

Analysis of College ESP Learners' Grammatical Errors: Types and Frequencies

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Abstract:

English for specific purpose learners (ESP Learners) may face certain challenges in language use, specifically during the writing process. Writing is a complicated productive skill that requires not only great linguistic repertoire but also a mastery in utilizing it. This qualitative descriptive study delves into the realm of English grammar. It aims to explore and analyze grammatical errors in tertiary-level students' writing, especially in composition writing assignments. This study adopted Corder's 1986 consecutive steps of Error Analysis approach to analyze Iraqi tertiary students' grammatical errors. The sampling was 40 sophomores at the University of Information Technology and Communication (UITC), Baghdad, Iraq. The findings showed that the wrong use of prepositions ranked first among other errors. It also showed that some teaching and pedagogical suggestions may be taken into account.

Keywords: ESP Learners; English Writing Assignments; Grammatical Errors; Writing Errors.

تحليل الأخطاء النحوية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية من طلبة الجامعات:

أنواعها ومدى تكرارها

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الملخص:

قد يواجه متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية بصفتها لغة لأغراض محددة بعض العقبات أثناء إستخدامها، وخصوصاً أثناء ممارستهم لعملية الكتابة. فالكتابة تعد من المهارات الإنتاجية المعقدة التي لا تتطلب خزين لغوي فحسب، وإنما إجادة إستخدام هكذا خزين. تخوض هذه الدراسة الوصفية النوعية في حقل نحو اللغة الإنكليزية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن وتحليل الأخطاء النحوية الموجودة في كتابات طلبة المرحلة الجامعية، وخصوصاً فرائض كتابة الإنشاء. إتمدت هذه الدراسة على أسلوب خطوات (كوردن ١٩٨٦) التعاقبية لتشخيص الأخطاء لتحليل الخطاء النحوية للفئة المستهدفة. تكونت عينة الدراسة من ٤٠ طالب من طلبة المرحلة الثالثة في جامعة تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات، بغداد، العراق. أظهرت نتائج البحث بأن الإستخدام الخاطيء لحروف الجر قد إحتلت المرتبة الأولى بين بقية الأخطاء. وأظهرت أيضاً بأن هنالك عدة مقترحات ذات الصلة بالتدريس والمناهج قد يتم الأخذ بها.

الكلمات المفتاحية : متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية، فرائض الكتابة باللغة الإنكليزية، الأخطاء النحوية، أخطاء الكتابة.

Introduction

Language is a fundamental aspect of our daily life. It is a tool that enables humans to be involved in the communities in which they live. It facilitates human relationships and can be considered a tool for understanding the events around us. As it is known, learning a language is like other learning processes in real life, it involves errors. Such errors are committed by learners during the learning process.

Linguistically, error analysis is an important factor in understanding the organized nature of the grammatical representation in speakers' minds (Montrul, 2011). Mastering a second language in real life started to be a basic requirement for almost all jobs in the labor market whether in the public or private sector. English is the widest language proliferated as a language of science and commerce all over the world. University students represent a noticeable social class that needs to learn a second language to be qualified to actively participate in the labor market.

Writing is a pervaded practice in students' daily educational practices (Hynninen, 2018). To learn a second language; one has to learn the four basic skills that constitute the basic pillars of every language learning which are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. These four skills reflect the learner's effective and communicative abilities. A better command of English requires continuous and actual use, good understanding and massive acquaintance of the language learned vocabulary (Aajami, 2018).

According to Ramadan (2019), passive skills such as reading and listening are named so because practicing them does not lead to any linguistic product in any form while speaking and writing are active skills due to their linguistic product that reflects the learner's linguistic competency of language learned.

Second language learners, in general, face many challenges in their productive skills in general and in writing in particular (Al Khotaba, 2013). Presenting perfect writing is a noticeable obstacle that faces the majority of English Language Learners (ELLs). Students at the University of Information Technology and Communications are taught English for a specific purpose as a certificate attainment requirement due to its importance in the labor market. Writing is a

pervasive outcome in the context of higher education. Students, for example, are required to present their assignments in written form (Hynninen, 2018). The pervasiveness of writing in academia contributed to the development of students' writing skills (Hewings, 2006).

