

## **Grammatical Error Analysis Of Iraqi Postgraduate Students' Academic Writing: The Case of Iraqi Students in UKM**

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### **Abstract**

This study was framed by Error Analysis approach as proposed by Corder (1964) in order to investigate the grammatical errors in the writing production of 15 Iraqi students in faculty of Information System at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Moreover, this study aimed at finding the causes of these errors generated. The samples of this study were collected from participants' preliminary master research proposal. In order to classify these errors, Dulay, Burt and Krashan's (1982) syntax and morphological errors taxonomy was adopted. Results showed that Iraqi students in UKM committed various errors in the following categories; tenses, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, verbs and morphological errors. However the highest number of errors generated was in preposition error category that compromised a total number of 22.1% of the total errors committed. Furthermore, it has been also found that most of these errors generated caused by the effect of grammatical and linguistic system of participants' mother language on their written production of the target language (i.e. Interlingual source).

**Keywords:** Error Analysis; Interlingual; Intralingual; Grammatical Errors; Syntax and Morphological Errors

### **1. Introduction**

Malaysia has witnessed an increasing number of international students coming from different countries of Southeast Asia and Middle East to be enrolled in different private and public universities (e.g. Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, University Malaya, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Multimedia University etc.,) (The Star newspaper, October 17, 2014). Typically, these international students will face new cultural and linguistic patterns in this new academic environment as the process of second language socialization begins to take place. Students who feel that they cannot adjust to their new academic environment academically or socially are at risk of getting poor grades, feel maladjusted, or at worst may discontinue their studies.

Those international students in Malaysian context of education are required to be competent users of English as a second language in order to be successful in their academic life because English language is the main medium of instruction across disciplines in Malaysian education context (Alavi & Mansor, 2011). But quite the contrary, international students in Malaysia are

argued to face various difficulties related to English proficiency either in their spoken or written discourse (e.g. Alvi & Mansour, 2011; Ariff & Mugableh, 2013). For example, Alavi and Mansour (2011) argued that international students in Malaysian universities face various problems ranging from adapting to a new culture and lack of understanding from the broader university community to lack of English language proficiency in both oral and written tasks. Moreover, Ariff and Mugableh (2013) in their study found that international students in Malaysian context of education face various language difficulties ranging from vocabulary, pronunciation, listening difficulties, to interactive nature of spoken discourse.

Arab students in general were found to commit various errors in their writing production that making them unable to cope with the institution's literacy expectations (Kharma and Hajjaj, 1997; Khalil, 2000; Bacha, 2002; Rababah, 2003). For example, Tahaineh (2010) conducted a study to find out the kinds of errors that Jordanians EFL students make in the use of prepositions. The samples of this study were collected from compositions of written discourse from 162 students. Findings of this study revealed that Jordanians tends to use proper preposition if equivalent was find in their other tongue, select the improper prepositions if equivalents are not used in in their mother tongue, and omit prepositions if equivalents are not required in their mother tongue. The researcher argued that these errors should be considered in future teaching plans and design during high school period in order to avoid such errors once Jordanian study either in local universities or overseas.

Moreover, Al-Bayati (2013) had examined the grammatical errors of Iraqi students in Department of English language/ college of Arts at University of Kufa. However, it is worth mentioning here that this study was limited to the errors in the use of prepositions only and other grammatical errors were left investigated. Al-Bayati (2013) analysed a total number of 32 students' final examination copybooks in literacy course (i.e. Novel and Drama) based on Quirk's (1985) comprehensive grammar model. Results indicated that three errors were emerged in the context of this study (preposition omission, substitution, and addition). According to the results generated in the context of this study, the researcher recommended that teaching techniques in Iraqi schools and university required considerable attention to the issue under discussion. Moreover, the traditional methods based on translation into and from L1 should be avoided in the context of teaching English for Iraqi learners.

Although this path of research continues to grow, none of these studies found in literature addressed the language difficulties that Iraqi students find challenging in any academic context in Malaysia. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill the gap by analysing the grammatical errors that Iraqi postgraduate students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) particularly in faculty of information system commit during their writing production.

