

## **Saudi College Students' Perception of Their Errors in Written English**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to shed light on the students learning strategies through their comments on their errors in written English extracted from the answer sheets of their midterm test. Thirty-two Saudi female college students at the fourth academic level made 207 errors, and when they were asked to comment on these errors, they claimed that they have made them because of test anxiety, concentration on content rather than form and the limited time allotted to the test. They have also claimed that they know the rules that underlie these deviant structures they have produced. The main implication of the students' comments is that the second or foreign language learners should be made aware of the differences between their native and target languages. However, the drills and exercises which are based on contrastive analysis should not be used excessively in the classroom; otherwise, the learners will be oversensitive and confused concerning these differences, and consequently, produce unnecessary and unintentional errors.

### **Introduction**

First errors of learning are usually gigantic. Then, and gradually, they diminish as one benefits of his/her errors. In a later stage of learning foreign or second language, learners are expected to reach a native speaker's competence or, at least, near that competence where errors are either eliminated or minimized to the extent that their impact on the learners' communication disappears, or they go unnoticed. But, unfortunately, the case with most of second language learners' errors is not so. Errors, mistakes, slips and attempts, as Edge (1989) has classified and termed them, insist on staining foreign or second language learners' written and verbal performance.

Do errors annoy English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers? Sure they do. Teachers are eager to find their students' written and verbal performance free of errors. However, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers (Corder, 1971; Richards, 1972 and 1984; Nemser, 1971; and

Dulay and Burt, 1973) look at the picture from a different perspective. Errors, they suggest, should not annoy teachers; rather, they should be looked at as a sign of development of the students' second language. Errors, they add, reflect the students' linguistic, writing, and communication competences at a given stage of their long way to master a foreign language, the linguistic system students are trying to build up and the strategies they are employing to learn.

A substantial number of studies on error analysis have been carried out all over the world to ease the errors' problem and to make the EFL teacher's task in the classroom smoother and easier. But errors insist to accompany second language learners' verbal and written performance.

### **1.Literature Review**

Error analysis was first introduced by Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) who have calimed that foreign or second language learners' errors could be predicted on the basis of the differences between the learners native and second languages. They have also suggested that where the aspects of the target language are similar to those of the learners' native language, learning will be easy; otherwise, it will be difficult and second language learners are expected to make errors. Since then linguists compared and contrasted languages in an attempt to figure out the differences or similarities that might exist between them and used these data to predict transfer errors second or foreign language learners would make. As a result, contrastive analysis dominated SLA research for quite a time. It was hoped that the findings reached by the different researchers would eventually be used to help develop special drills and excercises that would help learners learn correct and accurate use of the target language, and, in turn, eliminate or, at least, minimize their errors.

However, the picture was not completed at that point. Errors insist to manifest themselves in the learners' written and verbal production. In addition, classroom teachers have found out that where learners are expected to make errors, they actually do not, and where they are not expected to err, they do. Moreover, they face difficulties where they are not expected to (Dulay and Burt, 1973; Macnamara, 1971). The conclusion reached by both EFL classroom teachers and SLA researchers was that

contrastive analysis is not the efficient tool by which second or foreign language learners' errors could be predicted and accounted for. They also discovered many errors that were clearly not due to interference from the learners' native language. Therefore, it was safe for these researchers to assume that there must be other sources of errors beside the first language interference. Consequently, SLA researchers shifted their focus from predicting errors based on contrasting and comparing languages to classifying the various kinds of errors they see learners making.