For Halliday and Webster (2003) writing skill is a crucial element as it helps ESP learners to better memorize English language rules and utilize them whenever the matter necessitates. Thus, this study tries to highlight the importance and quality of ESP undergraduate learners' skills in writing at the University of Information Technology and Communications who intend to progress their studies abroad, particularly in English-speaking countries. There are many mistakes that ESP learners often unknowingly make and that can happen when writing in a language other than their L1 (Anwar, 2015). The grammatical structure affects the sentence structure that is produced in writing (Şanal, 2008).

The study primarily tries to answer two questions. The first is what are the types of grammatical errors found in students' assignments, while the second is to what extent each type of error has occurred. The study has two main objectives. The first one is to find out what types of grammatical errors are committed by students, while the second is to identify the most frequent type of grammatical errors among other types of errors.

Literature Review

Despite the growing interest in the wrong use of English language grammar in its written form within the context of foreign language learning countries, there remains a dearth in the body of literature written within the context, environment, and setting of Iraqi universities. Several prior studies dealt with this issue. For example, the first one was conducted by (Mahmood, 2016) who tried to evaluate ESP Learners' writing skills in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The study adopted error analysis as a tool for investigating the errors. The study aimed to identify, describe, analyze, and evaluate the writing errors, their causes, and sources. The sampling were sophomores at the English Department affiliated with several universities. The researcher used the Cambridge Standard Writing Test to check the students' efficiency in writing. The study showed that the students were inefficient in their writing skills.

(Al-Shujairi and Tan's, 2017) study; quantitatively investigated the written texts of Iraqi secondary school students and the grammatical mistakes they committed in writing assignments. A mixed-method design was adopted in this study. By adopting a convenience sampling method, the study used the data of 112 composition assignments. The study included an interview for triangulation purposes. Corder's (1986) error analysis model of grammatical errors was adopted to analyze the collected research data. The results showed that Iraqi secondary school students committed significant mistakes related to verb tenses, articles, and prepositions. In addition, Omission and Addition ranked first in terms of frequency. Moreover, the Intralanguage ranked first as a source of errors.

(Nasser,2019) experimental study highlighted the difficulties in writing composition faced by undergraduate girls. Thirty participants at the University of Baghdad, Iraq who majored in English were the sampling of the study. The study aimed to identify these difficulties and to suggest suitable solutions for committing these mistakes. The study found that it is of paramount importance to develop students' writing skills due to its axial role during the educational process.

Methodology

Design

This study is a qualitative one by which the researcher aims to find out writing grammatical errors committed by ESP students at the tertiary level. This method is used because the data of the study was analyzed descriptively and the results were presented in the form of explanations supported by data reflected by tables and charts.

Setting and Sampling

The study adopts the natural setting as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2022) by which the researcher collects data on the site where the participants of the study under research experience the problem or the issue. Forty Iraqi sophomores from the University of Information Technology and Communications, who majored in Medical Data Analysis, participated in the study. They had been instructed ESP syllabus for about ten years for four to five hours a week. Twenty-six of them were females and the rest were males. Their ages were between 20-21 and studying Smart Medical Systems at the College of Medical Informatics at UITC. Factors such as age and sex were

not considered in the current study. The second term of (2022-2023) academic year witnessed the implementation of this study.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

The researcher uses the students' composition writing assignments as data for this study. The assignments are asked to be written in the second term of the academic year (2022-2023).

Data Analysis

The organization and categorization of the data were according to thematic approaches that emerged from the categorization depending on the categories of errors the learners committed related to grammar errors only. As a result, error analysis (EA) is adopted to classify the ESP learners' errors. For Crystal (2018) EA is a technique to identify, classify, and systematically interpret the mistakes committed by L2 learners while practicing their linguistic skills, while Corder (1986) defines EA as a vehicle to interpret the learners' cognitive abilities and skills required to deal with the target language.

Furthermore, EA steps which were presented by Corder in the 1986s can be considered the easiest way to identify, classify, and categorize ESP Learners' errors (Spada and Lightbown, 2013). It starts with *collecting data* from certain already collected samples. Crystal (2018) defined EA as a technique by which the ESP learners' unacceptable forms are identified, classified, and systematically interpreted by adopting certain procedures.

