

أنواع الأخطاء الكتابية وأسبابها في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طُلاب المرحلة الثانوية بالسعودية

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المستخلص: هدف هذا البحث النوعي إلى دراسة أخطاء طُلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الثانوية، وهي فترة التعليم المبكر قبل الالتحاق بالكليات والجامعات. وتمَّ استخدام أسلوب تحليل الخطأ لفحص الأخطاء الكتابية في الاختبارات النهائية وتحديد أسباب هذه الأخطاء. تمَّ جمع أكثر من (5000) خطأ من (904) ورقة امتحان لطلّاب مدرستين ثانويتين. وجدت هذه الدراسة أربعة أنواع من الأخطاء في الكتابة لدى طُلاب المدارس الثانوية السعودية في اللغة الإنجليزية باعتبارها لغة أجنبية: أخطاء نحوية، وإملائية، وصرفية، وأسلوبية. وبدأت عملية التحليل من خلال تتبع هذه الأخطاء للتحقق من الأسباب. حيث اتضح أنَّ معظم تلك الأخطاء نتجت من أحد العوامل التالية أو مزيج منها: التقلُّ الخطأ من اللغة العربية النقل الخطأ من اللغة الإنجليزية، أسباب متعلِّقة بالتدريس، وعوامل مرتبطة باحتياجات الطلاب. وتوفّر هذه النتائج للمعلِّمين وأصحاب القرار معلومات غنية حول التّحديات الشائعة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية وتعلُّمها، وتسهم في اقتراح حلول مناسبة لتحسين أساليب التدريس واستراتيجيات التعلُّم وتصميم المناهج الدراسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، تحليل الأخطاء، التدريبات الكتابية، أخطاء الطلاب الشائعة.

Types and Causes of Secondary School Students' English Writing Errors

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined the errors of EFL secondary school students in the early education period before attending colleges and universities. Error analysis was employed to examine written errors in the final examinations and to determine the causes of these errors. More than 5000 errors were collected from the exam papers of 904 students from two secondary schools. This study found four types of errors in the writing of Saudi EFL secondary school students: grammar, mechanics, lexis, and semantics. The tracking of these errors assisted in the analysis process to verify these factors. Most written errors were caused by one of the following factors or a combination of them: Arabic language transfer, English language transfer, teaching-related issues, and student needs. These findings provide educators and policymakers with sufficient data on common challenges in language teaching and learning. They can propose suitable solutions to improve their teaching approaches, learning strategies, and curriculum designs.

Keywords: English education, error analysis, writing practice, common learners' mistakes.

Introduction

English in Saudi Arabia is taught as a foreign language (EFL). There have been several changes in how and when to teach it since its introduction into Saudi education in 1937 (Alrabai, 2018). Saudi students learn English starting in the fourth grade of elementary school before the last change that requires teaching it from the first grade (MoE, 2022). Studies show that many students do not achieve high levels of English competence after learning for nine years in public education (Rajab 2013). Students attend universities and colleges with low levels of English and are, therefore, required to study English again in the preparatory year program (PYP). Their low achievement is caused by several multidimensional factors including first-language interference, cultural effects, and lack of exposure to English. Other causes might include affective factors, such as motivation, high anxiety, low autonomy, and low self-esteem. English learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia face many challenges, such as the centralized system of education, large classes, teaching approaches, and learning practices, despite governmental efforts to improve the process of teaching and learning (Rajab 2013).

Language learning is a complicated process that involves many challenges in different skills including writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Learners make uncountable errors when learning a new language and its system (Brown, 2015). This is a common practice for language learners because these errors show that learning takes place and is in the process (Selinker, 1972). Among the errors in language learning, many learners consider writing errors the most challenging (James, 1998). This indicates that writing meaningfully without errors is not an inborn skill, but a challenge for all language users. Students can learn writing skills through several instructional stages such as planning, drafting, revising, rewriting, and editing. Following these stages enables students to find errors, deal with them, and correct them. In addition, teachers can provide feedback to guide students in developing their writing skills and correcting their errors (Nunan, 1999).

Language learners' errors indicate progress in the process of learning a language. The errors are not accidental mistakes, but evidence of rule-governed behavior in language learning (Selinker, 1972). Studying learning errors can provide information about learning progress and linguistic development (Brown, 2015). Studying the errors "resembles methodologically the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process" (Corder, 1974, p. 125). It shows how much learners know about the target language and how much is still not learned (Shrestha, 1979).

Corder (1967) considered several reasons for the importance of errors. First, the teacher could determine how far toward the learning goal the learner has progressed and, accordingly, what remains for them to learn. Second, errors provide the researcher with signs of how language is learned, and what approaches or procedures are used by the learner to discover the language. Third, errors are essential to the learners themselves when they look at them as devices for learning. Finally, errors might show the quality and adequacy of the teaching method, indicating that errors are not committed if the teaching method is adequate.

This study uses the term 'error' to refer to all issues in writing, although some scholars differentiate between errors and mistakes. Shrestha (1979) was among the first scholars to distinguish between mistake and error by relying on a self-correction criterion. Mistakes are self-corrected, whereas errors are not. Errors are systematic and occur frequently because students are not able to recognize them. Corder (1974) distinguished between performance and competence errors. Performance errors resemble mistakes as

they happen when the students are tired or hurried, whereas competence errors are more serious because they show inadequate learning. Brown (2015) stated that mistakes refer to a failure to apply a known system correctly, while errors are an obvious deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. Finally, students can make mistakes, but not errors. However, teachers can allocate both.

