

**INTER AND INTRA SENTENTIAL ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN  
COMPOSITION OF ARAB EFL LEARNERS / ERREURS INTER ET  
INTRA PROPOSITIONNELLES DANS LES ORDINATEURS DES  
ÉTUDIANTS ARABES QUI ÉTUDIENT L'ANGLAIS / ERORI INTER  
ȘI INTRA PROPOZIȚIONALE ÎN COMPUNERILE STUDENȚILOR  
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*Abstract:* Teachers of EFL often claim that reading, writing and grammar are emphasized more than listening and speaking. However, when one looks in detail at high school student's writing experience in Jordan, we find that it has been mainly at the sentence level. Students enter universities with little or no experience in producing paragraphs or essays. The university task is to take students through the tedious process of paragraph and essay writing (Markline & Issacson 1987, Reid & Lidstorm 1985, Silva 1990, Fawset & Sandberg 1996, etc). Cognitive maturity is, yet, a metalinguistic problem that teachers have to take into consideration in teaching writing (Flavell 1985, Devine & Boshoff 1993, Kasper 1998).

This paper aims at investigating some problems at both the micro and the macro levels of texts produced by Arab EFL learners. At the micro level the study will be limited to the problem of lexis and lexical choice. At the macro level the study will high light problems related to run-on sentences, reference relations, tense sequencing and logical organization. This study attempts to shed light on a more serious problem pertaining to discourse and cognitive development posed by the texts produces.

The paper concludes with pedagogical implications, suggestions and recommendations for the teaching of writing to EFL learners.

**Key words:** writing, discourse problems, collocations, run-on sentences, cognitive maturity.

### **Introduction**

Writing is a powerful instrument of thinking because it provides students with a way of gaining control over their thoughts. Writing shapes their perception of themselves and the world. However, the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing as a skill must be learned and practiced through experience. Writing is also composing which implies the ability to narrate, describe, or transform information into new text as in exposition or argumentation. Writing is best seen as a continuum of activities that ranges from the more mechanical of writing down on the one end to the more complex act of composing at the other end (Omaggio Hadley, 1993). Thus it creates Problems for ESL/ EFL Learners in academic context as the learner needs to work his way out by putting together concepts and knowledge and continuously developing texts. Writing, therefore, requires tremendous effort and practice in composing, developing and analyzing ideas, in addition to proficiency in the use of the L2 Language as well as the writing strategies, techniques and skills.

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Too many factors come into play when one talks about problems and Errors in L2 writing. Kaplan (1966) suggested that people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds organize discourse differently, as a reflection of their native Language and culture. Such thinking patterns are called contrastive rhetoric. Kaplan (1967:15) defines rhetoric as “a method of organizing syntactic units into patterns” at the sentence level by learning how to use grammar, syntax and vocabulary.

Language transfer is an important cognitive factor that relates to writing errors. Transfer is defined as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and the mother tongue (Odlin, 1989). The study of transfer involves the study of errors (negative interference), facilitation (positive transfer, avoidance of target language forms, and their over- use (Ellis 1994, Selinker 1972).

Despite the fact that L1 interference is no longer viewed as the only predictor or cause of errors at the structural level, a writer’s first language plays a significant and complex role in L2 learning. For example, when learners write under pressure, they may call upon systematic resources from their native language for the achievement and synthesis of meaning (Widdowson 1990). Research has also shown that language learners use their native language when generating ideas and attending to details (Fried- lander, 1990).

The social and cognitive factors also affect language learning. Exploration of social factors provide us with ideas as to why learners differ in rate of L2 learning, in proficiency type (conversational and writing abilities, and in ultimate proficiency (Ellis 1994). Arab EFL learners are financially committed to graduating from English department and are supposed to have strong reasons for learning and improving their skills.

Social factors also influence students contact with the target language. Students learning English ought to be encouraged to read academic texts, attend academic lectures, and even come into contact with native speeders of the language utilizing media and the internet if direct contact is not possible. Incentives should be provided by EFL instructors to promote interaction.

Academic writing is believed to be cognitively complex. Acquisition of vocabulary and discourse style is particularly difficult. According to cognitive theory, communicating in writing is an active process of skill development and gradual elimination of errors. Learning is a product of the complex interaction of the linguistic environment and the learners’ internal mechanism. Anderson (1985) proposed a three stage model of language production that applies to writing; construction: Planning what to write via the use of brain storming and a mind- map of outline; transformation: applying language rules to transform intended meaning into the form of message being composed; and execution: the physical process of producing the text. In Structuring information, the writer uses various types of knowledge, including discourse knowledge, understanding of audience and socio linguistic rules. Organization at the sentence level and at the text level is also important for effective communication of meaning, and ultimately for the written product. For instance, coherence problems may be due to not knowing how to organize a text or how to store relevant information.