Furthermore, Corder (as cited in Spada and Lightbown, 2013) established the second step which was *describing the errors*. Later, he argues that *analyzing the errors* is useful and required to pave the way for the third step. Teachers and practitioners believe that teaching these errors will help ESP learners to be more familiar with identifying errors and learning how to deal with them. Teaching such a thing will also create better materials for the learners (ELLIS, 2018). Others think that errors can be used to gain knowledge about ESP learners' progress and how to improve it (Nuruzzaman et al, 2018). To achieve the purpose of the current study, the researcher used the composition writing assignments papers of senior students at UITC during the academic year 2022-2023.

Findings

Types of Errors

Error analysis is the procedure of observing, identifying, analyzing, and classifying errors made by learners. In the study under research, error analysis is employed to highlight the deviations of the learners (under study) from the standard grammatical rules that should be followed in writing. (Carroll and Swain,1993) as cited in (Lee, 2020) stresses that the grammatical efficacy in second language writing is a result of error detection and correction. The study focuses on the grammatical errors found in students' assignments. The following paragraphs explain the error types and their frequencies supported by examples and represented in a form of a table and a pie chart.

The findings obtained for each research question will be explained elaborately and they are as follows: the findings showed that a total of 84 errors were committed by the students under study. Students committed (f =13 wrong uses of verb forms. The wrong use of singular-plural was committed nine times (f = 9). The wrong use of adjective/adverb was committed six times (f = 6). The wrong use of articles was committed seven times (f = 7). The wrong use of conjunctions was committed four times (f = 4). The wrong use of pronouns was committed eleven times (f = 11). The wrong use of prepositions was committed twenty-four times (f = 24). Items were missed eleven times (f = 11). The following table shows the types and frequencies of mistakes committed by the students under study.

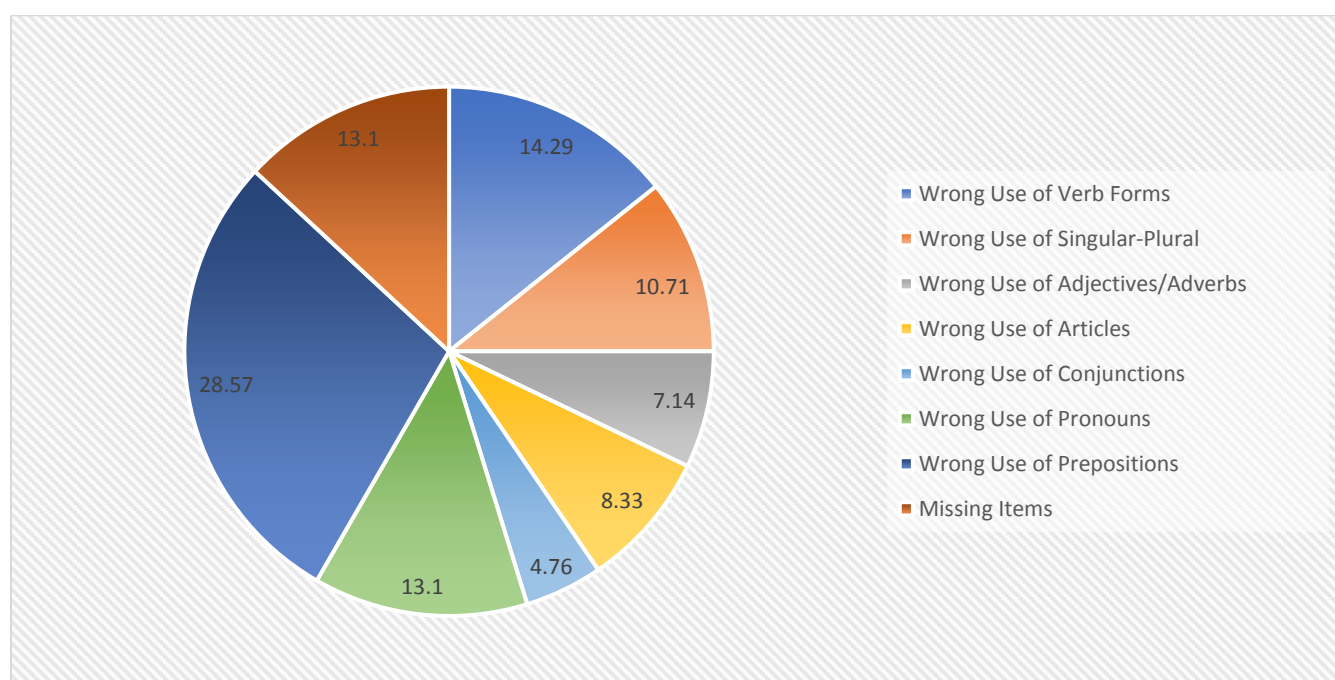
Types of Error	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Wrong Use of Verb Forms	12	14.29 %
Wrong Use of Singular-Plural	9	10.71 %
Wrong Use of Adjectives/Adverbs	6	7.14 %
Wrong Use of Articles	7	8.33%
Wrong Use of Conjunctions	4	4.76%
Wrong Use of Pronouns	11	13.10%
Wrong Use of Prepositions	24	28.57%

