An Investigation of Writing Errors of Saudi EFL University Students

(A Case Study of College of Science & Arts- Tanumah, King Khalid University)

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Abstract: This study aims at investigating the writing errors of Saudi EFL university students of College of Science & Arts, Tanumah at King Khalid University in the academic year 2014/2015 during the first semester. The study also aims at identifying and analyzing these errors, determining the causes of these errors, as well as investigating the factors that contribute to their occurrence and suggesting suitable solutions for the problem. For this purpose, research questions are posed and the answers to these questions are provided and discussed. The sample of this study includes 20 students who are chosen from the Level Four students besides the EFL teachers in the above-mentioned college. The analytical descriptive approach is adopted to handle this study. The study focuses on grammatical, punctuation, lexical, spelling and discourse errors in the writing English production of these learners .Testing, questionnaire , structured interview and personal observation of the researcher are all used as tools for collecting data. The findings of the study reveal that the students commit errors in their writing performance due to some factors such as: mother tongue interference, besides insufficient activities and practice of basic techniques of writing in addition to the lack of follow-up to the students' writing performance and some other factors.

Keywords: causes of errors; EFL students, writing errors; writing performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a lifelong process and it is often a challenging experience for learners. English occupies the status of a foreign language in the education system of majority of Arab countries. However, learning English as a foreign language is not an easy task. Acquiring English is a difficult issue among second or foreign language learners ESL/EFL especially Arab learners. According to Brown (2000), in order to master English language, learners have to be adequately exposed to all of the four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. English Language teaching is currently focusing on the teaching and learning of the four language skills. Researches show that learners' writing performance poses specific challenges for English second language teaching and learning contexts across the globe; in particular, in higher education institutions (Munro 2003; and Gambell 1991).

Writing is a crucial act in the process of learning any foreign language, but more so in English since it has become the language of global communication. According to Tribble (1997:8) writing skill is more and more important nowadays. Becoming a proficient writer is one of the major objectives of many students, especially for those who want to become members of international business, administrative or academic communities.

1.1 Statement of the problem:

Writing is an important discipline. It is the tool that helps students develop their knowledge. Mastery of the writing system of any language requires the ability to master grammar, spelling, punctuation…….etc. These aspects are very important in written language and any error in these aspects can affect the written production and may lead to misunderstanding.

Based on the researcher's own experience as an English language lecturer at College of Science & Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University, the students majoring in English encounter many challenges in writing skill that require investigation. It has also been observed by the researcher that when the students attempt to write a paragraph on a certain topic they produce badly constructed, badly presented, badly punctuated and incoherent piece of writing.

To discover how and why the errors are committed by EFL/ESL learners and to what extent the students' errors provide feedback to language teaching methods and practice, the study attempts to investigate the causes of these errors and tries to suggest some solutions to the problem.

1.2 Questions of the study:

1- Are writing errors of EFL university students related to MT interference?

2- Are ways of teaching behind the occurrence of these errors?

3- Is the weakness of writing performance related to EFL learners' lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary?

4- Is the weakness of writing performance related to EFL learners' lack of writing practice in and outside classroom?

1.3 Hypotheses of the study:

To answer the research questions, the following set of hypotheses has been put forth:

1- Mother tongue of Saudi EFL university students interferes and contributes to most of writing errors.

2- Some errors are related to the teachers' ways of teaching.

3- EFL learners' writing errors and weak writing performance are related to lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary

4- Writing weakness is related to lack of writing practice in and outside classroom.

1.4 Objectives of the study:

The main objectives of this study are the following:

1- To identify and analyze learner's errors in writing performance.

2- To determine the causes of these errors and to investigate factors that contribute to the learners' writing errors and their weak writing performance.

3- To suggest suitable solutions for this problem.

1.5 Limits of the study:

The study is mainly devoted to investigate and analyze writing errors of level four EFL learners in College of Science & Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University, in the academic year 2014/2015 during the first semester. The study focuses on the grammatical, punctuation, lexical, spelling and discourse errors in the writing English production of those learners .Testing, questionnaire , structured interviews and personal observation of the researcher are all used as tools for collecting data.

