common errors that students make in Jubail University College?

## 2. Literature Review

A number of different researchers have written about the syntactic errors of Arab learners. A research by (Meehan, An Investigation into the Structural Errors of Arab Learners' Written Persuasive Discourse in English, 2013) aimed at identifying the reasons behind the structural errors Arab learners make in academic persuasive discourse. One of the most common reasons of those errors is the huge difference between the writing system of Arabic and English. It investigates 12 Arabic speaking learners at upper-intermediate level at a UK Higher Education Institute. This research attempts to solve the problems concerning Arab learners in writing. It showed positive results and improvement in learners' structural errors. The Error Analysis criteria shows that the results are highly subjective.

Another research (Ngangbam, An Analysis of syntactic Errors Committed by Students of English Language Classes in Written Composition of Mutah University: A case of study, 2016) aimed at testing the English syntactic errors that freshmen English language students committed in their writing performance. The writer identified the causes, types of syntactic errors that occur more frequently and the problems in writing composition through selecting a group of native Arabic speakers and assorting some error categories. The results of this study showed that the syntactic errors occur due to the students' first language interference, the use of sentence fragment in an incorrect way, overuse, poor grammatical knowledge, and formation and development errors.

Another research (Researching Types and Causes of Errors in Arabic Speakers' Writings) is related to the performance of students in writing courses. This study uses error analysis to analyze students writing. This study shows that students' errors are systematic and classifiable. It also encourages teachers to understand these errors to develop remedial classes to help the students. It shows that students should realize their errors in order to develop their writing.

An article (May Al-Gharabally, The Writing Difficulties Faced by L2 Learners and How to Minimize them) discusses the importance of writing skills and ways to improve their

writing. She suggests a way to develop writing skills at a young age.

## 3. Methods and Procedures

The methodology used in this study is descriptive and analytic. The data of this study was collected from other researches written in the same area. In addition, a questionnaire was distributed to prep year English instructors in Jubail University College to examine different aspects of English writing errors that prep year students frequently make 'see appendix1'. This questionnaire was designed to identify and explore different errors found in written assignments and essay questions in writing exams. The instructors were asked about how such errors affect the final grades of the students, and about the suggested ways that are helpful to improve the students' writing.

Interviews were conducted with the students to know more about their experience in writing and how did they improve later on. According to them, they found that writing is very difficult at first, as they were unfamiliar with the English language. Since they are Arab speakers and studied English at JUC, they had to improve themselves in English especially in writing to do well in their assignments and exams. They carefully followed the instructions of their teachers such as writing a paragraph every week and correcting it with the teacher. Another instruction is to make full sentences in the class and share them with the students. Some students exerted more efforts in writing to have better grades in their exams because they were independent learners.

## 4. Research Findings

According to Meehan, S. (2013), it is important to be concerned with different aspects during the investigation of the errors of second language learners. One needs to consider how important errors are in language learning and the process of teaching. One also needs to have knowledge about what type of errors learners frequently make. Al-buainain (2007) argues that the errors categories are not accurate due to different factors, such as the learners' native language and learning situation.

### 4.1. Findings Related to the First Question

It has been found that the types of errors were classified differently according to different teachers. Some of them categorized errors of two types according to their importance; severe errors and typical errors. It was also found that errors were classified according to the level of the error: Grammaticality, acceptability, correctness and strangeness and infelicity

Errors can be divided into 6 categories. The first type is performance errors, which are the writing mistakes the students make when they are tired or in a hurry. These errors are not serious because students can detect them if they proofread their writing. On the other hand, the competence errors are considered serious as they are a result of insufficient learning. Also, developmental errors are the same as the errors that children make when they acquire their first language. The fourth type is interlingual errors which are the mistakes that reflect the students' native language structure. The last type is the "unique errors"; these errors do not fit into any of the categories mentioned before.

#### 4.2. Findings Related to the Second Question

Error analysis help students determine the errors and overcome them. It was found that students actuate their previous linguistic knowledge in transferring a language to another, so they transfer from their first language to the second language. In both languages, if the linguistic elements are similar to each other, it may seem as a positive transfer. On the other hand, if the elements are different, there will be a negative transfer which results in committing syntactic errors.