The PYP students' writings include many issues that are usually produced by beginners, but not accepted by advanced students at the tertiary level. For example, subject-verb-agreement is a common error in their writing. Other examples include the misspelling of simple vocabulary, preposition choice, article issues, verb tense errors, and word-forming mistakes. The researcher observed this problem for several years and had the curiosity to track such errors, determine their causes, and provide a remedy to develop his students' skills. Therefore, he decided to conduct this study in some secondary schools.

This study shed light on the writing errors of students in high schools. The study aims to discover their errors during an early education period before they attend the tertiary level. Most studies do not focus on EFL students' errors during primary education. It also aims at classifying common errors based on the causes that may contribute to committing them. This should enable this study to provide appropriate solutions for improving EFL teaching approaches and learning strategies. Therefore, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most frequent types of errors found in the writing of Saudi Secondary School students?
2. What are the possible causes for these errors?

Literature Review

Error analysis is a crucial step in language learning that needs thorough research. This requires engaging with the errors, which play critical roles in language learning and teaching, particularly if the language is the students' foreign language, as in the case of English in Saudi Arabia. Since its establishment in the 1960s, the theory has been the focus of many earlier researchers and linguists including Corder (1967) and Richards (1971). It is used as a substitute for Contrastive Analysis Theory, which studies errors by comparing students' first language (L1) and second language (L2). This comparison helps recognize the role of language transfer in learning a new language, but it does not explain many errors resulting from students' incorrect understanding of the system of the new language (Nunan, 1999).

Corder (1967) considered the goals of error analysis in recognizing, describing, and explaining errors. These goals encourage researchers and enrich their desire to develop language teaching, enhance pedagogy, and discover more about L2 acquisition. This led Corder (1974) to suggest a model of five steps for error analysis research: sample collection of student language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors. In general, errors are classified as errors of competence or performance. The first comes from applying the rules of L1 wrongly in L2, while the second comes from mistakes in using L2 (Shrestha, 1979).

Literature about Saudi EFL has received many studies during the last decade, as reviewed below, which indicate that most students encounter difficulties in language learning and do not achieve higher levels of achievement and proficiency. According to

the IELTS statistics of test-taker performance in 2022, the English language proficiency of Saudi students is not among the best countries (IELTS, 2022).

Saudi students achieved low scores on both overall and individual skills, as observed by the IELTS on Academic test performance. In the TOEFL iBT (2021) test and score data summary (2021), the same result was confirmed by the Saudi students who took the test during that year. Out of 30, they commonly scored 19 in reading, 22 in listening, 21 in speaking, and 19 in writing, with a total of 81 out of 120. These means of section scores are considered a low Percentile Rank of TOEFL iBT (2021) for both high school and undergraduate students.

The Education First English Proficiency Index (EF-EPI, 2022) tests the level of students' English proficiency in public schools in 111 countries. The last ranking showed that Saudi Arabia ranked 102. It is usually at the bottom of the ranking with a very low level of proficiency. As this study focused on writing, many studies have investigated the causes behind the low level of students' writing and the errors that prevent them from developing writing skills (Alzahrani et al., 2020; Atashian & Al-Bahri 2018; Khatter, 2019). At King Saud University, Nuruzzaman, Shafiqul Islam, and Shuchi (2018) examined the writing errors of 90 undergraduate Saudi students. They studied different levels of EFL as a foundation course to complete their majors in three different colleges. The results showed that Saudi EFL students made many errors in grammar, lexis, semantics, and mechanics. They committed many grammatical errors, which was the most error-prone area for students of the three majors.

Similarly, the writing of 30 Saudi EFL students was investigated by Ahmad and Othman (2019) at King Khalid University. The focus was on the effect of lexical errors on writing performance. Some teachers were interviewed to identify lexical errors and to determine their causes. The main causes of these lexical errors are L1 interference and inadequate vocabulary knowledge. Students are encouraged to enrich their vocabulary and teachers are recommended to provide students with immediate feedback.

There is a study conducted in Saudi secondary schools by Alzahrani et al. (2020), who examined the writing difficulties and needs of 216 female EFL learners in the last grade of public education. This mixed-method study found that mechanics, use of proper vocabulary, and organization are the main issues of female EFL learners. It is suggested to establish a writing program to expose learners to satisfactory training in writing skills and increase the number of writing hours. Some studies have examined the impact of L1 and culture on Saudi students' L2 writing ability. For example, Alluhaydan (2016) examined four students' writing skills based on the theory of contrastive rhetoric and interviewed them about their experiences. The findings reveal some major grammatical and content problems in Saudi EFL students' writing due to their thinking in Arabic while writing. They faced difficulties in word repetition, parallel construction, and overuse of grammatical rules.

Khatter (2019) analyzed the most common essay writing errors among advanced Saudi EFL female learners at Majmaa'h University. She attempted to identify the difficulties and underlying sources by analyzing a written corpus of 40 students' essays. Each student wrote three essays using narrative, descriptive, and compare/contrast organization and responded to a questionnaire about writing difficulties. In 120 essays, she found that punctuation errors were the most frequent type of errors, followed by spelling, prepositions, articles, wrong verbs, and wrong word forms. These errors were mainly caused by inter-lingual and intra-lingual transfers.

