



Learners' Writing Errors in Foreign Languages: Arabic and English as Examples

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ABSTRACT

The practice of writing in a foreign language is a demanding skill that requires deep understanding of relevant error types. This research focuses on understanding, analysing and specifying the error types related to writing in a foreign language in two different language settings, considering differences in their cultural and linguistic systems. The study has adopted two rubrics for marking and determining different types of error made by learners while writing in a foreign language (English or Arabic). Each rubric, with its error categories, is suitable for the nature of each language. The results of this study can lead to an understanding of major errors in English and Arabic writing experienced by foreign-language learners (e.g., mechanical errors in English and grammatical errors in Arabic). In light of these findings, future learners in academic writing classes of English and Arabic as foreign languages can be provided with further instruction on and exposure to common errors, as well as how to minimize them. Further research is recommended to explore both the benefits of providing sufficient feedback on learners' future writing and how typical errors are made.

KEYWORDS

Error, writing, English as a foreign language (EFL), Arabic as a foreign language (AFL), virtual exchange, telecollaboration

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1. Introduction

The study of errors in writing is becoming a crucial topic in foreign language learning. Crystal (1999) stated that error analysis in language learning involves the study of the unacceptable forms produced by individuals learning a language, especially a second or foreign language, including error tendencies and their types. James (2001) also explained that error analysis deals with the study of linguistic ignorance, what people do not know in terms language learning and what they should to overcome such ignorance. The current study investigates the errors learners experience during their learning and how teachers can deal with those errors in non-traditional settings. This research relies on the experiences of Saudi and American foreign-language learners of English and Arabic, respectively, during their practice of virtual exchange using telecollaboration. Both virtual exchange and telecollaboration are used as complementary terms to refer to the engagement of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration with partners from other cultural and/or linguistic settings as an integrated part of their language learning development (O'Dowd, 2018). Telecollaboration is defined as the process of shared creation where two or more individuals interact to create an understanding that none had previously owned or could have come to on their own (Schrage, 1990). John-Steiner *et al.* (1998) claimed that telecollaboration occurs when collaborators decide to act jointly, think together and combine independent conceptual schemes to create original frameworks.

The current study is innovative since it was conducted as part of a virtual exchange programme between learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) and Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) in Saudi Arabia and the US. Similar studies, which attempted to explore types of error in writing in a foreign language, were conducted by exploring one language and not for the sake of exchanging texts in a virtual setting. This study adopts two rubrics for analysing the types of error in the written texts in English and Arabic. The objectives of the study are to provide an exploratory analysis of types of error among learners and to determine whether learners of both languages confront similar

difficulties in their foreign language writing. This research also seeks to provide learning opportunities for learners to profit from the errors that they make by obtaining feedback from others, usually native speakers, to make new attempts that successively approximate their desired learning. The study aims to answer the following main research questions:

RQ1: What are the types of error (common errors) in English texts produced by learners of English as a foreign language (Arabic native speakers in the Saudi context)?

RQ2: What are the types of error (common errors) in Arabic texts produced by learners of Arabic as a foreign language (English native speakers in the US context)?

This research highlights various types of common writing error in a virtual exchange programme among EFL and AFL learners in two uniquely dissimilar contexts. It also shows common errors that language learners confront in both language learning settings, as well as how they can be utilized as a source of knowledge for language learning development and as a basis to direct learners' attention to better usage and accuracy of the foreign language. Such drawn conclusions are expected to provide learners with more explicit practice and extensive exposure to the correct form.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework:

This research draws its main theoretical framework and relevant ideas from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspectives. Before Vygotsky's sociocultural views can be explored, it is crucial to establish that writing should focus on creativity and sociability, and establish the major steps of error analysis conducted in this research: collecting samples of learners' language, identifying their errors and describing those errors (Corder, 1973). As far as Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspectives are concerned, they consider socially oriented telecollaboration (virtual exchange) as a basis of learning and development. Learning is a process

of apprenticeship and internalization in which skills and knowledge are transformed from the social into the cognitive plane. Learning writing occurs via the provision of mediation that is originally social and then becomes individual because of linguistically mediated interaction. Vygotsky believes that cognitive development is achieved through social learning.