JUC student are second learners of the language and thus most of their own errors in writing were because they wrongly assume that both linguistics systems of English and Arabic are similar. A lot of word order errors were found because they will start by the verb rather the subject.

It was also found that there are two main reasons behind committing syntactic errors. These reasons are Interlingual; the first reason is the complexity of the second language, the second reason is the interference from the students' first language. Arabic interference with the written form of English occurs because of the high variety (alfusha). It was obvious from the outcomes that the mother tongue interference, overgeneralization, the incomplete knowledge and the complexity of the second language that is being studied are major factors that affect the types of errors students encounter.

#### 4.3. Findings Related to Third Question

It was found that there are mutual tips and suggestions by all teachers to aid second language learners in writing. First, getting ideas by brainstorming and discussions such as planning and making idea maps. Then writing ideas in note form and using the questions to plan writing. After that, they should write the first draft then devise and correct errors before handing in the final draft. Also, they may compare or share ideas with other peer groups while writing then exchanging and reading each other's' work. It is also agreed

by all teachers that the second language learners must be encouraged and motivated by the teacher to make them feel that writing is an important and effective skill. According to the teachers, one should pay special attention to the grammatical rules and how to apply them in writing. Also, students must practice to write a paragraph every week and prepare pre-writing drafts to identify the errors and edit them in post-writing. In addition, some writing exercises were performed in class time. Also, in writing classes, each aspect would be discussed. For example, talking about topic and concluding sentences while practicing writing them. In addition to that, they mentioned a method for the visual students which is contextualizing. The purpose of this method is reflecting the context to help them write in a better way.

It has also been found that Committing syntactic errors affect the students' performance in their major and final exams. The first effect is that some students are able to write good and expressive paragraphs with great ideas, yet they lose marks due to syntactic errors. Also, some of them produce weak paragraphs because they have some problems in constructing comprehensible description. In addition, it is hard for them to construct opinion and narration paragraphs. Another effect is that 40% of the total score is deducted in writing exams regarding to the rubric. Every punctuation, spelling and grammar error is counted, so it results in getting low marks in mechanics, usage and cohesion. A rubric is used in exams to guide the students by listing the most important elements that they should pay attention to. It is used to show how the teachers will grade the students' exam papers. Also, it is used to show how students' grades will be divided regarding what they have asked them to pay attention to.

Table 1. JUC Portfolio Rubric.

Rubric	
P	Punctuation
Sp	Spelling
C	Capitalization
G/T	Grammar tense
G/WO	Word order
G/RO	Run on sentences
G/WW	Wrong word
G/MW	Missing word

#### 4.4. Findings Related to the Fourth Question

Based on the questionnaire, it was found that one of the most common errors that prep year students encounter in writing are in punctuation. According to one of the teachers "When they write a sentence, they do not use a full stop to end that sentence". Writing long sentences without using a full stop sounds feasible to them (see appendix 8.1). They also sometimes use a comma instead of a full stop at the end of

sentences. A full stop is used to indicate that the idea of a sentence is completed; however, a comma is used for different things such as making lists of adjectives, verbs or nouns. Also, it is used to connect two full sentences. It was noted from the portfolios that students do not differentiate between the usages of a comma and a full stop. Another problem is capitalization; the first letters of proper nouns of people, places and things are not capitalized most of the time. In addition, prep year students tend to use run-on sentences. There are no conjunctions used in order to show connection between clauses. Students should be aware that using conjunctions make their paragraphs well organized. That is because conjunctions make sentences comprehensible and sensible for the reader. Transition words and phrases are used to show relationship between ideas and sentences. It prepares the readers to have a clear idea about the next sentences. In some sentences, students choose the wrong form of words. For instance, they may use a verb instead of a noun depending on the word order in the sentence. In addition, they mix the word order by starting a sentence with a verb

followed by the subject. Mixed tenses are the most popular problem that students frequently encounter in writing essays. The students may not be able to determine which tense is appropriate to use. For example, when they were asked to write a paragraph using the simple past tense, they tend to use the past progressive tense. They also use the past tense in describing an event that may occur in the future. Moreover, simple and past progressive tenses are used without writing the “be” verb while it is an important part in these rules. Students also use singular subjects with plural verbs which is a mistake in subject-verb agreement. For instance, some sentences are written using the third person without adding the letter “s” at the end of the verb. Non parallel sentences occur when the students use, for example, the infinitive to make a list of verbs, but they add a gerund with these verbs. Also, most prep students either forget to write the articles or get confused when to write 'a' or 'an'. The last problem is writing incomplete sentences or sentences that have a missing verb which makes it a fragment.

