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# The impact of grammatical competence on 1st year university English students' written performance

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**Abstract**---It is clear that EFL Iraqi students of English have problems in mastering some grammatical components in English. However, the first year students are struggling with these types of grammar problems, some grammatical rules are similar in the two languages, which makes it rather easy for Arabic speakers to learn English. This study aims to investigate the scope and nature of the syntactic errors made by first year learners of English at Al- Hamdaniya University, Iraq. It identifies, describes, and analyzes errors made in certain specific grammar areas such as tenses, modals, auxiliaries, subject verb agreement, verb forms. The study used a composition writing test of 23 EFL Iraqi first year students. The study focuses on the accuracy in the English writing skills of Iraqi students with the aim to examine the interference of the rules of the target language. For this purpose, researchers in this paper analyse 20 written essays and identified common grammatical errors made by the students. Findings revealed that students made various types of errors, but the most recurrent were the mis-formation errors which were characterized by the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure and omission errors. Lastly, the findings of this study are expected to raise awareness among students, lecturers, scholars, and policymakers on the role of grammatical competence focusing on intralingual issues.

**Keywords**---Verb, Grammatical Competence, Errors, Tense, Writing skills.

## **Introduction**

This study investigated the cause, scope and nature of the syntactic errors made by the first year learners of English at Al- Hamdaniya University, Iraq, and the impact of grammatical competence on accuracy of these learners in writing skills. It described the types of errors including, subject verb agreement, tense, aspect, articles and determiners made by these learners so as to define the causes of the errors. The misuse of grammar usually leads to scrambled writing. Arab students face difficulties in writing compositions (Algama et al., 2021; Ankawi, 2015; Ibrahim, 2016). Even if the topic is interesting as they feel that they lack the ability to write grammatically correct sentences. Most students' writing difficulties fall into the categories of grammatical competence, sentence arrangement, misuse of tenses with adverbials, misuse of determiners, subject verb agreement, etc. In fact, writing in the target language is so challenging that the students would prefer to get ready-made compositions from handouts or from their teachers because they only want to pass the exam. To avoid such challenges, new teaching techniques and strategies were suggested (Al-Ahdal & Alqasham, 2020; Bin-Hady et al., 2020).

The current study is critical both theoretically and practically. Teachers will find it useful as it will provide in one place the errors made by students in using English grammar. This will enable them to develop strategies to combat these errors. Practically, it will afford them opportunities to adapt pedagogies which will help to form a better understanding of the grammar rules in the target language and their application. On the other hand, students can benefit from the study as it will improve their knowledge of English, and it can be used to encourage them to be more thoughtful when using English grammar. Researchers will also stand to gain as this study will provide a basic framework from which to take off. The role of positive feedback from the teacher has been recognized as crucial as a key psychological input to keep the learners motivated.

## **Literature Review**

Performance is a healthy starting point in discovering the types of errors made by foreign language learners and examining the causes of these errors. Errors analysis enables linguists to study the strategies of learning used by foreign language learners. Many students face challenges when they want to express thoughts in a foreign language, particularly in compositions because writing is a complex skill which demands the use of multifarious tenses and grammatical rules. Semantically, adverbs are effective linguistic tools or strategies which are crucial in the process of generating meaning in discourse (Al-Ahdal et al, 2014; Algama et al, 2021; Bin-Hady et al., 2020; Hazem & Kanaan, 2020). Yet, there are also some other concepts which are concerned more with syntax and semantics. Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) for instance, called grammar to be another name for syntax, while Rea-Dickens (1991) emphasized that meaning ought to take precedence over form in language. Grammar according to Downing, (2006) is defined as the study or analysis of rules in the language. Some linguists such as Hinkel (2002), Laufer and Nation (2001), and Norris and Ortega (2000), pointed out that mere introduction in grammar, reading comprehension, and text in L2 may not be effective enough in attaining proficiency. An understanding of

synchronic linguistics can provide students with a wide variety of grammar types or vocabulary choice in their writing. Synchronic linguistics should be purposeful for learners as this will arouse their interest in learning it. Further, it will improve learners' reading and writing if they learn synchronic linguistics "in context" (Norris & Ortega 2000). The training of synchronic linguistics in writing instead of for writing ought to be taught so that learners perceive how the language works, and their performance will be enhanced. Learners realize it is easier to master synchronic linguistics if they learn through discovery instead of drill-and-practice (Laufer & Nation, 2001). Therefore, this is one of the remedial instruction strategies for these errors. Some researchers like Dean (2008), Ehrenworth and Vinton (2005) have shown that synchronic linguistics is best understood and learned conceptually, inductively and, using discovery-based methods instead of automatically which might be provided and illustrated clearly in writing. The context plays a vital role in the production of speech (Hazem & Mohammed, 2021). An incorrect practice of English grammatical rules, morphology associate degreed syntax is caused by an interference of the mother tongue. Downing (2006) pointed out that learners tend to resort to the mother tongue language system while using English. As a result, they are unable to use the target language accurately. The skill to use the grammatical elements of a language accurately through the principles governing it is called 'Grammatical Competence'.