This is not to ignore the role attitude and motivation play in cognitive development and improvement of language skills.

Input and interaction play a vital role in the writing process, especially in classroom settings. Research studies have pointed out that input, a long with L1 transfer and

communicative need, may work together to shape interlanguage. Writers need to receive adequate L2 input to enable them to form new hypothesis about syntactic and rhetorical forms in the target language. If learners are not exposed to native-like models of written texts, their errors are likely to persist.

Writing in a target language is a complex Process that involves the ability to communicate in L2 and the ability to construct a text in order to express his/ her own ideas effectively.

Social and cognitive factors and learners strategies help us in assessing the underlying reasons why L2 learners exhibit particular writing error. For instance, the writing problems experienced by Arab EFL learners may be due to many factors, including the effects of transfer and interference from Arabic and cultural thinking patterns and norms. They need to undergo a cognitive process of exchanging the style of Arabic writing to that of English through practice and exposition. Arab learners of English continue to commit errors and be less effective due to the lack of familiarity and confidence with structural element in the target language, rhetorical and cultural conventions and new uses of writing.

Abisamra (2003) conducted a study investigating the errors committed by 9<sup>th</sup> grade Arab students in essay writing. The aim was to find out whether L1 is responsible for such errors or other factors come to play as well. She concluded that although the students have been studying English for eleven years, still they rely heavily on L1 interference and translation from Arabic. To overcome such errors she suggests more exposure to the language through writing and reading assignments. Teaching methods need to be reconsidered as well.

Bataineh and Bataineh (2005) analyzed the composition written by Jordanian university students to identify the errors they make in the use of the definite article. They identified nine types of errors pertaining to omission, addition and substitution. They concluded that the role of L1 interference is minimal. Most errors identified cannot be attributed to L1 (Arabic). They are the result of common learning strategies and overgeneralization.

Jalaluddin et al (2008), in an attempt to find out why students are weak in English after eleven years of studying the language, carried out a study on 315 students Form Two Malay schools using a closed test. Their study showed that students are weak in the area of grammar. Errors in the category of affixes, adverbs, adjectives, plural forms, copula and subject- verb agreement account for 60% of the total errors committed by the students. This is attributed to the difference in structure between Malay and English. Non- linguistic factors such as attitude, learning environment and social surroundings are responsible for the rest of the errors. In conclusion they suggest that teachers be exposed to linguistic knowledge for better understanding of language learning/ teaching.

Darus and Subramaniam (2009) have conducted a study investigating the errors made by Malay high school students. They have analyzed a corpus of written data consisting of 72 essays written by 72 participants of both sexes. The study has shown that most common types of errors committed are grammatical. Those are errors of concord, verb tense, lexical choice, word order, prepositions and sentence construction. They have concluded that such developmental errors reflect the process of internalization of grammatical rules and the level of difficulty the students face in language learning. At the pedagogical level, such errors can facilitate the process of language learning/ teaching and material preparation.

It is evident from the studies reviewed that students of different language background go through the same processes of language learning and commit more or less the same types of errors. The studies also have not looked at errors beyond the sentence level and they seem to agree that non- linguistic factors account for a good portion of the errors committed; something which the present piece of research tries to bring into focus.

### **The Present Study**

This study investigates some deviations at both the micro and macro- levels of texts produced by junior and senior students majoring in English at Yarmouk University. The study will be limited to the following areas:

Lexis and lexical choice.

Verbs as – phrasal verbs: Verbs with prepositions; Verbs that do not take prepositions.

Tense sequencing.

Agreement (Referential relations).

Run-on sentences.

### **Purpose of the study**

The central aim of this study is to explore EFL students- written texts for deviations manifested at the text level; provide explanation for such problems: shed light on a more serious problem pertaining to discourse and cognitive maturity; and also provide suggestions for the teaching of writing.

### **Subjects and Materials**

A number of essays are collected and analyzed for inter and intra sentential deviations. The essays are written by students majoring in English at Yarmouk University. They are seniors and juniors registered for English 206 (essay writing). The essays are written on topics of students' choice. All the mechanics of writing discussed in depth with examples to be analyzed and topics to be developed before students are asked to write. Students were introduced to thesis statements, definition, how to write a thesis statement, questions need to be asked before writing the thesis statement, the purpose of writing, the audience, the subject, clarity of writing a thesis statement, qualification, supporting topic sentences, relevance of what is written to the thesis statement, introduction, body, conclusion, verbs and modal verbs used in different text types, grammar, punctuation, spelling, cohesive devices, etc., and all of this is accompanied by series of examples for illustration. The outcome is extremely poor and frustrating.