In similar EFL contexts, Atashian and Al-Bahri (2018) investigated grammatical errors in the academic writing of Omani students majoring in English Education at Nizwa University. They collected data from 200 students' writings during the semester. The researchers formed a table of frequency to list the types of grammatical errors and the number of times the error was observed. The findings showed that tenses, adverbs, pronouns, subject-verb agreement, misplaced apostrophes, passive voice, and punctuation were the most frequent grammatical errors. Interviews with the students indicated that their perceptions were examined against their real errors in academic writing.

Hamed (2018) examined the most common linguistic errors and their frequency in the writing of 40 non-English major Libyan students. The author classified errors into four categories: grammatical, syntactic, substance, and lexical. There were seven subcategories of grammatical errors: tenses, articles, prepositions, singular/plural nouns, adjectives, possessive cases, and relative clauses. There are three subcategories of syntactic errors: subject/verb agreement, nouns and pronouns, and word order. Spelling errors had the highest frequency (38.8%), followed by capitalization and punctuation errors. These errors could be due to over-generalization in the target language, resulting from ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules, and interference resulting from L1 (Arabic) negative transfer.

Al-Hazani and Al-Talhab (2018) studied the effect of teacher corrective feedback on 50 female EFL Saudi students' grammatical and lexical accuracy in their foundation program. They used a pre-/post-test/delayed post-test design to collect data from both groups over 10 weeks. The findings demonstrated that the experimental group students had significantly better achievements than the control group students. In addition, teachers' written corrective feedback had an important positive effect and improved the students' grammatical and lexical accuracy, although they produced many errors in writing.

In a different EFL context, Sermon, Limnometric, and Pochakorn (2017) examined the students' writing errors at a Thai University and explored the sources of these errors. The researchers selected 26 participants (2 males and 24 females) who were second-year English majors. They collected and analyzed 104 pieces of writing essays. The most frequently committed errors were punctuation, articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and fragments. The major sources of the errors were inter-lingual interference, intra-lingual interference, limited knowledge of English grammar vocabulary, and students' carelessness.

In the end, the literature focuses on the written errors of college students worldwide. This means that writing issues at the tertiary level have attracted most researchers interested in language learning and writing skills, as I discussed above. Although these studies were conducted in different contexts, their findings were consistent. Such studies prove that in Saudi Arabia, the focus of research is on students of high education in general. Alsowat (2017) states that about three-fourths of the literature was conducted at the university level showing limited interest in school-level research.

Although there is neglect of written errors in secondary schools, some recent studies have investigated students' written errors (Alzahrani et al., 2020). However, these studies did not analyze the essential reasons and implications of their findings. Most of them list the findings in numbers, charts, tables, or statistics, without providing a deep description. This lack creates a gap in the literature that increases the importance of examining students' writing errors at different school levels. This study attempted to fill this gap by

tracking students' written errors in Saudi Arabian Secondary schools. It also determines whether the types and causes of errors occur in secondary schools or if there are different errors and causes.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized an error analysis approach to examine EFL students' writing in Saudi secondary schools. Error analysis is a systematic investigation of students' errors, which was created by Corder (1967), to recognize how to improve language learning. This study focused on students' writing errors during their final examinations of the semester. Conducting an error analysis helped examine a collection of errors produced by students. Such a research approach suited the aims of the current study, mainly to investigate the existence of certain errors in a specific written text and categorize them based on their reasons.

Context

This study focused on students' writing skills in two Saudi secondary schools. Two schools were selected to collect samples of students' products at different levels. In Saudi secondary schools, students use a textbook series of Mega Goal that is written by Ghazel and Kozanoglou (2021). Secondary Schools follow a system known as a credit system, curriculum system, or course system. In this system, students must study five compulsory English courses starting with English 1 and ending with English 5. Each course lasted for an entire semester through five weekly classes. Each class lasted 45 minutes. The writing skills are taught significantly in this textbook with several weekly exercises. The system is also highly centralized, with no modification or adjustment of curricula by teachers, principals, schools, and districts.

Participants

The numbers of students in these two secondary schools were different. The first school had 428, while the other had 476. Table 1 provides more details on their distribution. They had been studying English since the fourth grade of elementary school. Therefore, they had been learning English for 6 to 8 years based on their current grade. Secondary school students are usually 16-18 years old. Every classroom had about 32-40 students. Most students are Saudis who are homogeneous in their cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. They were taught by Saudi teachers. Most teachers have a bachelor's degree in English Education from Saudi universities with teaching experience of 3-21 years.

Table 1

Information About Schools

Grade	School A	School B
First grade	167	207
Second grade	140	145
Third grade	121	124
Total	428	476

Data Collection

The researcher obtained the required approval to conduct this study at both schools. Collecting data depended on students' writing at the final examination of the third semester of 2021-2022. Students were required to write about a specific topic based on what they had studied during the semester, as they were at different levels. The Appendix

includes a list of questions in the writing part of the final examinations at both schools. Students' answers to these questions were used as instruments for this study. The researcher preferred to investigate these written answers in the exams as serious products for students who attempt to achieve higher marks. This means that their writing in the final examination illustrates their skills and errors. Therefore, he did not plan to duplicate instruments commonly used in previous studies. Such studies required students to write samples for research purposes, to which students responded carelessly.