### **Grammatical Competence and Performance**

According to Chomsky (1965) competence indicates the speaker-hearer's knowledge about the language while performance refers to the specific utterances, including grammatical mistakes and non-linguistic features accompanying the use of language. Ellis, (1994) confirmed that competence and performance can be described as linguistic behaviours of the human mind. The former is the inherent linguistic ability and the latter is, to a great extent, the manifestation of the former in actual use. Competence shows the state of the speaker's mind, that is, what the speaker knows and what his performance shows while producing or comprehending language (Cook, 1993). In this context, Goodluck (1991) writes giving functional differences between competence and performance in language acquisition.

Many empirical studies focused on learners' grammatical competence. Fikron (2018) pointed out important role of grammatical competence in developing the learners' communicative ability. He clarified that the grammatical competence is not only responsible for learners' production, but also it monitors their language production. Accordingly, it is important for the instructors to focus on fostering such underlying system in their learners. Furthermore, Cuéllar (2013) conducted an action for the development of Colombian students' grammatical competence. The results revealed that using writing activities in a contextualized manner in teaching grammar boosted students overall linguistic elements.

Studies on the Arab world which explored the students' grammatical errors are many. Algamal (2021) found that Yemeni EFL learners made some errors which writing paragraphs. Such are classified into the subject-verb agreement, improper signal words, capitalization, misspelling of general words, punctuation, mis-use of

quantifier, and the incorrect use of *can* for negation. Ibrahim (2016) examined the problems that Sudanese secondary school students face in paragraph writing. The findings revealed that students' writing performance paragraph was low especially in applying cohesive devices. In a similar vein, Ankawi (2015) found that Saudi EFL students face challenges in academic writing and language-related issues including: their incompetence in grammatical, the different underlying system between Arabic and English, the socio-cultural variations between the two languages. Finally, Al-Khasawneh (2009) studied the writing problems encountered Arab post graduate students in Malaysia. The findings of the revealed that the students face problems grammar, spelling, and referencing in addition to organization of ideas, register and vocabulary.

### **Research Questions**

In order to narrow down the study, the researchers focused on analyzing the students' grammatical performance in the writing skill. Therefore, the study took into account the types and causes of grammatical errors made by the students in their writing. This study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What problems in writing do the students at Al- Hamdaniya University encounter the most?
2. What are the specific grammatical competence related issues that these students face?

### **Limitation of the Study**

This study is limited to writing composition of students in their first year of English at Al Hamdaniya University for the academic year 2016-2017. The study target is limited to the difficulties and obstacles students face in English writing.

### **Methods**

A descriptive qualitative method was used in this study to analyze the students' performance in the use of English grammar in their writings. Writing composition test was used to collection data from the participants. The analysis of this study consists of, firstly, *collecting* the data of the students' test. The second step is the *identification* of student's errors and placing them in categories (omission, addition, mis-order). The next step is the *explanation* of the grammatical errors in the sentences and their sources. The last step is the *evaluation* of the errors and an explanation for the occurrence of these errors.

The sample of the study represented 23 first year students at the English Department, College of Education, University of Al Hamdaniya, 2017. Students were requested to answer one of the questions given in a composition course. The writing prompt is: "Write a well- organized composition about one of the following titles Road Trip or Environmental Education and saving the planet."

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 below shows the 23 errors made by the students. The column on the left shows the students' errors while the column on the right shows the correct answers revealing a contrast.