### **Problems in lexis and lexical choice**

Problems of lexis and lexical choice are evident in the writing of Arab EFL learners. This is a clear indication that the students' level of proficiency in the language is weak, since lexical knowledge is a fundamental component of language proficiency. We take it for granted that student join the English department with sufficient corpus of vocabulary or lexical knowledge. Hence, vocabulary development is a neglected variable in language

teaching. In writing in particular, research has shown that lexis play a vital role in rendering a text coherent. The followings are examples from the data analyzed:

- The policeman decided to *draw me* to the headquarters. (.to draw: to take by force; literary translation from Arabic)
- The *sightless sight* of snow explode our hearts. (The beautiful scene of the snow is breath taking)
- It *imagine* to many people its very difficult to learn. (I think it is difficult for many people to learn.... Think and imagine are the equivalent of the same word in Arabic)
- By living with your parents, we save *the rent* for food, electricity, water etc. (Living with our parents, we can save the money we otherwise pay for food, electricity, etc... the mix between the spoken and the written style often renders the text incoherent)
- Immediately *occur in our opinion* how it dangerous. (it immediately came to our mind how dangerous it is..)
- English has beautiful *literary ruins*. (ruins: heritage)
- A person who *owns the English language* own the chance more than another... (A person with a high level of proficiency in English has a better chance of being hired than ...)
- They *forgive us from sharing* the expenses. (exempted us from paying our share)
- Man can work 12 *O'clock* every day if he wishes to save money. (o'clock: hours) The two words in English are equivalent to one word in Arabic.
- Me and my wife work 8 o'clock every day in a factory.

All of the above errors in lexical choice are the result of L1 interference. Probably students have learned these English words in isolation and their meanings, but they do not know how to appropriately use them in context.

Relevant to lexis and lexical choice is the use of idiomatic expressions which are often the result of L1 interference and lead to incoherence. Consider the following examples:

- My mother *grow us up* with my father in tears. (*grew us up in tears instead of having a hard time raising us*)
- She *polish* our sadness. (*Polish instead of comfort us*)
- He *keeps his culture and his country's moral* at his heart.
- In the factory people learn to *work on the rule*. (*Obey the rules*)
- *Women are the brother to men*. (*Dignified or self-confident women don't fear working in the same place with men*)
- Leaving the woman her house, *she will be a good meal for the sick person in the society*. (*Women who leave home will be subject to sexual harassment*)

Some of the errors in lexis are the result of using the wrong collocates and thus violate the idiomatic principle of collocation (Farghal & Obeidat 1995).

### Collocations

Collocations are lexical units consisting of a cluster of words from different parts of speech (Williams 2002). There are two types of collocations: the open collocations where words can cluster with a wide range of other words, and the closed collocations where the

words are fixed like idioms. Collocations are also classified into grammatical and lexical collocations. Grammatical collocations are compounds where a preposition is used with a noun, a verb or an adjective.

Examples:

- seeking for money (*literal translation from Arabic where the preposition for follows the verb equivalent to seek or look*)
- in the phone (*on the phone*)
- married from (*married to*)
- spend his money in clothes (*on clothes*)
- addicted with drugs (*addicted to*)

Lexical collocations include: verb+ noun or adverb, noun+ verb, adverb+ adjective, etc. Examples:

- walk on the rule (*obey the rules*)
- the student learned to work clockwise (*non stop*)
- read the readings (*do the readings*)
- repair his errors (*correct*)
- his economical troubles (*economic problems*)

### Verbs

Another area of lexis is verbs. By this we mean phrasal verbs is verbs with prepositions and verbs that do not require a preposition to follow; another neglected or over looked are a in language teaching. It is an area which relates to text types in writing; i.e., a descriptive text is expected to be dominated by intransitive verbs relating to size, shape, structure, etc.

Phrasal verbs are idiomatic in nature and consequently lead to breakdown in communication and coherence. Consider the following examples:

- The economic problem will *play up* the government. (*bring down*)
- Having followed a strict diet, she managed to *bring down* five kilos (*to lose*)
- There are parties which *share* in many of famous Arab singers (*where many famous Arab singers participate*)
- When we saw the bank we *felt with* an excitement. (*were excited*)
- Yarmouk *contains on* many specialization. (*offers many .....*)
- When we *think with* camping (*think about*)
- They start to *seek about* paying jobs (*look for*)
- I *spent* a long time *with loneliness*. (*I was lonely for a long time*)
- The UN try to *find* a solution the refugee problem. (*The UN tries to find a solution for the refugee problems*)
- They settle in camps *provided* the UN. (*They settle in camps provided by the UN*)
- It helps us to contact with other people. (*It helps us to contact other people*)

### Tense sequencing

Although English has categories for distinguishing past, present and future time, continuity VS single point, antecedent VS Subsequent and finished VS unfinished, students seem to be unaware of such distinctions. They keep shifting tenses with no justification; i.e., it is not something imposed by context of situation. The lack of tense sequencing, inter and intra sententially in a text is a major factor that impairs coherence. The following examples are illustrative:

- Many people start to work extra jobs because they need the money to live a beautiful life and bought everything without problems because many works didn't give enough money.
- We have been married for two year. Our dream is to save money to buy a flat. We adopted a good strategy by moving with our parent. My wife had faced many problems in dealing with my mother. They finally became able to manage with each other because it is the only way save money.
- The man in our country prefer the woman who stays at home. They thought that she can brings her children in a good way and gave her care for everything in her house.