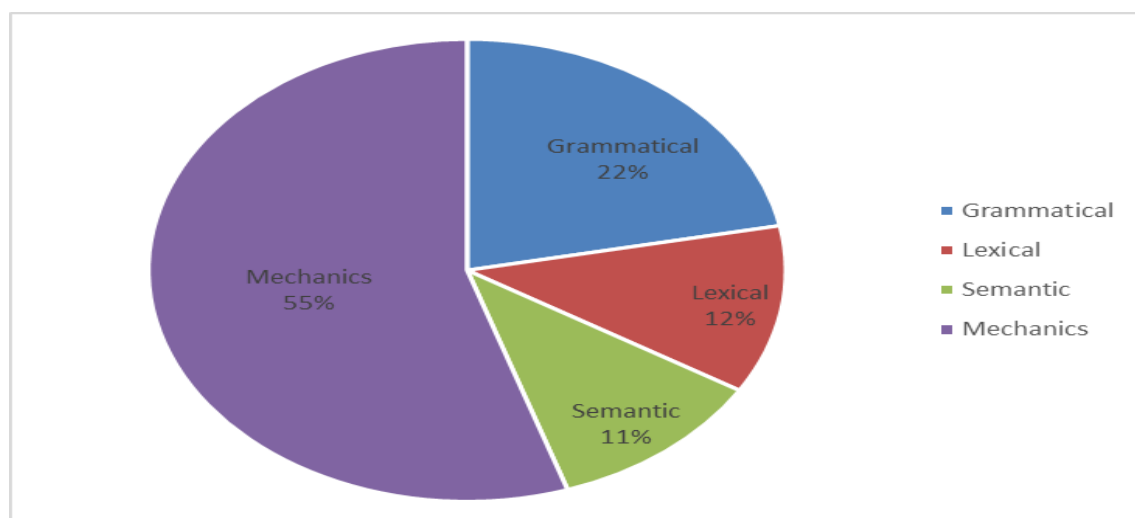
The researcher spent four days at each school to manually track the exam papers across all levels. He reviewed approximately 100 papers in six hours daily. He screened each paper several times to identify all written issues. In many cases, he evaluated and marked the written parts of the papers as the teachers did. He focused more on papers with many errors in writing sections. He prepared a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to address these issues. He also used his phone to capture more than 200 photos of paragraphs, sentences, and errors. For documenting purposes, he kept notes on his observations, classifications, and thoughts about errors. He neither checked the students' identities nor recorded their names. The sheet collected 5189 errors. Such a list is sufficient for conducting the analysis.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data started earlier when the researcher took notes during the data collection process. For example, he noted that some errors were repeated in different students' answers. He reflected on the data and commented on some errors as he gathered them. In qualitative research, it is common practice to have evolving and evolutionary procedures that facilitate researchers to analyze the data as they collect it (Saldaña, 2011). When data collection was completed, the researcher followed Corder's (1974) steps of error analysis, which included identification, description, explanation, and evaluation of errors. These steps make error analysis a useful instrument for revealing problematic areas of language learning and examining students' errors. These steps led to the coding process, which divided all written errors into different categories. Based on the taxonomy of Corder (1967), errors are categorized as grammatical, lexical, semantic, and mechanical. Figure 1 shows the percentages of these categories in the students' writing. Three experienced researchers carefully reviewed the data collection and analysis process.

Figure 1

Percentages of the Main Errors



Findings

Scanning the data against linguistic aspects identified the most frequent errors in students writing. This study found 5189 errors committed by students in their writing during the final examinations. Examining these errors resulted in several types. Each type included more than 10 errors, such as the addition of the article, language switch, wrong word choice, spelling, omission of a preposition, Arabic structure, word choice errors, punctuation, disordering, and capitalization. Such types with many errors can prove students' concerns. This means that if any type did not include 10 or more errors, it was excluded from the sorting process. Therefore, all types were categorized into four main themes. Table 2 shows these four categories with the total number and percentages of each category.

Discussion

This study aimed to answer two questions regarding the most frequent written errors of Saudi secondary school students and their possible causes. Answering these questions can shed light on the errors that these students make in high school before attending the tertiary level. Based on the taxonomy of writing errors (Corder, 1967), the analysis indicates that common errors are categorized into grammar, lexis, semantics, and mechanics. These categories are discussed separately to answer the first research question regarding common errors. They are ordered based on their frequencies and percentages, as shown in Table 2. This discussion provides examples of the most frequent errors that are often repeated in the data.