Crystal (2003) defines error analysis as a technique of identifying classifying and systematically interpreting the mistakes that learner of second language commit while they are performing oral or written tasks by using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics. EA is also a means of describing the learners' knowledge of the target language in any particular moment in their learning to relate this knowledge to the teaching they have been receiving (Corder, 1974).

Error analysis is a branch of applied linguistics with concern of two vital functions namely theoretical and practical. The theoretical function stems from the methodological perspective where it describes the learners' knowledge of the target language. It helps the researcher to find out the nature of psychological processes and the relation between the knowledge and the teaching the learner has been receiving. On the other hand, the practical function of EA is the function of that knowledge in remedial action to overcome the mismatch between the knowledge of the leaners and the demands of the situation (Corder, 1981).

Furthermore, Chan (2004) argued that error analysis is one of the most useful techniques that focus on the errors that learners commit whether in their written or spoken discourse. By investigating these errors, the researcher will be able to have better understanding of the linguistic deficiency of the participants so that instructors, syllabus designer, and textbook writers could address these difficulties in future (Chan, 2004).

Al-Haysoni (2012) argued that researchers in the area of EA are making advantages with their studies' outcome toward learners and teachers at the same time since their studies provide vital information to the teachers on their students' error so they could correct these errors and improve their teaching methods by focusing on these areas of deficiency among students. And at the same time, students themselves could benefit from these outcomes by increasing their awareness for the type of errors in their linguistic productions and thus focus on these types of errors in more effective way in future.

## **2. Problem of Statement**

Many Arab researchers in context of foreign language teaching had focused on the learners' errors in different context (e.g. Rababah, 2005; Al-Bayati, 2013; Humeid & Altai, 2013). These studies deal with difficulties that Arab learners encounter in their English learning process. For example, Rababha (2005) argued, "Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing" (p.22). Rababah (2005) had analysed these difficulties by indicating the kind of errors associated with both language use and language usage. In this regard, Corder (1973) argued that the study of errors is part of the investigation of the process of language learning since these errors provide us with clear picture of the linguistic development that learner undergo and give us indicator on what are the learning strategies employed within this learning process.

The researcher hypothesized that Iraqi students in UKM particularly in faculty of information system face various English difficulties in both oral and written forms. This hypothesis was proposed based on the recent literature found regarding Iraqi students in different educational context (e.g. Al-Bayati, 2013; Yahaya, 2007; Ugla, Adnan & Abidin, 2013). For example, Al-Bayati (2013) examined the writing errors made by Iraqi final year EFL students in English department at Kufa University. His analysis was merely limited to use of prepositions where he concluded that the major causes of these errors were due to L1 interference and the misapplication of the rules in L2.

Moreover, Yahya (2007) analysed the grammatical errors that Iraqi first year students commit in their oral production. The samples were recoded from participants' oral presentation in Baghdad University. Results indicated that Iraqi students are facing serious problems in various grammatical errors (i.e. tenses, prepositions, articles, passive/active voice and morphology). Although these studies continue to grow, none of these studies found in literature had addressed the grammatical problems that Iraqi students face in Malaysian context of education. Therefore this study was conducted to fill the gap by examine the written discourse of Iraqi postgraduate students particularly those who are currently engaged in their final year semester. The samples of the study were collected from written discourse production of selected Iraqi participants in UKM from faculty of computer sciences. These samples include their Master's preliminary proposal draft before being checked by their assigned supervisors.

## **3. Research Objectives**

The primary concern of this study is to explore the kinds of errors made by group of Iraqi postgraduate students in their master level in faculty of computer sciences at UKM. Moreover, this

study also is interested in exploring what are the causes of these grammatical errors that Iraqi students commit during their writing discourse at UKM.

#### **4. Research Questions**

1. What are the grammatical errors those Iraqi postgraduate students in faculty of computer sciences commit while they are writing their preliminary proposal draft of their final year thesis?
2. What are the causes of these grammatical errors in their written discourse?