1.6 Significance of the Study:

The present study is considered the first study conducted in this college. However, the significance of this study lies in its attempt to shed some light on factors that contribute to the learners' writing errors and their weak writing performance. Its implications may help instructors and their students benefit from the findings of the study. It is hoped that the results of this study would increase the students' knowledge about the sources of errors and how to improve their writing performance. Hopefully, the findings of the study would provide a means by which the EFL teacher can assess the learning and teaching process and determine priorities for future plan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of 'writing'

For Byrne (1996), 'writing' involves encoding of a message written through a sequence of sentences ordered together in certain ways, and it requires some conscious mental effort including making notes, drafting, and revising. Based on the above definition, the present study defines 'writing' as a thinking process which involves generating ideas, composing these ideas in sentences and paragraphs, and finally revising the ideas and paragraphs composed.

2.2 The Importance of Writing:

In the field of EFL or ESL instruction, Anchalee and Pongrat (2008:8) explain the importance of writing by claiming that writing helps students learn. First ,writing reinforces the grammatical structures ,idioms and vocabulary that were taught to students .Second ,when students write , they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language , to go beyond what they have just learned to say, to take risks .Third ,when they write , they necessarily become involved with the new language ; the effort to express ideas and constant use of eyes ,hand ,and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning .As students struggle with what to put down next or how to put it down on paper , they often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their ideas . Raimes (1983:6) points out that the close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course .She identified the different components for producing a clear, fluent and effective piece of writing: content, the writer's process, audience, purpose, word choice, organization, mechanics, grammar and style.

2.3 Teaching of Writing:

Teaching writing is a very important part of teaching the English language and no doubt it needs special attention. Though not easy, it is not so difficult as many teachers and students imagine. Watkins (2004), analyses the pros and cons of teaching writing and lists the essential reasons why learners may need to learn how to write:

1. Writing is an important means of communication, and therefore an important skill to master.

2. Writing can consolidate other language learning aspects (vocabulary, grammar).

3. Writing is a relatively straightforward way of practicing and using language outside the classroom.

4. A writing phase in a lesson can provide a change of pace.

5. Learning to write may fulfill professional needs. Learners may have to write business letters, emails or reports in English.

6. Many exams demand writing skills.

Hedge (1999) assumed thatwriting is essentially a creative process which involves students in a learning process, motivates, builds their confidence, gives them an opportunity to explore the language, to communicate and to look for the best ways of self-expression. The teacher's role in this process is undoubtedly very important: The teacher's role is to provide an environment in which students will learn about writing, see models of good writing, get plenty of practice in writing, and receive help during the writing process. The teacher, being a facilitator, helper, motivator, consultant, prompter, advisor and only then assessor, should help learners by organizing writing as a series of stages. First of all, students need to feel the necessity of writing. « Why should I write? What's the point of writing? » - these are common complaints of learners. And it is up to the teacher to bring real- world atmosphere in the classroom. Nowadays, it is not difficult to do, due to travel experiences, student exchange programs, internet opportunities and so on.

According to Ur (2002 169) in order to become good at writing, learners need concentration, instruction, practice, and patience. The teacher's task is to assist learners to gain control over the written word. How to do this? Douglas Brown (2001: 346-355) provides guidelines for developing learners' writing techniques. The teacher, when giving the learners a writing task, should always consider various techniques for maintaining efficient writing practice. These include: balance process and product, take account of the learners' cultural/literary background, connect reading and writing, provide as much authentic writing as possible, frame lesson plans in terms of including prewriting, drafting, and revising stages, offer techniques that are as interactive as possible and sensitively apply methods of responding to, and correcting the learners ´ writing. Furthermore, the teacher should bear in mind what good writers do and encourage the learners to do the same: focus on a goal or main idea when writing, perceptively gauge their audience, spend some time planning to write, easily let their first ideas flow onto the paper, follow a general organizational plan as they write, solicit and utilize feedback on their writing, revise their work willingly and efficiently and patiently make as many revisions as needed.

According to Brookes, A. and Grundy, P. (1998:15-17) when the focus is on the writing process, four main points have to be taken into account:

I. Determining a purpose. The purposes of writing outside the classroom and in the classroom may be different. For example, outside the classroom we may write because we feel the necessity to make our views known to someone else, while in the classroom there may be other purposes, such as to develop language skills or to fulfill institutional requirements.