2.2. Errors and the Learning Process:

Throughout the process of learning, error is an unavoidable phenomenon that occurs among humans as they lack accurate knowledge (Thornbury, 1999). Corder (1973) defined errors as 'those features of the learner's utterances which differ from those of any native speaker' (p. 260). Errors used to be recognized as undesirable problems, which teachers tried to prevent. However, recently they have come to be considered a sign of the learning process and language development (Chomsky, 1986). According to behaviourism, a dominant theory in the early 1900s, an error signifies a problem for learning. Each error requires accurate replacement with the correct association, thereby increasing the duration of the learning process. In contrast, Jones and Wheeler (1983) argued that errors occur because learners are not adequately exposed to teachers' input and do not live in the native speaker environment. In addition, Weireesh (1991) argued that making an error is a prerequisite for learners to learn. Errors occur because learners do not know the language system well until they can recognize correct language or accepted norms.

Errors thus result from the learning process; learners use various strategies in the learning and testing of various hypotheses. Errors occur during learning, accidentally and frequently without any notice by learners (Gass and Selinker, 2008). According to Rach *et al.* (2012), errors can be considered a source of the learning process, although some learners do not use them as learning opportunities. It is crucial to understand that errors and mistakes are not synonymous. According to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards *et al.*, 1992), learners make mistakes during writing or speaking because of lack of attention, fatigue or carelessness, and they become able to self-correct these. In contrast, errors involve using linguistic items in ways that are considered wrong by native speakers, without learners being able to self-correct these instances. Brown (2000) also distinguished between errors and mistakes: errors are formal divergences from native speakers' accepted norms in grammar and other aspects of language competency. On the other hand, mistakes are usually accidental and less formal. They occur within the knowledge of speakers due to emotional tension or temporary misremembering.

2.3. Errors and Foreign Language Writing:

Errors play a significant role in foreign language learning, including writing. In fact, foreign language learning is not a straightforward process; this includes experiencing errors. The diagnosis of errors is the first step to effective treatment before the provision of feedback (Bitchener, 2012; Shintani and Ellis, 2013). Learners' ability to understand errors in their target language presents a competence that is characterized by sufficient expertise (Brown, 2000). Interference from the native language is seen as an obstacle to learners' experience of errors in language learning and during the practice of writing in a foreign language (ALTameemy and Daradkeh, 2019; Botley and Dillah, 2016; Navidinia *et al.*, 2019; Sari *et al.*, 2019). Patrick *et al.* (2014) claimed that most writing-related errors happen due to difficulties in learners' cognitive process, including interference from one's native tongue and the overgeneralization of ideas, e.g., in verb tense and prepositions (Patrick *et al.*, 2014).

Many studies have consistently focused on the negative transfer from

the first language, which contributes to negative thinking patterns or conceptual absence (Li, 2021). Amara (2015) grouped the types of error in language into two categories: interlingual interference and intralingual interference. The former (interlingual) addresses the errors caused by learners' native language interference (including grammatical, mechanical and syntactic errors). The latter (intralingual) refers to the errors committed by learners when they misuse target language rules, perhaps because of difficulties relevant to the new language or the incomplete application of these rules. In addition, interlanguage-related issues deal with efforts learners make to fully process second or foreign language learning (Guan, 2021).

Writing is a thinking process that includes several cognitive processes, such as brainstorming, planning and organizing (Selvaraj and Aziz, 2019). Language writers in languages other than their native tongue are typically confronted by numerous linguistic difficulties during the process of language learning, and these can indicate their developmental stage. Instructors can prepare teaching materials and strategies accordingly to handle these errors appropriately (Phuket and Othman, 2015). Brown (2000) established more sources of error relevant to writing, except interlingual and intralingual transfer, including the context of learning and communicative strategies. Regardless of whether or not errors should be directly corrected, language learners should recognize the correct norm to complete their process of language learning.