#### **5. Conceptual Framework**

This study is framed by Error Analysis approach (EA) as proposed by Corder (1967). This approach involves collecting samples from language learners, identifying the errors in the samples, describe these errors, classifying these errors according to their hypothesized causes and finally evaluating their seriousness. Corder (1974) contended that errors that learners commit are very important aspects to be considered in language teaching and learning process since these errors can be regarded as an analysis device to understand how learners use the language in any specific context. Moreover, Dulay, Burt, and Krashan (1982) argued that errors that learners commit are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that learners employ to acquire the language.

#### **6. Significance of Study**

The significance of this study stemmed from fact that by revealing the grammatical errors that Iraqi students commit during writing production, the researcher will gain a significant insight on what are the strategies those Iraqi students in UKM employ in their writing to acquire English language. Moreover, these errors generated from the context of this study can work as a diagnostic tool in order to uncover the main grammatical problems that Iraqi students face in their writing production so that these errors could be the focus of teaching English language for Iraqi students in general. Moreover, from pedagogical contribution, this study will provide teachers of English as a foreign language in Iraq with the information concerning Iraqis' difficulties at different stages in their second language acquisition process so that appropriate courses could be designed and new teaching materials could be constructed for future teaching.

#### **7. Related literature review**

In recent years there have been a growing interest in error analysis as an important branch in the rapid expanding field of applied linguistic (Tushyeh, 2010). According to Dulay et al. (1982), error analysis is a technique that concerns with almost all errors made by second language learners including those resulting from the first language learning (i.e. interlingual factors) and those which are not traced to the learners native language (ie. intralagual factors). Corder (1981) argued that these errors are important in three ways for teacher first as they shed light on how learners learn the second language and the strategies they employed in order to learn. Second, these errors are important for teachers as indicator of learning. And finally they are important for learners themselves, as these errors are indications of hypothesis testing by the learners about second language.

As a result, many researchers had examined these errors in different educational context (e.g. Abushihab, El-Omari & Tobat, 2011; Tahaineh, 2010; Rababah, 2003; Al-Bayati, 2013; Humeid & Altai, 2013; Yahya, 2007; Ariff & Mugableh, 2013). For example, Abushihab et al. (2011) analysed the corpus of written discourse of 62 Jordanian EFL students in the department of English literature and translation at Alzaytoonah Private University of Jordan. This study was

conducted in order to investigate and classify the grammatical errors that those students commit in their writing production. Results demonstrated students' most recurring errors were morphological errors, articles, verbs, active and passive and tenses. Moreover, results indicated that the highest category of errors was the errors of prepositions that comprised 26% of the total errors.

In this line of research, Al-Bayati (2013) had examined the grammatical errors that Iraqi students of Department of English language/ college of Arts at University of Kufa. However, it is worth mentioning here that this study was limited to the errors in the use of prepositions only and other grammatical errors were left investigated. Al-Bayati (2013) analysed a total number of 32 students' final examination copybooks in literacy course (i.e. Novel and Drama) based on Quirk's (1985) comprehensive grammar model. Results indicated that three errors were emerged in the context of this study namely preposition omission, substitution, and addition. That is, students tend to use proper preposition if equivalent was found in their mother tongue, select the improper prepositions if equivalents are not used in their mother tongue, and omit prepositions if equivalents are not required in their mother tongue.

Furthermore, Al-Buainain (2010) addressed the problem that students face constantly in department of English at Qatar University in their writing course. This study examined 40 exams scripts collected from those students during their first writing course in university. This study was based on error analysis techniques as proposed by Corder (1974). Data analysis showed that students' errors are systematic and classifiable to include errors in verbs, relative clauses, articles, fragments, noun modifiers, countable and uncountable nouns, and prepositions.

Although this interest of research continues to grow, we still cannot find any study in literature address the case of Iraqi students in Malaysian context of education. Accordingly, this study was conducted to fill the gap in this area of research by examining the errors that Iraqi students in UKM commit during their writing production. Moreover, this study was interested also to find the causes of these grammatical errors generated.