Table 2

Categories, Numbers, and Percentages of Errors

Error category	Number	Percentage
Grammatical	1138	21.9%
Lexical	612	11.8%
Semantic	580	11.2%
Mechanical	2859	55.1%

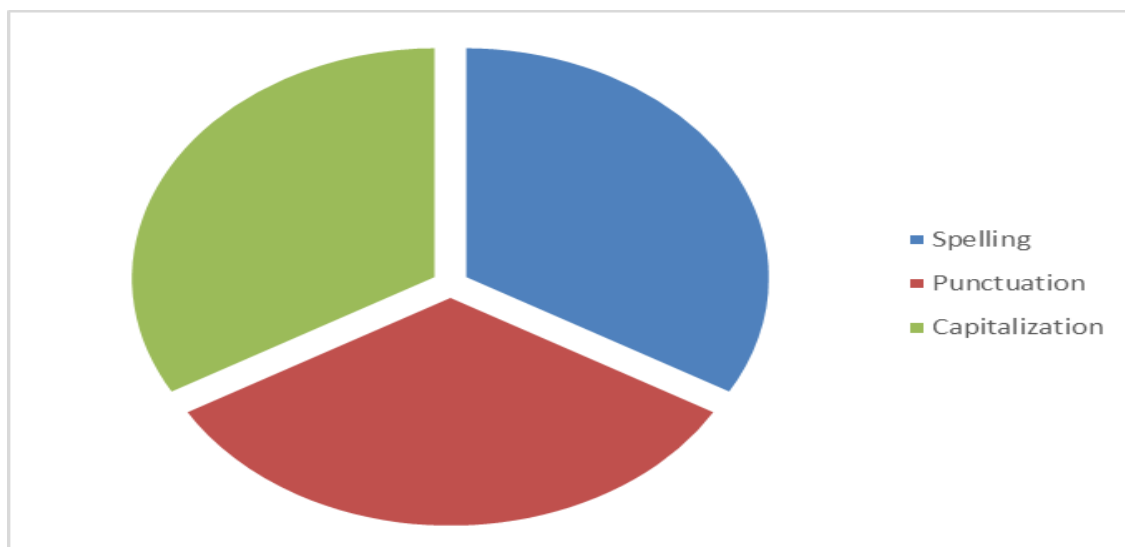
1. Mechanical Errors

The most common errors were mechanical errors, which accounted for approximately 55% of the participants' errors. Mechanical errors include the writing rules of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (Figure 2). These errors, particularly spelling and punctuation, occur in every student's writing. This agrees with the findings of Al Karazoun (2016), Alzahrani et al. (2020), Khatter, (2019), and Zuhour and Albalawi, (2015).

Spelling and punctuation errors are the most problematic issues for many Arab students. Spelling errors are a main challenge for native Arabic language students (Deacon, 2017). The current study proves that Saudi students are not excluded. Among their spelling errors, they substitute a letter with another, such as enside (inside) and bitween (between); add a letter to the word, such as palay (play) and sleepe (sleep); reverse a letter in the word like a freind (friend) and restuarant (restaurant); and forget a letter of the word, such as schol (school) and wich (which). Such spelling errors are the main types of errors among English learners (Cook, 2004).

Figure 2

Types of Mechanical Errors



Punctuation is another issue faced by many Saudi EFL students at both schools. Most of them are confused about how to end the sentences with a comma or a point. For example, a student wrote: “Studying online was good in corona time, [.] my teachers explained the lesson on the computer, [.] we did not go to the school, [.] we stayed in the houses, [.] all people ... etc.” Some of them ignore the punctuation mark at the end of the sentence, such as “Saudi vision 2030 changed all things we see new programs we see big shooping [shopping] malls many people will come to my country i like prince mohammed ibn salman... etc.” This is in line with Sawalmeh’s (2013) finding about Saudi students who have trouble using perfect punctuation in their writing.

The error of capitalization is usually related to punctuation and mechanical errors. Capitalization errors usually occur at the beginning of sentences, whereas punctuation errors occur at the end of sentences. Many students did not capitalize on the first letter of the sentence as a common error, as seen in the above examples. In addition, some students forgot to capitalize on the first letter of proper nouns, including people, titles, languages, and countries like Saudi Vision 2030, Mohammed, and Salman. Many students ignored the capitalization rule of ‘I’ which is the speaker pronoun. Punctuation and capitalization are important rules in writing mechanics. Both help deliver clear messages and develop strong connections between the writer and the reader.

2. Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors were the second most common errors among participants. The findings include 1138 errors, about 22% grammatical errors, including any unsuitable use of grammar rules. The most common examples of these errors were verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, double subject, negation, wrong word order, incorrect forms of verbs, third-person singular, relative clauses, conjunctions, and the misuse of articles and prepositions. Such grammatical errors occur because of the misapplication of grammatical rules (Richards, 1971; Selinker, 1972).

Many students failed to use the right verb tense according to context. For instance, they used the past tense in place of the present tense as in “blackboard always made the learning easy” or vice versa as in “students and teachers do not go to school during Covid-19.” This confirms that understanding tenses in English is problematic for Arab students

due to the different Arabic language structures. This is supported by the findings of Atashian and Al-Bahri (2018) who argued that some grammatical rules are confusing and ambiguous.

Table 3

Examples of Most Common Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors	Example
subject-verb agreement	The students is learning very well.
double subject	Teachers they are using online blackboard.
negation	Not all people don't like online learning.
wrong word order	Using technology helps in the classroom learners.
incorrect forms of verbs	The country deciding a lot of development.
third person singular	King Salman support modern learning methods.
relative clauses	My school is next to the beach, who it has interesting view.
conjunctions	As it is a nice city, so you can live there.
misuse of articles	Rice kabsah is delicious dish in my country.
misuse of prepositions	You can reach at there in car or bus.