2.4. Errors and Writing as Social Practice:

As discussed earlier, error-free writing in foreign language is challenging for language learners since it requires adequate knowledge of context and genre. This is because writing is a distinct skill, requiring a minimum level of acceptance to be understood by the readership. Aitchison and Lee (2006) asserted that writing involves a 'network of social, institutional and peer relations—of readers, reviewers, teachers, examiners, editors, and publishers' (p. 271). This entails that writing is not an isolated activity but a social practice that requires individuals to work as part of learning communities. Writers in foreign languages may interact with each other regardless of their linguistic differences. Truscott (2004) believed that during foreign language writing, error correction is not particularly productive, whereas Ferris (1999) had a contrary perspective, verifying the usefulness of dealing with errors committed via writing, since this practice increases social participation where learners can reduce their self-doubt, and withdrawal from writing as individuals learn from each other. This technique facilitates explicit instruction, and as Sun (2014) confirmed, explicit instruction on frequent grammatical errors is helpful during the process of writing.

The concept of practice as described by Lankshear and Knobel (2011) highlights several issues relevant to understanding students' (learners') writing in a language other than their first. It involves activities that writers engage in with others, within activity systems, to achieve human interaction. According to Piebenga (2019), writing is a social practice wherein others act as a channel for creating ideas and communicating messages, as well as correcting linguistic issues (errors in language). Writing is a method of representing, constructing and communicating knowledge, with a sense of argumentation (Wingate, 2012). Furthermore, writing as social practice involves interaction with others in many forms; writers may collaborate to discuss their plans, share their writing and offer feedback to one another (Englert *et al.*, 1992). Therefore, social practice in this context refers to the achievement of writing tasks in partnership with others, such as teacher or peers, to discuss and produce more refined written products. Reichelt (2001) claimed that students may benefit from receiving direct or indirect comments on their written essays. Grammatical errors are among the common in foreign language

writing, including errors relating to article, preposition, verb morphology, noun singular and plural, and subject–predicate agreement (Cheng *et al.*, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants:

This research was conducted by applying the principles of language exchange and telecollaboration to learners of EFL and AFL (Alwaleedi *et al.*, 2019). The research settings were Saudi Arabia and the US, which were carefully chosen due to their linguistic and cultural differences. The participants from both settings shared a similar desire to further their linguistic and cultural proficiencies in English or Arabic as foreign languages and to benefit from each other's writing and feedback. The participants were purposely selected from three private and governmental institutions in Saudi Arabia and the US. The first cohort of participants, located in Saudi Arabia, were English language major students who studied EFL and were in their fourth year at the College of Arts. The second cohort of participants, based in the US, were third- and fourth-year students learning AFL, with different specializations, such as psychology and liberal arts.

The participants underwent assessment of their linguistic proficiency in Arabic and English to ensure that there was no linguistic discrepancy between the learners in both cohorts. Learners of English (native Arabic speakers) as well as learners of Arabic (native English speakers) who were based in the US achieved similar scores, between B1 and B2 (independent users), according to the Common European Framework of Reference; this equates to a score of 4.5 and 5 (intermediate and upper-intermediate) based on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) constructs. There were 44 participants in total, both males and females. Twenty-two US-based students of Arabic took part in the study, while 20 Saudi-based English major students participated. All participants voluntarily agreed to contribute to the requirements of this research and its various writing tasks. The participants were carefully divided into pairs and trios, with every student from Saudi Arabia working with one or two students from the US.