Table1  
Students' performance and the correct forms

| No. | Erroneous form                   | Correct form                   |
|-----|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1   | One of ways                      | One of the ways                |
|     | It is either will be interesting | It is either interesting       |
|     | Amazing or annoy                 | Amazing or annoying            |
|     | This places                      | These places                   |
|     | Some information                 | much information               |
|     | A lot of information             | much information               |
| 2   | A road trip it is big            | A road trip is a big           |
|     | It is need                       | It needs                       |
|     | To sulition                      | To solve                       |
|     | It is need                       | It needs                       |
|     | To built                         | To build                       |
|     | Road making                      | Road is making                 |
|     | Should be we clean               | We should be clean             |
|     | To gave                          | To give                        |
| 3   | Last summer we go                | Last summer, we went           |
|     | We went the street sadon         | We went to the Sadon street    |
|     | We desided visit                 | We decided to visit            |
|     | He had beauty house              | He had a beauty house          |
|     | He is work                       | He is working                  |
|     | He have one baby                 | He has one baby                |
|     | We visit the mall Almansoor      | We visit the mall of Almansoor |
|     | We desided go                    | We decided to go               |
|     | Me found                         | I found                        |
|     | We back to the hotel             | We came back the hotel         |
|     | That the day                     | That day                       |
|     |                                  |                                |
| 4   | Have dinner                      | Have a dinner                  |
|     | An amazing pictures              | amazing pictures               |
|     | We back to the hotel             | We came back the hotel         |
|     | He was having a children         | He was having a child          |
| 5   | For health for everyone          | For the health of everyone     |
| 6   | My trip it was                   | My trip was                    |
|     | Also so much                     | Also much                      |
|     | I arraired on late time          | I arrived in a late time       |
|     | The road it was                  | The road was                   |
|     | Can not going to                 | Can't go to                    |
|     | This days                        | These days                     |
|     | Check points not only            | Check points are not only      |
|     | My car broken                    | My car has broken              |

|    |                                  |                                       |
|----|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 7  | In restaurant                    | In a restaurant                       |
|    | I was went                       | I went                                |
| 8  | The last spring my family go     | The last spring, my family went       |
|    | Were stand                       | Were stayed                           |
|    | two day                          | two days                              |
|    | in hotel                         | in a hotel                            |
|    | We eating                        | We ate                                |
|    | I'm don't eat                    | I didn't eat                          |
|    | My mother came to me rice        | My mother bought me rice              |
|    | The eat is very beautiful        | The lunch was very delicious          |
|    | My brother and me playing tiens  | My brother and me were playing tennis |
|    | And the morning                  | In the morning                        |
|    | Came with us and go              | Came with us and went                 |
|    | All the places nice              | All the nice places                   |
| 9  | It was the many places beautiful | It was the beautiful places           |
|    | To Centre the city               | To the city Centre                    |
|    | We decided stay                  | We decided to stay                    |
|    | The hotel too was very beautiful | The hotel was very beautiful          |
|    | It has a wonderful severals      | It has wonderful services             |
|    | We went to shopping              | We went shopping                      |
|    | We stay week in there            | We stayed a week there                |
|    | To us city                       | To our city                           |
|    | We visit again                   | We visited again                      |
|    | The places beautiful             | The beautiful places                  |
| 10 | We take a lot of pictures        | We took lot of pictures               |
|    | Singing to music                 | Listening to music                    |
|    | In road                          | In the road                           |
| 11 | We make a big accident           | We made an accident                   |
|    | The fast drive                   | The fast driving                      |
|    | A good driver that drive         | A good driver that drives             |
| 12 | But is very dangerous            | But, it is very dangerous             |
|    | We stay in                       | We stayed in                          |
| 13 | The program trip                 | The trip program                      |
|    | At the morning                   | In the morning                        |
| 14 | We pass                          | We passed                             |
|    | We benefit                       | We got benefit                        |
|    | My old friend Sam and I          | My old friend Sam and me              |
|    | We playing                       | We were playing                       |
| 15 | To go in the trip                | To go to the trip                     |
|    | It is raining                    | It was raining                        |
|    | The weather be cold              | The weather turned cold               |
|    | He doing                         | He was doing                          |
|    | I really want                    | I really wanted                       |
|    | The place was we went            | The place we went                     |
|    | It's really nice                 | It was really nice                    |
|    | We playing                       | We played                             |
|    | Give                             | Gave                                  |