Table 3 shows examples of the most common grammatical errors. Such errors have been previously reported in the literature. Regarding articles, for example, many errors show that Saudi students are not able to use the definite article 'the' and indefinite article 'a/an' appropriately. Several studies have proven that it is a challenge to master the use of English articles (Sawalmeh, 2013). Another example is the conjunction errors that occur when students attempt to connect two sentences. They failed to use the right conjunction or to double the conjunction, such as "because students cannot go to school, so they study online" and "while blackboard is easy to use, but the internet is not good." One of these conjunctions, either because or so, is sufficient to join both clauses. Such conjunction errors have been found in similar studies in EFL contexts, including Kiriaki and Agustín-Llach (2014) and Nuruzzaman et al. (2018).

Preposition errors are also one of the frequent grammatical errors for Saudi students. Short prepositions, such as on, in, at, to, for, and of; lead to more errors than other prepositions. For example, a student wrote: "we should of study every day," another one wrote: "the hero was married on 2 wives," and a third one wrote: "I am good to use internet in studying." Such errors have been discussed in previous studies (Khatter, 2019; Zuhour & Albalawi, 2015) to demonstrate the struggle to use English prepositions properly.

3. Lexical Errors

Lexical errors occurred in the third position after mechanical and grammatical errors. There were 612 errors in unsuitable usage of lexical items, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. These errors occur at the word level when writing incorrect words and selecting an awkward vocabulary that does not make sense. Such errors lead to writing sentences without a clear meaning or to obtaining the wrong meaning. Lexical errors are not built on rules or structures but might be the wrong choice of words, literal translation, redundancy, and word formation (James, 1998).

More than 300 lexical errors were classified as a wrong choice of words, such as the wrong choice of the homophones 'there/their.' In students' writing, there are various examples of such wrong choices including "the application is named [called] Duolingo," "I said to [told] my friends about my dream," "the hero of the movie did not like to make [have] children," and "he's [his] name is Sami." Other errors were classified as literal

translation errors like “a lot of visitors come from outside [abroad],” and redundancy errors like “they work in the morning shift.”

These lexical errors show that many Saudi students have issues regarding how to use words properly and efficiently. Their writing might not achieve the main purpose of delivering a clear message and expressing complete information. This result supports the findings of Al-Hazzani and Altalhab (2018), Khatter (2019), and Zuhour and Albalawi (2015). These studies prove that lexical errors are challenging for EFL students, who lack clarity in most sentences. It is often difficult for readers to understand what these students have attempted to write.

4. Semantic Errors

The last type of students' written error was the semantic error that existed 580 times in the data. This study considers semantic errors as meaning-based issues because semantic errors imply a wrong meaning. These errors are possibly caused by any type of errors discussed above, such as grammatical and mechanical errors. For example, a spelling error creates a semantic distortion that affects the meaning of a sentence that includes the spelling error. Also, semantic errors are not only connected to but also built on, lexical errors. Both types of errors cause incorrect meanings and miscommunication, which leads to misunderstandings. Therefore, semantic errors might result from different issues in grammar, mechanics, or lexicons (Agustín-Llach, 2005).

The meaning of a sentence is based on the meaning of each word. This means that if the words of a sentence fit each other, the sentence has a clear meaning. However, 580 errors show that a word might not make sense and, then, the sentence might be the same as in “many students took [had/formed] a wrong idea about online learning,” “people can lend [borrow] good CDs from the school library,” “smartphones good things [device] for communication,” “Saudi Arabia is grown [has developed] a lot,” and “teachers must have some adjectives [features/qualities] to teach online.” Some errors cause distortion or unsuitable semantic relations as in “people will addict of [be interested in] Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia”.

These sentences sound awkward for native English speakers because their words are not perfectly positioned in the sentence structure. These examples of inappropriate meanings corroborate the ideas of semantic confusion and semantic deviation (James, 1998). The errors also match the results mentioned in earlier studies by Ahmad and Othman (2019) on EFL students' difficulty with semantics more than forming words, Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) about their lack of essential vocabulary to express their thoughts properly, and Al Karazoun (2016) about their first language influence. These studies show that avoiding these errors requires students to have sufficient semantic competence to construct a clear meaning for any sentence and ensure that its parts suit each other.

Moving to the second research question about the probable causes of these written errors by Saudi secondary school students. The results reveal that the errors might be attributed to different causes, including students' L1, second-language systems, educational background, teaching weaknesses, and learning deficiencies. This study classifies the causes of errors into four probable sources to provide educators, researchers, and policymakers with insight into the process of language learning. The sources are inter-lingual transfer, intra-lingual transfer, teaching methods, and learners' needs. Each source is a major cause of error, and it might include some minor causes, as discussed below.

Inter-lingual Transfer

An inter-lingual transfer is one of the major causes of Saudi students' written errors in secondary school. It is also known as a language switch, mother tongue interference, first language transfer, L1 influence, or inter-lingual error. It includes all errors of interference in the student's native language. In other words, there are errors resulting from language transfer or caused by the learner's mother tongue (Dulay & Burt, 1974). This means that students, particularly beginners, commit writing errors because of grammatical, lexical, phonological, or morphological factors or rules of their first language, which is Arabic in this study (Alhaisoni, 2012; Ruwaida, 2015). This is like the findings on the Thai language in Sermsook et al.'s (2017) study.