As a result of that shift, a substantial number of studies (Corder, 1985; Selinker, 1972; Emam, 1972; Scott and Tucker, 1974; El-Hibir, 1976; Ibrahim, 1978; Kharma, 1981; Ellis, 1985; Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989; Mukattash, 1981; Shaheen, 1984; Abd-El-Jawad, 1986; El-Hibir & Al-Taha, 1992) have been carried out all over the world. It was hoped that by studying the various types of errors made by second or foreign language learners, SLA researchers would be able to draw a clear picture of the second language learning process, the learning strategies followed by second or foreign language learners and the sources of the learners' errors. The result of this analysis, it was also hoped, would help reduce these errors through drills and exercises devised on the basis of this error analysis. So error analysis dominated the field of SLA research for a long time. However, the fruits of this new trend of SLA research were not up to the researchers' and teachers' expectations. Errors are still found in the verbal and written performance of second or foreign language learners. What makes things worse is that error analysis appears to suffer from different weaknesses. Hoornstra (2002), Ellis (1985), Tono (1999) and Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) have pointed out the weaknesses error analysis suffers from which are as follows: First, the collected data for error analysis represent a single point in time. Therefore, error analysis is not an efficient tool by itself for studying the development of the learners' second language. Second, error analysis deals with the learners' verbal and written production; that is the production competence. Up to date, it cannot tackle the receptive competence which is as important as that of the production. Third, error analysis is based on a linguistic paradigm which does not describe accurately the way language works. Fourth, it is said that error analysis is not a perfect tool to categorize errors and explain their sources.

A close look at the different studies which deal with errors, the critics of error analysis have suggested, will clarify the discrepancy that exists among the findings reached by different researchers. What might be an interference error in one study is a developmental one in another. The conclusion that might be reached is that error analysis, to some extent, is impressionistic, and that is really a serious problem error analysis suffers from.

Regardless of these problems, error analysis helps SLA researchers learn more about the psycholinguistic processes involved in learning a second or foreign language. These processes, it is suggested, constitute an important role in the learning of the second and even the first language (Senders & Moray, 1991). Moreover, EFL teachers and methodologists need error analysis to understand the learning strategies of the second language learners, and in turn, develop better teaching methods.

## **2. Aim of the Study**

This paper tackles the question of errors from the students' point of view. The students' errors in written English were collected, corrected and presented to the students to comment on them indicating the causes that led them to make such errors. It was hoped that the students' perception of their errors will shed light on the learning strategies students employ to learn the second language. It is also hoped that on the basis of the students' perception of their errors, some important implications will be inferred which may help EFL teachers improve their teaching methods, and in turn, reduce their students' errors.

## **3. Questions of the Study**

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of errors do EFL Saudi female college students usually make?
2. How do they perceive their errors?
3. How does students' perception of their errors help clarify their learning strategies?
4. What are the implications of the students' perception of their errors in written English?

## **4. Procedure**

### **4.1. Subjects of the Study**

Thirty two fourth level students in the Department of Foreign Languages at King Faisal University have participated in the study. They are 22-24 years old. All the subjects of the study were Saudi female college students enrolled in an advanced course, Language Testing, and most of them have successfully passed all the courses of the English program and are left with only one course, Teaching Practice. It is important to mention here that the students have attended an Error Analysis course where they were taught how to identify, classify and describe written and verbal errors in English made by second language learners.

### **4.2. Data Collection**

The data of this study have been obtained by two instruments: a test and students comments on their errors.

#### **4.2.1. The Test**

The midterm exam, which constitutes the main tool to collect the data, consisted of five main questions, each of which includes different test items. Two discussion questions and a third question dealing with definition of terms were the main source of the data of the study.

#### **4.2.2. Students' Comments**

The students' answer sheets were marked by the researcher and then the written errors of each student were underlined and corrected. Later, the participants were asked to look at their errors and the correction provided by the researcher and then comment on them, identifying the causes that led them to make such errors. The students' comments constituted the second source of the collected data.

### **4.3. Data Analysis**

The participants of the study were categorized into four levels-A, B, C, and D-according to their marks in the test (see table 1). Then the errors made by the students were classified into two comprehensive types, developmental (errors which are the result of the students' linguistic competence) and interference (errors which are the result of the students'

native language interference in their second one), each of which was divided into various subtypes according to the causes and sources of the errors.

## 5. Findings and Comments

### 5.1. Students' Performance in the Test

As demonstrated in table 1, the number of the students who performed at the 'A' level is only six, constituting 18.75% of the total number of the participants, while the number of the students who performed at the 'D' level is three constituting 9.88% of the participants. The number of the students who performed at the 'B' and 'C' levels is consecutively 10 and 13 constituting 31.25% and 40.62% of the participants of the study.