Missing Items	11	13.10%
Total	84	100 %

Table (1): Frequencies and Percentages of Grammatical Errors

It can be seen that the wrong use of prepositions ranked first as errors committed by the participants while the wrong use of verb forms ranked second. The other ranks are shown clearly in the table above and the whole result is also shown in the following pie chart.

Figure (2): The Percentages Represented in A Pie Chart



The following are some examples of the grammatical errors committed during writing the assignment:

- 1- "The software engineering involve steps..." (Wrong Subject-verb agreement).
- 2- "The stores was closed" (Wrong Use of Singular-Plural).
- 3- "That's real wonderful" (Wrong Use of Adjectives/Adverbs).
- 4- "The Amman is a big city" (Wrong Use of Articles).
- 5- "When they arrived their then it was raining" (Wrong Use of Conjunctions).

- 6- "It is funny to see a buyer doesn't know what they want to buy" (Wrong Use of Pronouns).
- 7- "She will arrive in 5pm" (Wrong Use of Prepositions).
- 8- "He wrote me a letter" (missing Items).

Discussion

The main aim of the study is to focus on the grammatical errors committed by students of UITC in their composition assignments. Now, we will answer the research questions depending on the findings obtained:

RQ1: What are the types of grammatical errors found in students' assignments?

As it can be seen in the table and pie chart above, there were 84 grammatical errors found in the participants' writings. The findings showed that there were eight types of errors in the participants' assignments. They were: Wrong Subject-verb agreement, Wrong Use of Singular-Plural, Wrong Use of Adjectives/Adverbs, Wrong Use of Articles, Wrong Use of Conjunctions, Wrong Use of Pronouns, Wrong Use of Prepositions, and missing Items. This diversity in errors is a reference of students' incompetence in the syllabus of grammar.

RQ2: What is the frequency rate of each type of errors?

As it can be concluded from the table and pie chart above, the Wrong Use of Prepositions errors ranked first in the frequency rate and the Wrong Use of Verb Forms errors ranked second, while the Wrong Use of Pronouns errors ranked third. It also showed that the Wrong Use of Articles ranked fourth errors and the Wrong Use of Conjunctions errors ranked fifth, while the Wrong Use of Pronouns errors ranked sixth. In addition, the Wrong Use of Prepositions errors ranked seventh and the Missing Items errors ranked eighth in the frequency rate.

Several factors contributed to this quantity of errors. One of them is the influence of speakers' L1, for example:

العراق بلد جميل.

-The Iraq is a beautiful country.

The first sentence is correctly written in Arabic and the second sentence is wrongly written in English. This wrong use of the article (in the second sentence) is a clear example of the influence of L1 on the linguistic product in L2. The use of the Arabic article (ال) in the first sentence was reflected in the second sentence where we can notice the wrong use of the article (the) in the second sentence.

Conclusion

To conclude, based on the results above, it can be concluded that the composition assignment reflected the students' low proficiency in this topic. It also can be considered as an indicator to teachers, curricula designers, and officials in charge to allocate a larger portion of curricula (study materials) to this part of grammar as a way that enables students to effectively and confidently use English grammar.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

This qualitative study tries to highlight, determine, and classify errors found in students' composition assignment writings at the tertiary level. It has some limitations such as the relatively small number of samples, so increasing the number of samples may produce different, diverse, and/or more generalizable results, and dealing with gender choices (depending on one gender other than another) may contribute to providing more useful and diverse results. Future studies may employ and utilize these limitations from different perspectives to present different results.

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