Arabic sentence structure when writing in English is a common grammatical error among Saudi students. For example, they start with the first person preceding the third person as in "I and my teachers enjoyed the online learning." This is the typical structure of Arabic sentences due to the Arabic culture that appreciates the first person. Although this sentence is understood in English, it does not follow the English writing system. Native speakers of English may feel that such a sentence is unsuitable or unacceptable because they believe that the first person should follow the third person. Such an example of an error is among the inter-lingual errors found in this study, which is like the results of Al Karazoun (2016) and Alluhaydan (2016).

Other examples include the use of plural nouns as a substitute for singular nouns because Arabic has countable plural nouns for some English uncountable singular nouns (Richards, 1971). In addition, this study found that many errors prove that students apply the rules of Arabic articles (Ruwaida, 2015), the choice of prepositions (Al-Hazzani & Altalhab, 2018), and the use of punctuation (Khatter, 2019) when writing in English. These examples show that students must recognize the differences between the Arabic and English linguistic systems. They lack the characteristics of each language, resulting in the use of L1 features in L2 (Alluhaydan, 2016) and difficulties in learning English writing skills and rules (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018).

Intra-lingual Transfer

Intra-lingual transfer is another main cause of errors among Saudi secondary school students. It is called an intra-lingual error because it refers to an error in the target language (Dulay & Burt, 1974). This error occurs because of false applications or misuse of rules. It also comes from incomplete knowledge of the English system, faulty understanding of its rules, or ignorance of them. Another probable source of the error is incorrect attempts to originate rules based on the acquired items, which is known as an overgeneralization of features. Therefore, intra-lingual errors show how the rules and features of the language influence each other (Brown, 2015).

This study found several pieces of evidence for the false application of rules and incomplete knowledge of the English system. For instance, this includes rules of tenses, definite and indefinite articles, prepositions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vowels, silent letters, and confusing English sounds (Dulay & Burt, 1974). The literature shows that Saudi EFL students make errors when applying these rules because they are difficult to understand (Kiriakí & Agustín-Llach, 2014). They always suffer when learning English spelling. To exemplify their issue, they are confused between 'gh' in 'right,' and 'enough. The first is silent, while the second is pronounced /f/. Spelling is inconsistent for most of them, and it is not equivalent to Arabic. Deacon (2017) provided more details about the spelling problems of Arab students.

Some errors were also seen as evidence of overgeneralization. When students add the suffix 'ed' to irregular verbs when writing about past tense in 'slepted' and 'cuted,' they mistakenly apply the rule of past tense verbs to all verbs without considering irregular ones. They may have acquired the rules in parts. Another example happens when they add the plural (s) to all nouns including irregular nouns, such as 'informations' and 'furnitures.' Errors occur because of ignorance of rule restrictions (Dulay & Burt, 1974). Overgeneralization errors can happen in lexical vocabulary when students overuse a word to mean different situations like using 'things' to mean causes, features, types, tools, devices, and the like. This error is also called overextension, which is caused by the students' need to acquire more vocabulary.

Teaching Methods

Teaching methods play a fundamental role in student errors. Indeed, these errors might be signs of insufficient teaching methods. Corder (1967) claimed that students would not commit errors if their teachers used the appropriate teaching methods. Teaching methods include educational principles and pedagogical strategies that support both teachers and students. They assist teachers in managing the course and students in achieving the learning objectives. According to Brown (2015), teachers should select techniques that fit the course content, support their educational duties, and encourage students to practice their learning. Teaching methods include modern and old approaches as well as high-tech and low-tech techniques. Every method includes different tools, activities, and procedures to achieve learning goals.

In the Saudi EFL context, studies have shown that most students are not properly taught. The use of traditional teaching methods and strategies does not support students in the perfect acquisition of language. These methods mostly depend on teacher-centered approaches to prepare students to pass examinations (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015). Most teachers use Arabic as a medium of instruction to teach grammatical structures and explain vocabulary (Elyas & Picard, 2010). They neither pay attention to individual differences nor vary their teaching activities in their classes (Al Shlowiy, 2023). Every learning situation requires activities and techniques based on the learning outcomes and teaching settings. For example, some classes have many students, which require special activities such as group work.

Such methods rely on memorization and repetition and lack practical skills training. This is one of the factors that leads students to make errors in writing. Students must practice what they learn about grammar, lexicons, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and other writing skills. They cannot develop their learning if they do not make errors (Richards, 1971). Teaching methods should be student-oriented to provide more practice and support students in applying their writing skills individually. This shows the importance of using different modern teaching methods that rely on technologies to reduce teachers' dominance, boost students' engagement with learning content, and improve their knowledge (Cook, 2004).

Learners' Needs

This is the last possible cause of student errors. It might be connected to the previous cause, but it is discussed here as a separate cause owing to its importance. Students' errors show that they have several needs during their learning journey. Starting with their view of English as a school subject, they need to pass (James, 1998). Most students did not consider it a language for communication to be used by many businesses in their lives. Therefore, they focus on getting marks on exams, not on developing language skills and avoiding errors. Such attitudes influence students' interest in learning English and their

motivation to develop their learning (Cook, 2004). This is why some students continue to make errors frequently, without progress. Many students prefer to write freely without paying attention to or caring about academic rules and techniques that are considered boring to them (Nunan, 1999).