#### **Agreement: Referential Pronouns**

One of the major problems in students' writings is the illogical shift in the use of referential pronouns. In the same paragraph they write, it is noticed that students refer to a person or people by different pronouns refer by different pronouns shifting from we, to they, he, his, your in an inconsistent manner. This breaks down connectivity in the text, leads to confusion on the part of the reader and impairs coherence.

It is obvious that students are not aware of their audience and/ or lack knowledge of the concept of audience. In addition, it is a sign of informality. The following examples are illustrative:

- When a person leaves his country, he or she faces many difficulties to embody a new society. The society in a foreign country differ from your home. Boys and girls both are allowed to take their own way after age 18 ... the climate is a problem. It causes many trouble to your health.
- According to the nature every one live with your parents but not a longtime because each one will independence from his parents.
- Every new couple wished to live in isolation, but that it is difficult in the first step of their life, We must working ...

#### **Agreement:**

**Subject – Verb**

**Noun – Pronoun**

**Determiner/ Demonstrative – Noun**

The problem of agreement though a locality problem seems to persist and difficult to over come. We are not suggesting that the teacher should spend his/ her time trying to explain the problem of agreement, but it shouldn't at the same time be overlooked.

The fact that students at this stage of learning still commit errors in all areas of agreement is an indication of their level of proficiency. Consider the following examples:

- There is some families who didn't ...
- They have many experience in this life
- Much have been written ...
- Most of the professions has been occupied by women.
- Women has a characteristic that man has not owned.
- Women are a kindly creature that talk place in this life and prove that she can do the best she has in her house before her works and she can works in any jobs. So let us encourage this wonderful women to do her best in their life.

### **Run- On Sentences**

Run- on sentences or long sentences seem to be a common feature in the writings of Arab EFL learners. In many cases one finds that a whole essay is written as three sentences. It is the norm rather than the exception to find one paragraph written as one sentence.

This could be explained by the over use of coordinators especially the all purpose "and". The coordinator "and" is favored by beginning writers as it helps them handle ideas in the least demanding manner, viz, narration which is based mainly on addition relationship. Besides, "and" assumes a number of relationships although it makes it difficult for the reader to grasp the intended relationship. The text figures as a list of ideas rather than hierarchic unit whose elements are joined by the complex process of subordination. Consider the following examples:

- Referring to it is importance for students in several fields in the society and especially the professions which need qualification compounding with strong perfect language like English, and this strong language which help students after finish their education to transfer into a new field and, in particular students who travel to the foreign countries to continue their higher education , or travel for working, that in a foreign country students and other persons who work abroad need a second language in order to deal with all peoples from different countries and different nationalities.
- Most people decide to learn English and practice it in order to know the tradition, thoughts beliefs and arts of the foreign country and all of this can help us collect information and awareness become large and more educated people.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from the examples above that EFL learners face difficulties at both the micro and the macro levels of the text. The study, therefore, concludes with the following pedagogical implications to help improve students' writing abilities and assist teachers in teaching writing:

Writing should be taught through reading; i.e., students should be exposed to reading texts of various types (descriptive, narrative, informative, argumentative, etc.). Teachers should go over these texts with students and analyze them in terms of content, organization, logical development, coherence, style and structure before asking students to write. Teachers should understand that cognitive maturity precedes language production. It is better for teachers to focus first on content and then approach grammar problems in the context of their

writing. Often it is difficult to distinguish content problems from grammar problems. Content and language are so inextricably layered that teachers can be tricked into seeing only grammar errors. Teachers should understand that correction of errors doesn't promote learning. In fact, focusing mainly on grammar errors, which seems easier to do than focusing on organization or logical development, may indicate to students that correction supersedes meaning. Collocations and naturalness should be given the due attention. Such are often neglected variables in language teaching. As far as grammatical errors are concerned, it is probably better for teachers to point out the most frequent types of errors, explain them and give appropriate examples for illustration.

It is often best to let students do the correction. If you do correct the grammar, do so for one paragraph only and let students follow pursuit. Teachers should encourage students to keep and consult a profile of the grammatical errors they make in order to avoid committing the same errors.

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