**Table ( 1 )**  
Students classified according to their marks in the test

| Level | Range of Marks | No. of students | Percentage | No. of errors | Percentage |
|-------|----------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| A     | 60 – 50        | 06              | 18.75      | 24            | 11.59      |
| B     | 49 – 40        | 10              | 31.25      | 73            | 35.27      |
| C     | 39 – 30        | 13              | 40.62      | 91            | 43.96      |
| D     | 29 – 20        | 03              | 09.38      | 19            | 09.18      |
| Total |                | 32              | 100        | 207           | 100        |

A close look at the students' errors will indicate that the 'A' and 'D' level students made the least number of errors and that is because the students at the 'A' level had answered the questions of the test fully, accurately and correctly, while the students at the 'D' level had left some questions unanswered and their performance at the rest of the questions was really poor in terms of language and content. It also seems that the students at the 'B' and 'C' levels were struggling to answer the questions; therefore, they made the largest number of errors.

### 5.2. Students' Errors

Table 2 displays that the total number of the errors made by the students is 207, classified into two comprehensive types, developmental (159 errors) and interference (48 errors), according to their causes and sources. The big difference between these two types of errors, as a matter of fact, supports

Swain's (1971) and Dulay and Burt's (1972) conclusion which states that as second or foreign language learners progress in their learning of the target language, their reliance on their native language decreases.

**Table ( 2 )**  
Types of errors made by the students

| Type of errors | Number of errors | Percentage |
|----------------|------------------|------------|
| Developmental  | 159              | 76.8       |
| I Interference | 48               | 23.2       |
| Total          | 207              | 100        |

In the case of the participants of this study, they are at the fourth academic level in the Department of Foreign Languages, which means that they are somewhat advanced students; consequently, they have reduced their reliance on their native language to a large extent.

#### 5.2.1. Interference Errors

The interference errors are divided into two types, literal translation from Arabic, and omission of the indefinite article. Table 3 shows that the students made nine translation errors, and 39 indefinite article omission errors.

**Table ( 3 )**  
Classification of the interference errors

| Type of error                      | Number of errors | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| Translation from Arabic            | 9                | 18.75      |
| Omission of the indefinite article | 39               | 81.25      |
| Total                              | 43               | 100        |

Because of the test anxiety and the limited time allotted to the test, the subjects echoed their Arabic language and produced that number of interference errors. They felt that they did not have enough time to give their performance another moment's thought; otherwise, they would not have produced such errors, as they have said in their comments. As a result, and

without being aware of these errors, they produced sentences such as the following two incorrect ones.

- \* This not true. This incorrect English sentence echoes the correct Arabic sentence, *Hatha laysa sa'ah*. (translation error).
- \* This is difficult test. It resembles the correct Arabic sentence, *Hatha imtihan sa'ab*. (article omission error).

The parallelism between the Arabic and English sentences is quite clear in the learners' errors. The two examples above demonstrate that in the first sentence the students dropped verb to be, while in the second one, they used verb to be but deleted the indefinite article. This fact supports the students' comments that they know the grammatical rules that underlie the deviant sentences they have produced, but because of their reliance on their native language, they have produced these errors.

### 5.2.2. Developmental Errors

The participants of the study made 159 developmental errors constituting 76.82% of the total number of their errors. These errors, as table 4 displays, have been classified into five types: wrong tense, spelling, subject-verb agreement, omission of the relative pronouns and finally redundancy errors.

**Table ( 4 )**  
Classification of the developmental errors

| Type of error                     | No. of errors | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|------------|
| Wrong tense                       | 43            | 27.05      |
| Spelling                          | 25            | 15.72      |
| Subject-verb agreement            | 70            | 44.03      |
| Omission of the relative pronouns | 12            | 07.54      |
| Redundancy                        | 09            | 05.66      |
| Total                             | 159           | 100        |

One major reason of these errors is the difficulty of the target language which is reflected in the general characteristics of rule learning such as



wrong generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to realize the conditions under which rules apply, as Richards (1971) suggests.