**Table 2.** JUC students’ mistakes in writing.

Type of Error	Samples of Prep Students' mistakes	Correction
Capitalization and missing verb	one day when i playing in the garden, ...	One day when I was playing in the garden, ...
G/T, missing article and G/WW	I've been position	I had been in a situation
Spelling mistake	I need three months vocation	I need three months' vacation
Punctuation and tense	I was worry about college but now I get use to it	I was worried about college, but now I got used to it
Non parallel sentences	To be polite by giving advices and show good manners	To be polite by giving advices and showing good manners
Capitalization (title)	The Best vacation days	The Best Vacation Days
Subject verb agreement	When someone surprise me Ahmad lie	When someone surprises me Ahmad lies
Verb to be	These is the best events of my life	These are the best events of my life
G/T Grammar tense (writing story)	I forget the chocolate chips	I forgot the chocolate chips
Articles	I want to be translator. I want active and interesting job.	I want to be a translator. I want an active and interesting job.
Transitions	But at the end,	At the end,

## 5. Recommendations

The study recommends the following approaches to help teachers improve their students’ writing: ask the students to brainstorm ideas before writing, write a post paragraph before the final draft, correcting errors with the teacher, and ask them to write a paragraph each week. However, students are also responsible for improving their writing skills. Students should be active learners to help improve themselves by exposure to meaningful input such as reading books in English. Students can use the different approaches by themselves without the supervision of a teacher. Another way is to make advantage of helpful online websites. At last, students should pay attention to others' writings in order to be

able to identify their writing errors.

## 6. Conclusion

Students learn more from their mistakes as previously stated in the research. As they make mistakes, it is the students’ duty to correct these mistakes in order to have better understanding of what they have problem with. This research aims at finding where the problem lies in students' writings and understanding the errors. In addition, some possible solutions were given to aid the students and their teachers in improving writing skills.

The research first started with discussing the methods used for collecting the data. Then, the importance of syntactic

errors was mentioned. Also, the types of syntactic errors were discussed in details. Another aspect which was discussed is the most common syntactic errors with examples for further explanation. After discussing these topics, approaches to

improve students' writings were introduced. At last, recommendations were given for the purpose of helping students to improve their writing.

## Appendix

### Sample of the Questionnaire

**Syntactic Errors in Written English in Second Language Learners**

A research is being conducted based on this questionnaire. Please, answer the following questions about prep year students.