3.2. Tasks:

Participant tasks included the following four themes: Family and Friendship, Learning Practices and Daily Activities, Food and Cooking and National Ceremonies and Special Days. The nature of these tasks varied, with each theme focusing on an essential cultural component. These specified tasks helped the participants to reduce their fear of others belonging to different cultures and to increase their motivation and creativity by using meaningful language (González-Lloret and Ortega, 2014). As there were four tasks and four different themes, the participants in each group were asked to write four paragraphs (with each participant using the language they were learning as a foreign language) for each theme. Then they uploaded their writing electronically to the designated file for each group (21 groups in total). Each paragraph was accepted only if it was approximately 200 words and had been written in the target (foreign) language (English or Arabic). The purposes of assigning the participants to write texts were as follows:

- To practice academic writing in a foreign language (English or Arabic)
- To be read by a teammate who is a native speaker (English or Arabic) of the source language
- To provide appropriate (linguistic and cultural) feedback

The medium of interaction of such virtual exchange between the participants in the two settings was writing, via shared files on Google Drive. Google Drive was deemed the most appropriate social networking tool by the collaborators, ensuring their security and

comfort.

3.3. Data Analysis:

This study examined the types of error learners make while learning a foreign language (particularly in academic writing) during their participation in intercultural telecollaborative communication tasks in a language exchange programme. It explored the common type of errors among learners of English and Arabic as foreign languages and then categorised them: grammatical, mechanical, lexical, semantic or syntactic. Two rubrics were adopted for analysis of the attained data. Both rubrics addressed five main types of error: grammatical, mechanical, lexical, syntactic and semantic. However, the classifications for what each type involves varied because the linguistic structure of Arabic and English differs significantly. For example, grammatical errors in English texts often involve verb tense (e.g., third person singular). In contrast, grammatical errors in Arabic texts often involve verb choice (e.g., masculine or feminine).

The data were gathered from all participants' written texts. The number of written texts in English, produced by the Saudi learners of EFL, was 59, whereas the number of Arabic texts, which were produced by the American learners of AFL, was 42. All texts were written during participants' interaction with teammates in their counter cohort (in Saudi Arabia and the US).

4. Findings

As addressed earlier, this study attempts to answer three main questions: the types of error in English texts produced by learners of EFL (the participants in the Saudi context), the types of error in Arabic texts produced by learners of AFL (the participants in the US context) and the pedagogical implications and lessons drawn from this profound scrutiny related to errors in foreign language writing.

4.1. Analysis of English Texts:

In the process of conducting this research, 59 written texts were produced in English by Arabic native speakers learning EFL. Figure 1 shows the main types of error and their respective percentages: mechanical (38%), grammatical (36%), lexical (18%), semantic (6%), and syntactic (2%). Mechanical and grammatical errors were both common, representing the greatest weaknesses among EFL learners. These errors were found to correspond to the differences in linguistic structure and grammatical system between the native tongue (the source language) and the foreign language (the target language).

Figure 1: Types of Error in English Texts

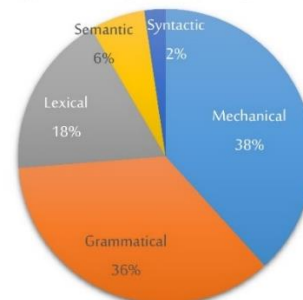


Table 1 presents the types of error in greater detail, including error categories, frequencies and order of rank in English texts. Each type of error (such as mechanical) contains sub-branches, which are known as error categories (such as spelling). As indicated earlier, the most frequent errors were mechanical (347 in total). Of the 17 categories of error identified, punctuation (located within the mechanical group) caused the greatest difficulty among participants (245 errors). Punctuation was followed by capitalization (55 errors)

and spelling (47 errors). The second most frequent type of error was grammatical (321 errors), with the highest number of errors relating to determining accurate verb tense (86 errors). Managing forms related to singularity and plurality (46 errors) and sentence structure (42 errors) was found to be less problematic. The third most frequent type of error was lexical (162 errors), including the following categories: articles (58 errors), word form (42 errors), prepositions (39 errors) and pronouns (23 errors). The fourth and fifth most frequent types of error were semantic and syntactic, relating to incorrect word choice (55 errors) and word order (21 errors), respectively.