|    |                                     |                              |
|----|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
|    | We take                             | We took                      |
| 16 | It's not even can make you be happy | It's not even made you happy |
|    | The people became going to          | people are going to          |
| 17 | In time present                     | In the present time          |
|    | Can be go                           | Can go                       |
| 18 | We travel                           | We traveled                  |
|    | We tend                             | We tended                    |
|    | It is making                        | It makes                     |
|    | New location                        | A new location               |
|    | Travel a new country                | Travel to a new country      |
| 19 | The trip is be more enjoyable       | The trip is more enjoyable   |
|    | With to any                         | With any                     |
|    | Many place                          | Many places                  |
|    | It like                             | It likes                     |
|    | Can be develop                      | Can be developed             |
| 20 | I am happy                          | I was happy                  |
|    | I playing                           | I was playing                |
|    | I can speaking                      | I can speak                  |
|    | Road trip it is tiring              | Road trip is tiring          |
| 21 | It is became                        | It is become                 |
|    | He very likes tea                   | He likes tea very much       |
|    | It is be very funny                 | It is very funny             |
|    | To made                             | To make                      |
|    | To felt better                      | To feel better               |
| 22 | Help                                | Helps                        |
|    | The trip is discover                | The trip is to discover      |
|    | My family give                      | My family gave               |
|    | My family going to                  | My family were going to      |
| 23 | It give                             | It gives                     |
|    | A happiness                         | Happiness                    |
|    | There are many benefit              | There are many benefits      |
|    | It give                             | It gives                     |
|    | To remembers                        | To remember                  |
|    | It depend                           | It depends                   |

Based on the table above which is regarded as a summary of students' performance, the researchers focused on the grammatical errors that the student committed in order to see the problems that they faced. It may be noted that all the twenty three participants' errors have been taken up in this study, and after a preliminary analysis, the following grammatical heads were considered for discussion.

### **Determiner**

A determiner is a special category of words that limits (or determines) the nouns that follow them. These words may be within the type of articles (the, a (n)), demonstratives (this, that, these, those), possessive determiners (my, your, his,

her, its, our, their) and quantifiers (one, two, 10 million). Structurally, a determiner precedes an adjective within the phrase, for example:

He is a clever boy.

In cases where there are no adjectives given, determiners are positioned directly before a noun. Through the 23 texts of students' written performance, the researchers found that the determiners are used incorrectly or are not used at all. Some of these erroneous article use include:

*\*'an amazing pictures.'*

Here the student used the indefinite article 'an' wrongly because the indefinite article is not used with the plural nouns. Similarly, the output of another student in *\*'It has a wonderful severals'* is misused again with the same grammatical mistakes. In the following examples the students did not use determiners at all:

*\*'in hotel',*

*\*'He had beauty house'.*

The grammatical rule says that one should use articles before singular countable nouns. This means that the students are not aware of how to use these articles in the specific positions.

### **Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA)**

A close examination of the texts showed that there were (12) incorrect varieties of SVA in the students' performance. For instance, a student writes:

*\*'This places'* instead of 'these places'

*\* 'It need'* instead of 'it needs'.

The students are not fully aware of the rule of subject verb agreement which is regarded as a core component of grammar.

### **Copulative 'Be'**

The finding shows that frequently, the students either omit or use the wrong forms of copular 'be'.

This study has shown a variety of errors that appear to be due to the interference of L1, so the error is interlingual. The findings showed that there were at least 10 occurrences of the misuse of copulars. Take for example the following:

*\*'he doing', instead of 'he is/was doing'.*

### **Infinitives**

The term infinitive in English refers to the base form of the verb. This verb form is either in the present tense with first or second person subject or preceded by 'to', modals, etc.

The majority of the students' performance errors were found in ill-formed use of the 'to-Infinitive', whereas the other form of infinitives are less frequently occurring. Consider the following:

*\*'To solution'* instead of 'to solve'.

In the above example, the students did not change the noun to verb, solution-solve. Others write to- infinitive without attention to the verb e.g.:

- \*‘*To built*’ instead of ‘to build’,
- \*‘*To (felt) better*’, or not used,
- \*‘*Travel a new country*’ ... ‘to new country’.
- \*‘*We decide visit*’ instead of ‘...to visit’.

### **Tense and Aspect of the Verb**

Through the analysis of students’ performance, the researchers discovered that the majority of students’ grammatical mistakes are found in the tenses and aspects of the verbs tense used. The following is an example from a participant’s writing:

\* ‘*Last summer we go, my car broken, we eating, I am don’t eat, we decided stay*’...etc.

It is clearly obvious that the student did not recognize the tenses and aspects of English as well. In this study, the researchers found 32 similarly ill-formed sentences.

### **Number**

Number can be identified by the noun and the verb. The number system focused on singularity and plurality of the nouns that are used in the students’ writing performance. It is clear that some students did not focus on the number system. For example, a student wrote:

\*‘*This places*’ instead of ‘*these places*’.