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II. Selecting the main ideas: The following activities may help in gathering and selecting ideas:

a) Brainstorming;

b) Discussing ideas with colleagues;

c) Taking stock of what we have written at regular intervals as we write and considering what we might go on to write about.

III. Identifying readership: Taking note on readership is another important part of writing process. Learners have to know to whom they are writing, who will read their work. This gives them additional encouragement and interest.

IV. Suitable form: It becomes much easier if we distinguish what is conventional from what writers are free to choose for themselves. The beginnings and endings of letters, for example, are conventional. We might provide a variety of different examples from which our learners could select the most appropriate for their purpose.

2.4 EFL Writing Difficulty:

In order to comprehend second language writing difficulty more clearly, a number of researchers as well as scholars have paid much attention to identifying what hardships EFL/ESL student writers may confront while writing. Al-Khsawneh (2010) , for example, relates the weakness of EFL students in writing performance to the following factors:

a- Lack of motivation, or the teacher's interest.

b- Many learners use their mother tongue because of the isolated culture. Yet, methods of teaching English included the medium of instructions, using Arabic in English classes, writing done in Arabic,

c- Teachers' low proficiency in English.

d- Lack of writing practice in educational institutions.

e- EFL students have limited vocabulary. Therefore, students end up repeating the same words; this hinders creativity. Students couldn't give voice to their thoughts because they lack the adequate stock of vocabulary.

f. English language learners don't use invented spelling and their written texts are restricted to words which they know.

g. The present tense is the only tense used in their writing.

h. It is difficult to understand writing performance of the EFL learners because of the ill-structured sentences in composition.

i. Students are unwilling to share their work with other students and they don't get the suitable feedback.

Ski (2005), cited in Thongma (2012:6)   attributes weak performance of EFL learners in English language learning in general and writing skill in particular to the following factors:

(a) EFL learners have insufficient or lacking of exposure to the language as there is a limited opportunity to use English outside the classrooms

(b) Learners lack motivation to learn English as they do not see the immediate need to use the language.

(c) Time management is involved in students' educational achievement; for instance, students with better time-management skills tend to have higher grade-point average (GPA) than students with poorer time-management skills.

According to Jack (2011:15),the following are the key factors which influence EFL students' writing :

(a) Student under-preparedness:

Various research studies indicate that ESL students tend to be under-prepared for university studies. Maloney (2003:664) claims that under-prepared students find it difficult to cope with the writing tasks that are expected of them in higher education teaching and learning contexts. As a result, their experiences of academic writing tasks tend to be negative.

These studies show that there is a strong link between student writing difficulties and under-preparedness. Niven (2005:774) attributes the problems of under-prepared students' experience with writing at university to the wide gap between writing expectations and demands between school and university. This means that universities should expect first

year students to be inadequately prepared for the required writing skills because, as Hirst et al. (2004:66) confirm, students were not equipped to deal with the academic literacy required of them. Therefore, universities should be expected to put in place proper structures that can support under-prepared students to start addressing and improving their specific academic writing needs.

(b) Staff under-preparedness

Staff under-preparedness is an important issue because in some instances under-preparedness tends to be perceived and ascribed to students only. But, as Moutlana (2007:3) argues, the problem of student writing is exacerbated by lecturers and tutors who are not adequately prepared to provide the appropriate support to under-prepared students. In order to address academic writing difficulties, lecturers or tutors should also see themselves as active participants in the process by making sure that they are fully equipped and trained to help students improve their academic writing skills.

(c) Reading and writing support for underprepared students

For under-prepared students to cope with the required academic writing tasks at university, they will need support. Van Schalkwyk et al. (2009:192) argue that reading and writing play a fundamental role in student learning and that acquiring these skills during the first year at university is a critical factor in ensuring that students succeed.