Table 1: Types, Category and Frequency of Error in English Texts

Type of error	Error category	Frequency	Order of rank
Mechanical			
Capitalization		55	
Punctuation		245	
Spelling		47	
Total		347	1
Grammatical			
Verb tense		86	
Sentence structure		42	
Relative clause		24	
Conjunction		37	
Singular/plural		46	
Verb omission		28	
Subject omission		29	
S-V agreement		29	
Total		321	2
Lexical			
Pronoun		23	
Article		58	
Preposition		39	
Word form		42	
Total		162	3
Semantic			
Word choice		55	
Total		55	4
Syntactic			
Word order		21	
Total		21	5

4.2. Analysis of Arabic Texts:

This research also included the analysis of Arabic texts, which were produced by English native speakers learning AFL. Forty-two texts were incorporated in this process of analysis. The Arabic texts revealed the following error construction: grammatical (46%), semantic (27%), mechanical (20%), lexical (6%) and syntactic (1%), as shown in Figure 2. Unlike the English texts, the Arabic texts' majority errors were grammatical and semantic. This indicates the major challenges confronting AFL learners. The challenges of writing in AFL differ to those in EFL. This is due to the different nature of the Arabic linguistic system, which has a complex grammar and morphology that is dissimilar to English, particularly in relation to using articles, derivations and borrowing.

Figure 2: Types of Error in Arabic Texts

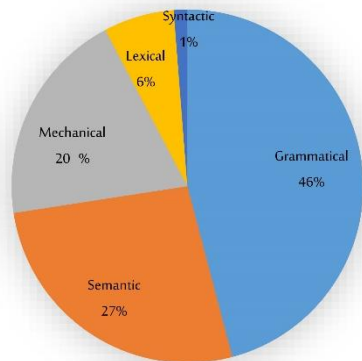


Table 2 provides further analysis of Arabic texts, including the types of error and their categories, frequencies and order of rank. It is noticeable that the error categories for Arabic texts are more numerous than those for English texts. It is also evident that the nature of errors in the given texts in Arabic is different to that in English. For instance, indentation is highly regarded in English, while the choice of collocation in Arabic is precise. Based on the given

analysis, it was found that the most frequent errors were grammatical (184), as this type has more categories. Of the 34 categories of error identified, the learners struggled most with dropping the article (ā) from adjectives (30 errors), using incorrect masculine or feminine adjective forms (27 errors) and dropping the article (ā) from qualified nouns (26 errors). The second most frequent type of error was semantic (107). It was clearly challenging for learners to derive suitable forms of various meanings of different words (57 errors). This was followed by inaccurate usage of words and failing to convey the desired and plausible meanings (17 errors). The third most frequent type of error was mechanical (79 errors), with several mistakes in shaping Arabic letters. Finally, the fourth and fifth most common types of error were lexical and syntactic, referring to incorrect usage of prepositions and confusion between adjectives and nouns (5 errors in each category).

Table 2: Types, Category and Frequency of Error in Arabic Texts

Type of error	Error category	Frequency	Order of rank
Grammatical			
Verb (masculine/feminine)		9	
Predicate (masculine/feminine)		4	
Demonstrative adjectives (masculine/feminine)		4	
Demonstrative adjectives (masculine/feminine)		0	
Adjective (masculine/feminine)		27	
Verb (masculine/feminine)		2	
Dropping article (ā) from adjective		30	
Dropping article (ā) from qualified noun		26	
Adding article (ā) to the annexing		9	
Dropping article (ā) from the annexed		25	
Dropping article (ā) from coordinated noun		24	
Verb tense (present - past)		0	
Verb tense (past - present)		4	
Keeping (o) in the present verb		0	
Keeping the vowel in the present verb preceded by (lam)		0	
Keeping the vowel letter from the bilateral past verb connected to the feminine quiescent (ta)		0	
Keeping the (N) letter in the five verbs		6	
Dropping the relative (ya)		3	
Not changing the (o) letter with (t) letter in the form VIII verb		7	
Not changing the (t) letter with (d) letter in the form VIII verb		0	
Keeping assimilation in the stressed trilateral verb		3	
Total		183	1
Semantic			
Replacing a foreign word with another		16	
Deriving unsuitable form		57	
Using a word in inappropriate context		17	
Explaining the meaning using sentences that are not understandable.		17	
Total		107	2
Mechanical			
Writing Hamzatu of rupture instead of Hamzatu of liaison		0	
Writing Hamzatu of liaison instead of Hamzatu of rupture		6	
Mistakes in shaping letters		72	
Writing attached (t) instead of opened (t)		0	
Writing opened (t) instead of attached (t)		1	
Total		79	3
Lexical			
Preposition		26	
Total		26	4
Syntactic			
Replacing the adjective and the noun		5	
Replacing the number and the noun		0	
Total		5	5