Changing their perception of English will help them avoid many kinds of errors. When they have a positive perception of the language, they increase their interest in learning it. This leads them to boost their learning, such as acquiring more vocabulary and grammar, because they always suffer from vocabulary deficiency (Ahmad & Othman, 2019) and grammar issues (Richards, 1971). Their vocabulary knowledge is lower than the curriculum requirements (Al Rashidi & Phan, 2015). Having positive perceptions of academic writing enables students to enjoy rules and develop errors. They will seek more opportunities to practice English outside the classroom and compensate for their lack of practice in school (Al Shlowiy, 2023).

Learning styles and strategies play a role in students' errors and how to deal with the errors. Learning styles are minor causes or indirect sources beyond errors in learning. Students might use poor learning styles, including repeating and memorizing rules, words, sentences, and other parts of learning (Alrabai, 2014). Such strategies do not help them understand language structure and vocabulary meaning. When students make errors, they are unaware of them. Even when they receive corrections or feedback, they do not fully recognize the rationale behind the correction and repeat the errors repeatedly (Al-Hazani & Al-Talhab, 2018).

Limitations

This study concentrated on the errors made by some male students in two secondary schools in a Saudi city. It might be not possible to generalize its findings to all Saudi students. Other students in different schools, cities, and regions may have different faults and causes. Furthermore, neither students nor teachers were directly involved in the study through questionnaires or interviews. Their views and perceptions should grant additional insights. These limitations might be ideas for future research.

Implications and Conclusions

Students' written errors and their causes provide significant insights for students, teachers, parents, curriculum designers, and policymakers. Categorizing the errors into four groups shows how to deal with them and prepare solutions. For instance, looking at the causes of either L1 interference or L2 interference helps strengthen the solutions. L1 and L2 might have similarities and differences that influence the learning process and lead to errors (Brown, 2015). In addition, thinking of the causes as the teacher's responsibilities or the student's responsibilities can lessen issues and increase remedies.

Teachers should select various teaching methods to address the different needs of their classes (Brown, 2015). Integrating these methods into an exclusive teaching approach provides sufficient solutions for different learning styles and settings (Nunan, 1999). For example, some students require extensive exposure to grammatical rules, whereas others do not. Many beginner students need explicit spelling teaching (Deacon, 2017).

Students should take turns depending on themselves in facing their deficiencies, such as using additional learning materials based on their level of English proficiency. When students recognize their errors, they can attempt strategies to overcome them. They should be motivated to make errors to develop their learning. Corder (1967) suggests that students can use errors as devices for learning. Students can use their L1 to learn L2 by distinguishing between Arabic and English, thus reducing confusion.

Curriculum designers and policymakers should understand the language learning process that accepts errors. Errors are unavoidable because they are a part of learning (James, 1998). It is not wrong but a useful tool to help EFL students reduce their errors and write better in English (Sermsook et al., 2017). Therefore, the curriculum should adopt modern supportive strategies.

Finally, this study showed that Saudi EFL secondary school students have writing errors in mechanics, grammar, lexis, and semantics. These errors were caused by four major factors: first language transfer, target language transfer, teaching issues, and student needs. Some minor sources indirectly led to written errors, such as teaching and learning strategies. These sources are obstacles to Saudi EFL students' correct writing. Addressing these difficulties was the target of this study by specifying their causes and sources. It is not an issue to make an error in writing, because it is a normal step in learning and shows how learning occurs. Learning errors are learning opportunities (Corder 1967). However, the issue is to maintain the errors without fixing them, providing supportive feedback, and preventing their causes. The issue lies in learning from these errors. These factors enable EFL teachers and students to employ various approaches and techniques in teaching and learning.

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Appendix

Guided Compositions

You want to buy a new story. There are many advertisements about stories. Write a paragraph about: "Your Favorite story"

You may use the Guiding words: (story – characters – actions – places – price ...)

Of no less than (70) words, write about: Teaching the Great Career.

The following words may help you.

(dream – job – students - pass – knowledge – moral – values – educate – study)

Studying online and studying face to face are two ways of learning Write an essay about the two kinds, using the following guide words: Guiding words: inside class – contact – expression – active – go anywhere – computer – internet – limit – time – age

Of no less than (70) words, write about your Favorite TV Show.

Your writing should answer the following:

1. What is your favorite TV show?
2. What kind of TV show is it?
3. Why do you like it?
4. What channel does the TV show air on?
5. Give a brief description of it.

Write a paragraph of no less than (70) words. about:

(By 2050, the world will have changed for the better in some ways and for the worse in others). You might use these words: (technology – internet - robots – online jobs – artificial intelligence ...)

Free Compositions

Choose one topic from the following to write about.

1. Write an email to STC asking for a job. Present your Education, Experience, Skills...
2. Write a paragraph about: "Your Dream Intelligent Home".

Choose ONE topic and write a paragraph about it:

1. Saudi Vision 2030
2. My Favorite Gadget

Choose one topic from the following to write about.

1. Imagine that you are invited to a famous restaurant in your city. Write a paragraph about "Your Favorite Dish".
2. Write a paragraph about "A place to visit"

Choose ONE topic and write a paragraph about it of no less than (50) words.

- 1- Unusual Hotel you lived in, heard, or read.
- 2- Describe Your Personality

Write a short essay about your favorite season or your dream job.