On examining the classification of errors, one can recognize that the majority of these errors involve subject-verb agreement, which constitute 44.03% of the total number of the errors made by the students. As such, one might be tempted to conclude that the students are fossilized and may not be able to improve their competence. However, the fact is that these errors, as the students' comments reveal, do not indicate a sign of fossilization; that is, these nonlinguistic forms are not permanent. Rather, they may destabilize or change into the authentic norms. Fossilization is more likely to take place if the students are not motivated to change. Moreover, these errors are likely to change into slips of the tongue or pen, as Ancker (2000) has claimed. The students who participated in the study are really motivated and have the linguistic competence to eliminate these errors. That is quite clear in their comments on their errors, where they have stated that they have made these errors just because of test anxiety, the limited time allotted to the exam and their concentration on content rather than form.

The second point to be raised here is the participants' misspelled words. It is worthwhile mentioning that when the data were collected, the salient spelling errors which reflect the learner's linguistic competence were only considered. The misspelled word "tow," for example, is considered a serious error and reflects the participants' competence, especially if it is repeated in their performance. Some reasons, of course among others, for such spelling errors are the confusing correspondence between sound and script, words that have the same pronunciation but different forms, and finally words that have the letter 'c', which is sometimes pronounced as 'k', and sometimes as 's'. (for more on Arab students' spelling errors, see El-Hibir and Al-Taha, (1992), who convincingly accounted for these spelling errors).

Most of the relative pronoun structures exist in both Arabic and English, but with some differences, which cause some problems to Arab students. In their performance, the participants of the study dropped the relative pronouns and produced incorrect sentences (see appendix). A possible explanation to such errors is that the students attended an Error Analysis course where they encountered and analyzed incorrect sentences where relative pronouns were used or dropped. As a result, they became

oversensitive and aware of such errors and in order not to make them they dropped the relative pronouns where they were supposed to use them. It seems that they have been trying to reduce their linguistic burden by allowing their Arabic system to function instead of that of the target language. Therefore, when the students say in their comments that they have produced same and similar errors because of carelessness and test anxiety, there is no reason to doubt their credibility.

The subject-verb agreement errors constitute 44.03% of the total number of the errors made by the students which is a high percentage for such somewhat advanced students, who are not supposed to make such many errors. The only possible explanation for these unexpected errors, which is provided by the students themselves, is that the linguistic pressure placed on the students because of the test forced them to allow their Arabic system to function freely. This becomes evident if one realizes that the same students did not produce the same errors in their other written performance such as their homework. The same explanation applies to the redundancy errors.

### **5.3. Students' Comments**

The students' comments on their errors will be divided into two parts: the first will encompass the general comments shared by all the students, while the second will comprise individual comments on some errors made by some students, especially the 'A' level students.

#### **5.3.1. General Comments**

The majority of the students have admitted that most of their errors are due to various factors other than their linguistic competence. Test anxiety was the main factor behind their errors. They have claimed that worrying about the test results has dominated their thinking. Consequently, they have produced these 'silly' errors, as they have described them. Their concentration on content rather than form is another reason of their errors. They have said that what was important to them was to answer the content questions correctly in order to pass the test. The third reason of their errors is the limited time allotted to the test which prevents them from going over their performance to correct whatever errors or mistakes they have made.

The students' justification of their errors is indicative for two reasons. First, all the students have expressed their surprise at making these errors simply because, as they have said in their comments, they know the rules that underlie these produced deviant structures and their making them is a matter of carelessness; that is, they are slips of the pen which are not significant for the process of language learning, as Corder (1971) has suggested. Second, it is evident that the students' claim is acceptable, since they have produced structures similar to those deviant ones in other parts of their answer sheets.

This dogma, the substantial number of errors the students made and their claim that they know the rules that underlie them, can be resolved through recalling the distinction between receptive competence, the grammatical rules by which the learner understands others' oral and written production, and the productive competence, the rules he/she uses to produce utterances in the target language. It is argued that EFL learners employ the correct grammatical rules to perceive others' written or verbal production. However, when it comes to production, they face some difficulties; although these same rules are available to them, their use becomes optional (Troike, 1969).