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the collected data, it was found that the participants had the greatest difficulty with punctuation during the practice of writing in English, while learners of writing in Arabic had problems with less accurate usage of Arabic letters. A possible explanation is the influence of their first language, which has different foci for writing in a foreign language. The participants were found to need more exposure to the basics of writing in English and Arabic as foreign languages and to be reminded frequently of the similarities and differences between the two languages, regardless of their linguistic proficiency. Interference between English and Arabic has been found to be common in some settings (Botley and Dillah, 2016).

As errors undoubtedly occur in language learning and during the practice of writing in a foreign language (Thornbury, 1999), the different types of error were explored. Al Jawad and Mansour (2021) found that grammatical errors were common among Arabic native speakers learning to write in English. As for errors made by learners of writing in AFL, the findings of the current study are consistent with Alwaleedi *et al.* (2019), who confirmed that similar learners have

major problems with writing Arabic, including using some aspects of grammar, such as prepositions, definite and indefinite nouns, and using adjectives before nouns. The findings show that major errors committed by learners in both settings included interlingual errors, i.e., mechanical and grammatical (Amara, 2015). These errors may have occurred for the following reasons. The participants started writing in English and Arabic as foreign languages at a relatively late stage, at the university level. There were relatively few errors by learners practising writing in English (with Arabic as a native tongue) because writing in English was not an entirely new activity to them. For the Arabic native speaker participants, English was a mandatory subject in secondary school and was the medium of instruction at the university.

There are some pedagogical implications to be drawn from this research. First, making errors happens often among foreign language learners as part of their journey along the language developmental process of foreign language acquisition. Therefore, errors should not be stigmatized by teachers. However, they can be used for implicit teaching and extensive practice for best practices of learning writing. Second, errors should be used in language classes, with the provision of correct forms in interactive activities. These activities should be associated with real-life settings, based on authentic materials, such as newspapers, magazines, websites and accredited reading materials in teaching. Finally, errors can positively contribute to better facilitation of language development when encouragement, awareness, positive corrective feedback, a non-threatening learning environment, authentic target language input and interactive teaching and learning are made available. In addition, the practices of virtual exchange and telecollaboration extend the positive influences of errors, making them valuable for writing development. In conclusion, not all the learners of Arabic and English in this study were at a similar level of proficiency, based on the most frequent errors in their writing. Some participants managed to fulfil the writing tasks because they had previously been exposed to writing in a foreign language (either in English or Arabic). In contrast, other participants had limited vocabulary knowledge and thus struggled to write appropriately and to communicate their ideas, due to their lack of fluency and eloquence in writing. Determining the types of error and their categories contributes to addressing and remedying these issues, considering individual differences and proficiency and linguistic levels for each learner (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). In terms of lessons drawn from this research, activities should be designed to target the areas that need improvement, and priority should be given to the most frequent errors. Errors can also serve as a source for self-correction, with the guidance of teachers who can work to model various uses of the target language. After the most common types of error in writing performed by learners of EFL and AFL have been identified, further research can be conducted that focuses on establishing a contrastive analysis of the two groups (English and Arabic) regarding shared tense use and aspects as well as language specific tenses, to determine if learners make writing errors based on different tense systems.

Biography

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