(d) Inadequate approaches to teaching writing

Research shows that some of the approaches used in teaching writing are problematic because they are considered inadequate and do not address particular aspects of students' writing needs van Schalkwyk et al. (2009)

2.5 A Brief Review on Previous Relevant Studies:

Shedding light on the contribution of some previous researchers is fundamentally important since it will help in making suggestions and proposing solutions concerning the problem of the current study. The aim of this part; therefore, is to provide a thorough review of the genuine contributions of some previous studies and views in the domain of writing errors made by EFL learners.

Hamid (2006) investigates spelling errors found in written composition of second and third secondary students in the United Arab Emirates. The investigation shows that the students' spelling errors resulted from lack of motivation, insufficient teaching and insufficient practice.

There is a dominating belief among researchers is that writing is the most difficult language skill for EFL learners to master. Gomaa (2010), cited in (Dana 2013:255) indicated that "students' first language affects learning the target language". This is why students make certain mistakes and repeat them. Here are some of the common mistakes she has experienced while teaching writing:

a. Run on sentences: Run on sentences in Arabic are accepted. In Arabic we write endless sentences with no punctuation marks, and that is not accepted when writing English.

b. Arabish: When the students translate Arabic into English they sometimes use words causing misunderstanding and confusion. For example, a sentence like "*Flu infection spreads by peace with hand*" is grammatically correct but meaningless. The student means "*Flue infection is caused by greetings and handshakes*". The words *greetings* and *peace* are of the same meaning in Arabic so the student wrote one instead of the other.

c. Punctuation: Several English language learners with Arabic background struggle with punctuation since Arabic has few limitations in the use of commas and periods than English. The semi-colon, and the exclamation marks aren't very commonly used in students' writings.

D .Writing Organization: The circular structure in the English essay (with the topic sentence of the same idea in the conclusion) is foreign to Arabic essay where the conclusion has to bring something new.

In reviewing some studies conducted on writing errors committed by Arab EFL learners, many studies show that Arab EFL students face severe problems in writing while learning English process. Abisamra (2003), states that most of the syntactic errors committed by Arab EFL learners in their written production are because of the interference of their first language. She has emphasized that when the EFL learners don't know how to express something in the foreign language, they directly refer to their native language. She studied a group of ten essays written by Arabic-speaking EFL students in

the ninth grade. After analysis, she found a total of 213 errors (29 grammatical, 35 syntactic, 26 lexical, 3 semantic, and 120 substances errors). The major cause of their committed errors was not only negative first language transfer "interference" but also intralingual interference.

According to Grami (2010) ,numerous studies have been conducted to identify the problems of Saudi EFL learners in their writing. The findings of these studies reported that despite the fact that Saudi students study English as a compulsory subjects for six years before joining any university but actually only a few of them are able to show satisfactory performance in the university entrance examinations .

Tahaineh (2010) has stated that Arab students' errors in writing fall in the category of syntax and grammar and quoted Hashim's (1996) findings, who reviewed and analysed a number of studies conducted on Arab EFL learners' syntactic errors and stated that Arab learners' errors can be categorised in seven syntactic subcategories: prepositions, verbs, articles, conjunctions, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and sentence structure.

Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) reinforced the previous findings and revealed that Arab EFL learners' errors in writing are syntactical and especially in prepositions. Most recent studies conducted to investigate Arab EFL learners syntactic errors also found out that verbs and prepositions are the most problematic areas in this regard.

Concerning the problems of Saudi university undergraduates, Khan (2011), cited in Choudhary and Umer (2012:18) , conducted a study to investigate the problems of Saudi university undergraduates, has mentioned that they face several problems in phoneme clusters, spellings, grammar, mistakes due to first language interference, structure, doubling of subjects, doubling of preposition, tenses, articles, appropriate vocabulary, wrong use of prefixes & suffixes etc. Khan (2011:125) also reviewed several studies in this regard and concluded that Arab EFL learners' problems are caused by the following reasons:

a) School graduates have lack of information regarding the university or college they enrolled in;

b) There is deficiency in the English language curricula offered by some schools and universities;

c) Dreadful teaching methodology;

d) Problems with proper language environments; and

e) Lack of personal impetus on the part of the students.