### **5.3.2. Individual Comments**

Although most of the students have claimed that they know the grammatical rules that underlie the deviant structures they have produced, some of them, especially the 'A' level students, have admitted their ignorance of these rules. One amazing comment provided by one student who produced the sentence "*It is a test which indicate...*" is that "*I thought that since I used verb to be in the very beginning of the sentence, , there is no need to add the third person marker 's' to the verb which comes after the relative pronoun.*" In another deviant sentence, the same student dropped the relative pronoun which she was supposed to use. The deviant sentence reads as follows: "*It is a test measures the students' reading skill.*" In her comment, she wrote "*If I use the relative pronoun, I have to drop the third person singular marker, 's', which is wrong.*" The student's two deviant sentences and her comment on them shed light on the student's "confused competence" concerning the use of relative pronouns. Although the relative pronoun structure exists in the student native language, she failed to use it

correctly in her English production, because in Arabic the pronoun that refers either to the subject or the object of the sentence is attached to the verb, which is not the case in English. The second indication of the student's comment is that she is aware of the subject-verb agreement structure and is able to produce it correctly, but because the relative pronoun structure confused her, and because she concentrated on the content, she sacrificed the use of the relative pronoun to produce a correct sentence, as she believes.

Concerning the deletion of the definite and indefinite articles, some students have admitted that they do not know when to use them and when not. This failure to learn and understand the use of the articles explains the students' excessive use of these articles in other situations. It is quite clear that there is a problem with the students' linguistic competence in this regard. The Arabic language system of the definite and indefinite articles might have a negative effect on the students' wrong use of these articles in the target language, and this really needs to be investigated by researchers. (for more on Arab students' wrong use of the definite/indefinite articles, see Kharma, 1981).

An interesting and indicative comment is provided by a student who has produced a deviant sentence where she has used the auxiliary 'be' in a place where it does not belong. She has produced "*The test is measure...*" and commented "*I know the correct structure; that is I should not add the auxiliary 'be' to the sentence, but because I did want to produce a correct sentence, I added the auxiliary 'be' to form the present tense structure.*" A similar comment is expressed by another student who has used the passive voice structure in one of her sentences where she is not supposed to. She has commented "*Although I know that I should not use the passive structure in this sentence, I did use it. Why? I do not know! I just wanted to produce a correct and elegant structure!*" These comments are in line of what Brown (1994) has noted concerning language learning. He has questioned the issue that the learner who is consciously aware of what he/she is doing might find it difficult to learn a second or foreign language meaningfully. In other words, is it easier to learn a second or foreign language consciously or unconsciously? Actually, Brown has left the question open, giving equal logical justifications for the two possible answers, yes or no.

## **6. Implications of the Study**

Based on the students' perception of their errors, the following implications might be helpful to the EFL teacher.

First, in light of the students' comments, something has to be done to rectify the opposing viewpoints of the teachers and students concerning the errors made by the students. While teachers consider their students' errors as a manifestation of their poor linguistic competence, students consider them as slips of the tongue or pen. To solve this 'problem,' teachers should consider the distinction between the errors which reflect the students' linguistic competence and those called performance errors, and accordingly, tell their students in advance which errors will be considered slips of the tongue and which will be considered competence ones. Consequently, teachers' correction will be based on that classification of errors. Furthermore, to reduce their students' threat of failure and to orient them for success, teachers can tell their students that unless the errors hinder their intended meaning, they will not be penalized for them. Through such an understanding between teachers and students, it is hoped that the students will be able to overcome their test anxiety and, in turn, reduce their errors.

Second, it should be known to teachers that error analysis has been employed to draw a picture of the the learners' learning strategies and never meant to eliminate or even reduce the students' errors. Rather, it intends to help teachers adjust their teaching methods and understand their students' learning strategies. However, errors, regardless of the teaching methods employed in the classroom, are there and will stay as long as foreign language teaching is practiced. Therefore, teachers should not be so worried about them.

Third, much has been said about the teaching methods and materials which are based on contrastive analysis. However, the students' perception of their errors urges a new visit to that issue. Since most of the students' errors involve the subject-verb agreement structure which, in part, is due to native language interference, those teaching methods which are based on contrastive analysis should be revised and made less dependent on that analysis. It looks more advantageous to employ authentic materials and when need be, teachers can draw their students' attention to the differences between the native and foreign languages. In this case, second or foreign

language learners' sensitivity and awareness of these differences will be raised, and that might help students reduce their interference errors.