This error occurs because of lack of phonological awareness as the learners of English are not in the know of the differences between ‘this / ðɪs/ and these / ðɪz/’. Another error detected from the samples is:

\* ‘*Two day*’ instead of ‘*two days*’

In this case the student forgets to add the inflectional ‘s’ to make a plural. Moreover, some students are not aware of using the appropriate quantifier with singular or plural noun. For instance:

\*‘*Many place*’ for ‘*many places*’.

### **Pronouns**

Consider for example, some of the students’ performances:

\*‘*Me found*’ for ‘*I found*’.

In the above example, the student wants to use the personal pronoun ‘I’ because the composition that is required from him/ her is about him/herself. Therefore, the inappropriate personal pronoun is used. The possessive pronoun is also detected as in ‘to us city’ instead of ‘our city’. In this structure the students didn’t realize the appropriate possessive pronoun in an appropriate slot, so it is used arbitrarily.

### **Prepositions**

Students made mistakes in the use of prepositions because of the difference between the source language and the target language. The results of this research show that of 7 students or 29%, made errors in the use of prepositions of place and time. These results indicated that there was a lack of understanding of the

types and functions of prepositions. Some of the incorrect prepositions: 'to', 'in', 'at' etc. for example:

*\*'at the morning'. Instead of 'in the morning'.*

Sometimes, a student uses two prepositions together such as *\*'with to any'*. In the same vein, Kamil and Hazem (2020) found that the students' deficiencies are found in the uses of the three prepositions namely, 'in', 'on' and 'at'.

## **Inversion**

Inversion covers the main grammatical operations as in forming questions where we put an operator before the subject. For example, if we want to form a question for a sentence like:

*'He is clever'.*

The question form for this sentence will be:

*Is he clever?*

However, the findings revealed that some students inverse the grammar elements within a sentence. Consider some of the following inaccurate responses of the students:

*\*'Should be we clean' for 'we should be clean'*

*\*'We went the street sadon' for 'we went to the Sadon Street.'*

*\*All the places nice' for all the nice places',*

*\*'many places beautiful' for 'many beautiful places',*

*\*'The program trip' for 'the trip program'*

*\*'In time present' for 'in the present time'.*

These errors imply that the students are not fully aware of the arrangement of the components of sentences in a long paragraph.

## **Spelling Mistakes**

This paper indicates that overgeneralization of spelling rules is a causative factor for the spelling errors committed. For example, some important words which are considered easy to spell for foreign learners were inaccurately spelled:

*\*'sulition' for 'solution',*

*\*'Desidef' for 'decided',*

*\*'Severals' for 'several',*

*\*'tiens' for 'tennis'.*

The study found that EFL Iraqi students made different kinds of errors while writing compositions. Errors are classified into ten types beginning with determiners, subject-verb agreements, copulative be, tense, aspects, infinitive, prepositions, inversion, number, pronouns and spelling mistakes. This finding is in line with Algamal (2021) and Al-Khaswneh's (2009) studies. They found that Arab learners of English committed mistakes in subject-verb agreements, mispronunciation, quantifiers, capitalization, use of negation. Furthermore, Ibrahim (2016) showed that Sudanese EFL learners could not use cohesive markers properly in writing paragraphs. In the same vein, Ankawi (2015) related that Saudi EFL learners' problems in writing to their incompetence in grammar,

the difference between Arabic and English underlying systems and the cultural variations between that the two language possess. To avoid above mentions problems, it is benefitable to think about other teaching strategies like process genre approach, (Bin-Hady et al, 2020) where students get time to practise the writing process and get feedback from teachers.

## Conclusions

In this study, an attempt was made to investigate students' grammatical competence in written English. It is clear that EFL Iraqi students of English have problems in mastering some grammatical components especially subject-verb concord in English. However, the first year students are struggling with these types of grammar problems, some grammatical rules are similar in the two languages, which makes it rather easy for Arabic speakers to learn English. Omission is another error found in the students' performance. It is clear from the findings that the most common are mis-formation errors. This may be due to many reasons. First, the students were confused about choosing the suitable tenses. Second, it is possible that they had difficulties in distinguishing between the singular and plural subject. Third, they found it difficult to decide how to change the verb related to the tense in the sentences. Finally, this study confirmed that there are three main causes for students' inaccuracies, and these are: Intralingual, Interlingual and Communicative strategies.

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