1. What are the 10 most common syntactic errors that prep year student encounter in writing?

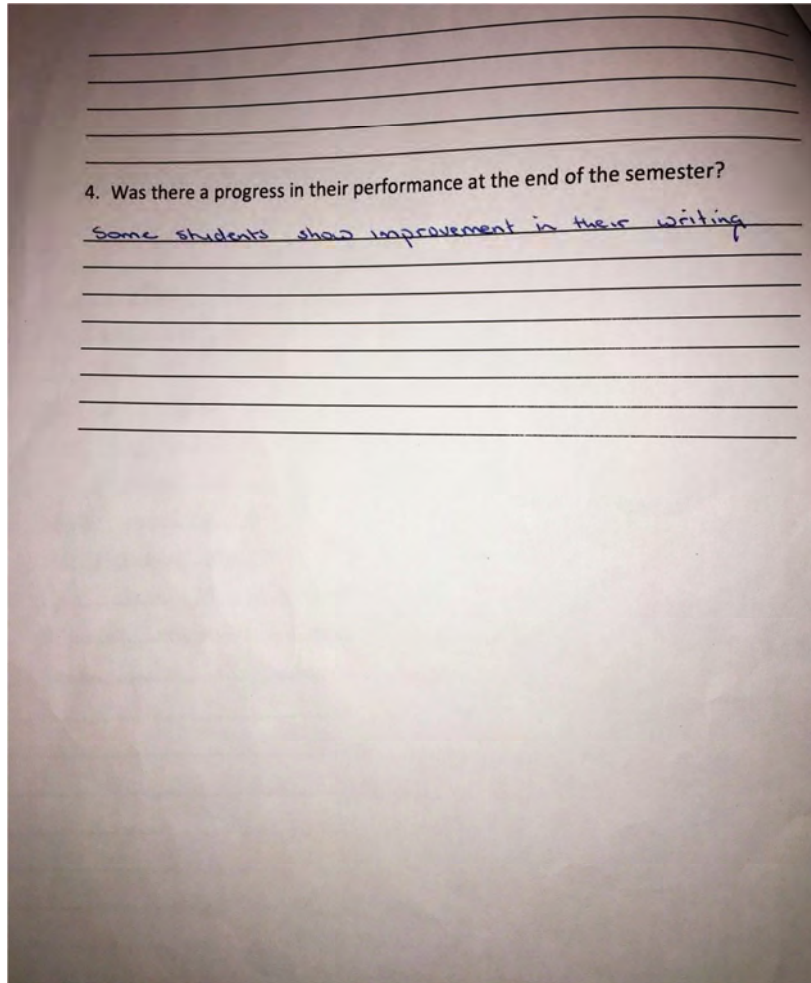
Subject-verb agreement  
 Use of tenses  
 Prepositions  
 Use of articles a - an - the  
 Singular / Plural nouns  
 Use of auxiliary verbs  
 Sentence structure - sentence fragment  
 Run on sentences etc.  
 Punctuation, capitalization

2. How do these errors affect their performances in major and final exams?

students get penalised according to the rubric. This means that students usually get low marks in mechanics, usage and cohesion.

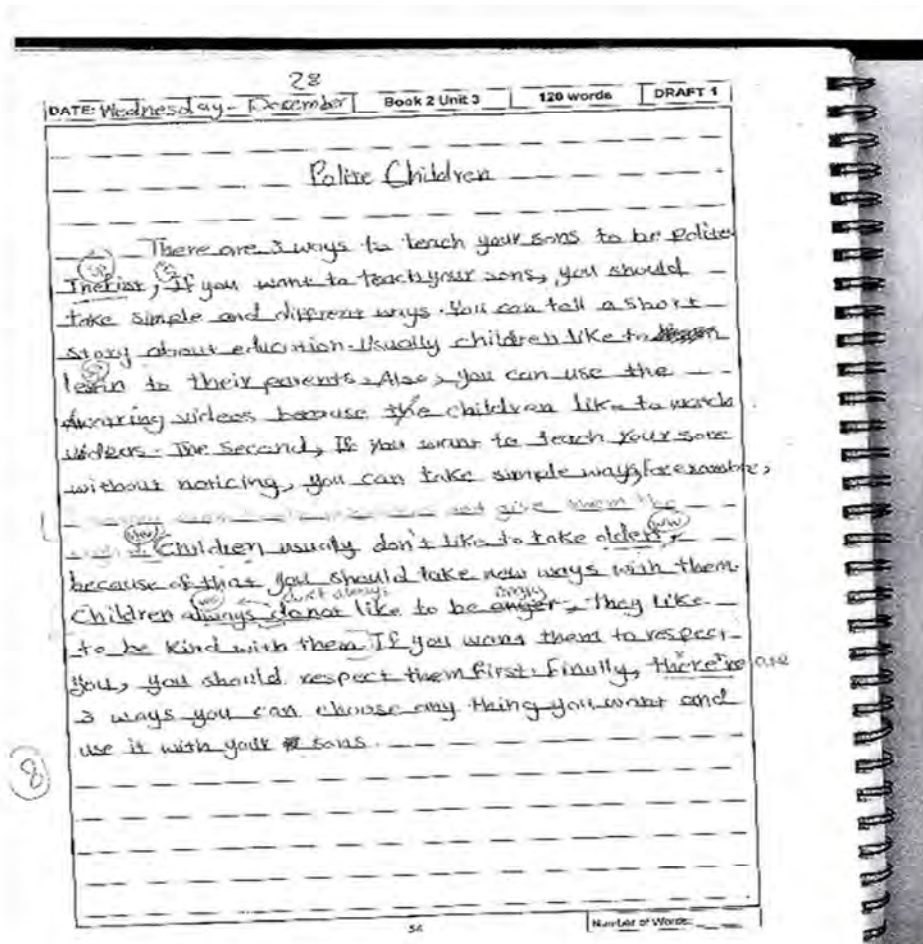
3. What methods were used to help improve their writing skills?