## **8. Methods, Samples and Procedures**

Postgraduate students in faculty of computer sciences at UKM have to present a final year preliminary proposal particularly if they are conducting a mix mode master degree (i.e. subjects and final year thesis). These preliminary proposals often prepared by students in order to present their topics in their final year thesis which typically consist of introduction section, research objectives followed by research problems and finally research methodology section. The researcher argued that these proposals provide the researcher with a rich data to be analysed for the purpose of this research. The materials of this study were 15 preliminary proposal drafts for final year thesis. These samples were collected from 15 randomly selected Iraqi students in faculty of computer sciences at UKM. For the purpose of avoiding any ethical issue in this research, participants' names were not used in this research or any other reports. Pseudonyms were used instead.

The analysis of this research was derived from Coders' (1967) methods on Errors Analysis. The fundamental nature of the research's questions call for more exploratory investigation to answer questions on what are the grammatical errors that Iraqi students commit in their writing production in UKM and what are the causes of these errors generated in the context of this study. Thus a qualitative approach was adopted in this research since the central component of the theoretical framework of this study is the assumption that errors constitute an important part of second language acquisition process and this indeed the fundamental claim of the interlingual hypothesis as argued by Coder (1967).

In order to answer the first research question on what are the grammatical errors that Iraqi students commit in their writing production, the researcher analysed the data collected using Dulay et al. (1982) syntax and morphological taxonomy as Table 1 below shows:

Tenses	Preposition	Articles	Active and Passive Voice	Verbs	Morphological errors
Simple past instead of present perfect	Omission of prepositions	Omission of "the"	Passive auxiliary Be omission	Omission of verb "be"	Omission of plural ending "s"
Simple present instead of present perfect	Addition of prepositions	Addition of "the"	Passive with intransitive verb Be addition	Addition of verb "be"	Misuse of plural errors and addition of the plural ending "s"
Simple past instead of simple present	Misuse of prepositions	Omission of "a/an"	Preposition confusion	Misuse of the verb "be"	Misuse of possessive "s"
Present progressive instead of simple present		Addition of "a/an"		Omission of the verbs	Incorrect use of comparative adjectives
Past perfect instead of simple past		Misuse of articles		Misuse of other verbs	Wrong word form

Table 1 Syntax and Morphological Errors adopted from Dulay, Burt and Krashan (1982)

This taxonomy was used in particular since it is expected to identify the language acquisition process that Iraqi students employ in their writing construction. Thereafter, the researcher started examining the source of errors generated within these writing essays. These sources are argued to be either from interlingual or intralingual source. The interlingual sources are those caused by negative transfer or interference from the learners' mother tongue, while the intralingual sources are those caused by interference within the target language itself (Dulay et al. 1982).

## 9. Results and Discussion

The collected written data from Iraqis' preliminary proposals were analysed by the researcher and two other ratters in UKM in order to identify the grammatical errors generated. Results showed that the main major grammatical errors were mainly in the following categories; tenses, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, verbs and morphological errors. A total number of 633 grammatical errors were found in the written corpus of Iraqi students in UKM. Table 2 below demonstrated these errors in number and percentage:

Error category	The number of errors	The percentage of errors
Tenses	90	14.2 %
Prepositions	140	22.1 %
Articles	75	11.8 %
Active and passive voice	69	10.9 %
Verbs	139	21.9 %
Morphological errors	120	18.9 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>633</b>	<b>100 %</b>

Table 2 classification of the type of errors generated in the context of the study

### • Tenses

The number of errors in tenses category is 90 grammatical mistakes that compromises 14.2 % of the total errors generated in the data analysis process. These errors were divided into subcategories according to Dulay et al. (1982) taxonomy as sated in table 3 below:

Type of tense errors	Number
Simple past instead of present perfect	20
Simple present instead of present perfect	14
Simple past instead of simple present	12
Present progressive instead of simple present	24
Past perfect instead of simple past	20

Table 3 Tense errors subcategories

Data analysis revealed that Iraqi students in UKM had insufficient knowledge on how to employ several English tenses in their written discourse. The researcher argued that this kind of errors is strongly related to negative transfer from their mother tongue language into target language (i.e. interlingual). Excerpts bellow demonstrated these types of errors:

1. Every language has its own set of grammars that make it unique. However, when deal with computers in terms of translation or information retrieval, serious ambiguities arose. (*Simple Past instead of Simple present in "arise"*)
2. However, these challenges drawn the attention of many researchers towards (*simple past instead of present perfect in "have drawn"*).