Fourth, the last indicative point of this study involves the grammatical drills and exercises used in the EFL classroom. Excessive drills and exercises which are based on aspects of the target language that are different from those of the native language, as is the case in most of our schools, will make the students oversensitive concerning these structures. This oversensitivity will increase the students' tension when they attempt to use the target language in either their communication or writing production and unintentionally produce interference errors. This indication appears to contradict the previous one which states that teachers can draw their students' attention to some differences between the native and target language. However, the case is not so. A moderate sensitivity of the differences between the two languages might ease and reduce the students' tension, while oversensitivity may complicate things and lead the students to make unintentional and unnecessary errors.

## **7. Conclusion**

Error analysis has been criticized as being an inefficient tool for studying the way second language learners develop their target language. It is argued that error analysis deals with the learners' productive competence rather than the receptive one, and it is also an imperfect instrument for categorizing errors and explaining them. However, EFL teachers and researchers can not ignore error analysis as an important tool by which they can learn more about the psycholinguistic processes involved in the learning of a second language. Furthermore, EFL teachers observe these errors whenever they read or listen to their students' performance; consequently, they have to deal with and analyze these errors, and accordingly, improve their teaching methods. In conclusion, error analysis is important to EFL teachers, SLA researchers and EFL students as well.

This study attempts to tackle the question of error analysis from the students' perspective in order to clarify the learning strategies EFL learners employ when they learn a second language. In light of the findings of the study, some important indications have been inferred which might, it is hoped, help EFL teachers and methodologists improve their teaching

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methods, which, in turn, will help reduce the errors made by the students. One of the important implications of the study is that second or foreign language learners should be aware of the differences between their native and foreign languages. However, teachers should not use the drills and exercises which are based on these differences excessively in the classroom; otherwise, the students will be oversensitive and confused concerning the differences between the native and target languages, and while trying to produce the correct structure, they produce the wrong one. This is probably why the students in this study have claimed that they know the rules that underlie the deviant structures they have made.

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## **Appendix**

### **Examples of the Students' Errors**

#### **A. Interference Errors**

- \*This not true.
- \*It is difficult test.
- \*Give them a long time.
- \*The answer is that decrease 5 points.
- \*It is bad test.
- \*It is bad item.

#### **B. Developmental Errors**

- \*This will leads us to understand.
- \*It is influenced the test.
- \*There are tow kinds of tests.
- \*The student will loos some marks.
- \*It is a very good marks.
- \*He never did not make a high score.
- \*The score is change.
- \*It is a test indicate..... .
- \*This item are..... .
- \*It is deal with.... .
- \*It mean the stability of the test.
- \*He dose not lose.... .
- \*It has call temporal.
- \*The time is so limit.
- \*The students can not able.
- \*This may confused the students.
- \*The student does not improved.
- \*One student is set up..... .
- \*He use wrong item.

## **إدراك طالبات الجامعة السعودية لأخطائهن الكتابية في اللغة الإنجليزية**

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### **الملخص:**

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على كيفية تعلم الطالبات للغة الإنجليزية من خلال تعليقاتهن على أخطائهن الكتابية في أحد الامتحانات النصفية. ولقد شارك اثنتان وثلاثون طالبة في قسم اللغات الأجنبية، المستوى الرابع، في هذه الدراسة حيث عملن مئتين وسبعة أخطاء. وعندما طلب منهن أن يعلقن على أخطائهن قال معظمهن إن هذه الأخطاء كانت نتيجة للقلق الناتج عن الامتحان وتركيزهن على كتابة المعلومات الصحيحة وعدم التركيز على سلامة اللغة، وأن الوقت القصير المحدد للامتحان كان عاملاً مهماً في عملهن لهذه الأخطاء. كما أن المشاركات في الدراسة قلن أنهن يعرضن القواعد اللغوية للأخطاء التي عملنها. من الدلائل الهامة لهذه الدراسة هو أنه يجب أن يكون طالب اللغة الإنجليزية واعياً للاختلافات بين اللغة العربية واللغة الإنجليزية ولكن يجب أن تكون التمارين التي تركز على هذه الاختلافات موجزة وغير كثيرة حتى لا تخلق لدى الطلاب حساسية زائدة قد تدفعهم لعمل أخطاء لغوية غير مقصودة ولا مبرر لها.