Writing portfolios were introduced. Students have to write paragraphs each week. These are then corrected and the students have to re-write them correcting all errors.



JUC Portfolio Rubric

MEASURE	8	7 / 6	5 / 4	3 / 2	1 / 0	Total
<b>Mechanics</b> Use of accurate Punctuation, Spelling, and Capitalization. P Sp C	No spelling or punctuation errors	Very few punctuation and spelling errors	Adequate spelling and punctuation, some errors	Many spelling and punctuation & errors	Numerous spelling and punctuation errors	/8
<b>Usage</b> Use of appropriate grammar and standard English G/T G/WO G/RO G/MW G/WW	Very good use of grammar and standard English	Minimal grammar errors and demonstrated use of standard English	Adequate grammar and use of standard English, some errors	Several grammar errors and a weak grasp of standard English	Gross grammatical and language errors	/8
<b>Organization</b>	<b>Topic Sentence 2 marks</b> <u>Existence:</u> Is it there? <u>Relevance:</u> Does it cover the essence of the paragraph?		<b>Supporting Details / Body</b> 4 marks	<b>Concluding Sentence 2 marks</b> <u>Existence:</u> Is it there? <u>Relevance:</u> Does it cover the essence of the paragraph?		/8
<b>Content</b>	<b>On topic / No digressions 4 marks</b> No digressions 4 Deduct 1 mark for every sentence off topic			<b>Ideas and Word Usage 4 marks</b> Excellent ideas and vocabulary usage 4 Good Ideas and vocabulary usage 3 Fair ideas and vocabulary usage 2 Poor ideas and vocabulary usage 1		/8
<b>Cohesion and Clarity</b>	<b>Good execution of:</b> Varied sentence structure, appropriate transitions, and proficient vocabulary usage 7- 8 marks		<b>Fair execution of:</b> Varied sentence structure, appropriate transitions, and proficient vocabulary usage 3, 4, 5, 6 marks	<b>Poor execution of:</b> varied sentence structure, appropriate transitions, and proficient vocabulary usage 1- 2 marks		/8
Deduct 2 marks from 20 if there is no title. Deduct 1 mark from 20 if the title is a sentence or a question.				<b>Total out of 40</b>		
				<b>Total out of 20</b>		
emarks:						



## References

- [1] Akande, A. T. (2001) "Learners Competence versus Morphological Appropriateness in the Acquisition of English." *Ife Studies in English Language* 5: 36-45.
- [2] Al-Buainain, H. (2007). Researching Types and Causes of Errors in Arabic Speakers' Writing. Midraj, S. Jendli, A & Sellami (Eds.), *Research in ELT Context* (195-224). UAE.
- [3] Al-Gharabally, M. (2015). The Writing Difficulties Faced by L2 Learners and How to Minimize them. *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, 3(5), 42-49.
- [4] Babalola, E. T. and Akande, A. T. (2002). "Some Linguistic Problems of Yoruba Learners of English in Nigeria" *ES: Revista de Filologia Inglesa* 24: 245-257.
- [5] Cook, V. (1992) "Evidence for multi-competence Language learning," vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 557-591.
- [6] Dulay, H., Burt, M., and Krashen, S (1982). *Language two*, Oxford: Oxford University press.
- [7] Meehan, S. (2013). *An Investigation into the Structural Errors of Arabic Learners' Written Persuasive Discourse in English* (MA). University of Lancashire.
- [8] Ngangbam, H. (2016), An Analysis Of Syntactic Errors Committed By Students Of English Language Class In The Written Composition Of Mutah University: A Case Study, *European Journal Of English Language, Linguistics and Literature*, 3(1).
- [9] Odlin, T. (1989). Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning.
- [10] Selinker, T. (1992). *Rediscovering interlanguage*, London: Longman.