Iraqi students were found to translate literally from Arabic into English during their writing production. This translation method is very evident in many excerpts that were generated in participants' written discourse. For example, in the second excerpt, participant tend to use simple past in "drawn the attention" instead of present perfect "have drawn the attention" since such grammatical formula in Arabic language is not even exist.

- **Prepositions**

This category constitutes the most problematic area for Iraqi students in UKM (i.e. 22.1 % of total errors committed). These errors were classified into the following subcategories at Table 4 bellow shows:

Type of Errors	Number
Omission of prepositions	33
Addition of prepositions	56
Misuse of prepositions	51
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>

Table 4 Prepositions errors subcategories

Abushihab, El-Omari, and Tobat (2011) defined prepositions as a tool to express relation between two entities. They further argued that English prepositions have different functions that are not easy for Arab learners to learn correctly. Iraqi students in UKM tend to use proper preposition if equivalent was find in their other tongue, select the improper prepositions if equivalents are not used in in their mother tongue, and omit prepositions if equivalents are not required in their mother tongue. The following excerpts demonstrated these types of errors in Iraqi students' written discourse:

1. In other words, all conceptual notions are born out function and not vice versa (*Omission of preposition "of" in "born out of fuction"*).
2. Therefore, it is vital to consider many factors in prior to the development of any natural language processing applications (*Addition of preposition "in" in "in prior to the development of"*).

3. This study focuses in the GR related problems of Arabic language and addresses the issue with optimum solution. (*Misuse of preposition in “focus in the GR related problems” instead of “focuses on”*)

It should be noted that these results are in line with Al-Bayati's (2013) study that researched the grammatical errors of Iraqi students in term of prepositions. Albayati's study revealed that Iraqi students in department of English at Al-Kufa University face various difficulties in employing prepositions in their writing productions.

- **Articles**

Results also indicated that Iraqi students in UKM committed various errors in Article usage. These errors constitute 11.8 % of total errors committed in students' written production. The following subcategories emerged in analysing this type of error:

Types of errors	Number
Omission of “the”	9
Addition of “the”	15
Omission of “a/an”	20
Addition of “a/an”	8
Misuse of articles	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>

Table 5 Article errors subcategories

The following excerpts demonstrated these types of errors in students' written production.

1. This study focuses on the GR related problems of the Arabic language and addresses issue with optimum solution (*Omission of article “the” in “and addresses the issue with optimum solution”*).
2. This study focuses on the GR related problems of the Arabic language and addresses issue with optimum solution (*Addition of article “the” in “of the Arabic language”*).
3. Grammatical relation is part of linguistics that studies the relationships of elements within a clause (*Omission of “a” in “relation is a part of linguistic”*)
4. Research aims to implement an machine learning classification (MLC) for Arabic grammatical relation extraction (*Addition of “an” in “implement an machine”*)
5. Objects are a thing or person that relates to the subject. There can be no objects, one object, or multiple objects within one clause or sentence (*Misuse of article in “objects are a thing”*).

Shulz (2004) argued that English has definite and indefinite articles and the use of these articles depends on the noun pre-modified by the article. Definite article is used with specific reference. The indefinite article with generic reference is used with a singular countable noun when the reference represents the whole class. However, Arabic has only a definite article called “the L of definition”. These articles are not used similarly in Arabic as in English. For example, in second excerpt the participants literally translated the sentence from his mother tongue (i.e. Arabic) into the target language as in “AL logha AL Arabia” which is equivalent to “The Arabic Language” in English. These results are in line with Crompton's (2011) study that researched the articles error in a corpus of English writing by tertiary-level L1 Arabic speakers. Result of this study demonstrated the strong likelihood that these errors are caused by L1 transfer rather than an interlanguage development order.

- **Active and Passive Voice**

This category comprises 10.9% of the total errors committed in the context of this study. English and Arabic languages both have active and passive voice but with different construction. That is English passive construction uses auxiliaries and word order change. However, passive voice in Arabic language is just a matter of vowel change without any changing in the word order. Such



differences are argued to cause many errors in Iraqi students' writing production. These errors were classified into the following subcategories:

Type of errors	Number
Passive auxiliary Be omission	30
Passive with auxiliary verb Be addition	30
Preposition confusion	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>

Table 6 Active and passive errors subcategories

The following excerpts demonstrated these types of errors in details:

1. Grammatical relation theory employed by various linguists to determine the idea of relational grammar (*Passive auxiliary Be omission as in "was employed by various"*)
2. The grammatical cases and categories of the words are being determined by the relationships (*Passive with auxiliary verb Be addition as in "words are being determined"*).

Iraqi students in UKM tend to omit the passive auxiliary "be" as in first example because such construction is not even exist in Arabic language morphology. Moreover, they tend to add extra auxiliary due to lack of knowledge in the grammatical orders of words in English passive voice construction.

- **Verbs**

Data analysis shows that Iraqi students in UKM have serious difficulties in employing verbs in English in different spots in their written discourse. This category compromises 21.9 % of the total errors committed in the context of this study. These errors were classified into the following subcategories:

Types of errors	Number of errors
Omission of the verb "be"	44
Addition of the verb "be"	61
Misuse of the verb "be"	13
Omission of other verbs	10
Misuse of other verbs	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>

Table 7 Verbs errors subcategories

As table 7 above demonstrated, the cases of (addition of the verb "be") and the case of (addition of the verb "be") are the most problematic errors that Iraqi students commit in this type of errors. The following excerpts demonstrated these types of errors in details:

1. The primary means of studying this through the relationships of the subject, objects, adjuncts, and complements (*omission of the verb "be" as in "this are through"*)
2. this research is aim to implement an machine learning classification (MLC) for Arabic grammatical relation extraction (*addition of the verb "be" as in "this research is aim to"*).

- **Morphological Errors**

The last category to be considered in this paper is the morphological errors that constitute 18.9 % of the total errors collected in the context of this study. These errors were classified to the following subcategories:

Types of errors	Number of errors
Omission of plural ending “s”	33
Misuse and addition of the plural ending “s”	44
Misuse of possessive “s”	17
Incorrect use of comparative adjectives	9
Wrong word form	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>

Table 8 Morphological errors subcategories

The following errors demonstrated these types of errors in details:

1. Therefore , it is vital to consider many factor prior to the development of any natural language processing applications (*omission of plural ending “s”*)
2. as the machine learning classification had been successfully used in developing many natural languages processing systems(*misuse and addition of the plural ending “s”*)
3. then determine the grammatical’s cases and categories(*Misuse of possessive “s”*)
4. This makes the subject the more important part of the sentence. Objects are a thing or person that relates to the subject. There can be no objects, one object, or multiple objects within one clause or sentenc (*incorrent use of comparative adjectives*).

## 10. Conclusion

This study had indicated that interference from L1 and inadequate components of L2 are the main source of errors. These results are argued to be very essential in learning the target language since the sources of errors within the context of this study were identified so that remedial teaching design can be easily prepared depend on these results generated.

Studying the nature of errors enables teachers of foreign languages and researchers to have a better understanding of the linguistic area where learners have the most difficulty while writing. The data provided by the analysis of learners' errors will help teachers, syllabus designers and test developers to determine their way of teaching or materials in the process of language teaching and learning. They should make use of such studies to acquire new techniques and insights. It is possible for them to see language learners from a different point of view.

The results of the study indicate that the Iraqi students in UKM context of education learners are competent in basic rules of the target language, but their knowledge of the target language has some defects. These defects in Learning the target language may be due to the lack of practice in writing during their education level at schools in Iraqi or during their degree level. Accordingly, teachers of foreign languages should focus on the most common errors and try to overcome them by using various materials and methods. They can conduct remedial teaching using exercises and skills related to the problematic areas of the target language. Besides, textbook designers and syllabus designers should design their materials in the light of these errors. Test developers should also construct their tests according to these errors so that they could measure students’ improvement by proper tests.

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