According to his findings, the causes of the problems may be dealt with from four perspectives, i.e., the learners, faculty members, curricula and the environment of teaching /learning context. It has been reported that Saudi EFL learners are more interested in getting better scores instead of learning the target language and they are in the habit of memorizing passages without understanding, grammatical rules and lexical items to achieve high grade point average (Grami, 2010; Zaid, 1993). Another very strong reason behind this marks-oriented behaviour of Saudi EFL learners is that a vast majority of them lack intrinsic motivation and bear various extrinsic motivational factors to learn English language (Javid, Asmari, & Farooq, 2012). Concerning the role of EFL teachers, a growing mass of research has suggested that a vast majority of EFL teachers seem to lack the following:

a) A proper and appropriate training to teach English,

b) A proper motivation to indulge in teaching process, and

c) Willingness to incorporate innovation and modern techniques in their teaching practices; thus, causing the continuation of traditional, outdated and teacher-led teaching practices that is a major impediment in the way of effective and efficient ELT in Saudi Arabia (Bersamina, 2009; Grami, 2010; Zaid, 1993). Another important factor in this regard is the absence of appropriate and learner-centered curricula to cater for the specific EFL needs of the learners. It has been frequently reported that the curricula taught in several Saudi university is outdated, traditional and textbook-based that encourage the students to merely memorise instead of making them grasp the target language (Khan, 2011; Bersamina, 2009; Zughoul, 1987)

To conclude this part, the study before hand is unlike the other studies which have been conducted earlier dealing with many grammatical, syntactic and spelling errors only. It differs from all the above studies as it deals with grammatical, spelling , punctuation , lexical and discourse errors . Unlike other studies that employed two types of tools for collecting

data, this study employs three types of tools for collecting data, these are testing, students' questionnaire and teachers' interview. Most research in the second language writing focuses on the teaching of writing rather than on the second language learners' experiences in the process of writing. This study focuses to large extent, on the EFL learners' experience in writing.

Thus, from this review of related literature, we can say that the field of English language teaching is a wide field that has many explorations which need to be made. In addition, many ambiguities and problems in this field need to be given intensive exploration for a better understanding of EFL learners' errors.

3.   MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Method of Study: The study adopts descriptive analytical method.

3.2 Population of Study: The population includes all fourth level EFL students who study writing skill course in the academic year 2014/2015 in the Department of English Language in the College of Science and Arts , Tanumah which is 120 Kms away from Abha ; the main campus of King Khalid University. The students are 20-22 years old with Arabic as their mother tongue. All the subjects of the study are Saudi male college students. In addition to the students`, the population also covers all English language teaching staff in the above mentioned college. Teachers have been chosen on the ground that they play an important role in promoting and developing students' writing skills in particular and the learning process in general. Students are chosen due to the nature of the research questions and hypotheses which address their writing errors.

3.3 Sample of Study:

(a) 20 students' answer scripts from fourth level EFL students are randomly chosen from an essay test as a representative sample.

(b) 20 students' answer scripts from fourth level EFL students are randomly chosen from a questionnaire conducted on them.

(c) All the answers of the structured interviews which are conducted on the English language teaching staff in the above mentioned college.

3.4 Instruments:

The data of this study are collected through questionnaire, test and structured interview. The questionnaire and the test are designed for the students chosen as a sample population, while teachers are asked to respond to structured interview. However, the study employs the following tools for collecting data:

3.4.1 Teachers' Interview:

The main objective of this interview is to explore the teachers' general opinion about Saudi EFL university learners' academic writing performance. Based on EFL teachers' experience, the interview seeks to find out what specific difficulties do Saudi EFL university learners experience when writing essays. The interview attempts to find out what suggestions do EFL teachers have in order to reduce writing errors of Saudi EFL university learners and what should be done to improve EFL learners' English writing skills. The purpose of the interview, therefore, is to collect data based on the teachers' experience.

3.4.2 The Test:

The rationale behind the test conducted on the students is to reveal some of aspects of the students' written performance . The students are asked to write an essay on a certain topic. The task is done during a regular university lecture. This is meant to remove any sort of anxiety among the subjects. The participants are given one hour to accomplish the task. The topic is associated with the sort of activities in which students are engaged during their daily life. Such topics may enable the students to write freely and comfortably because they address things which are meaningful to them. Raimes (1983) argues that when a meaningful writing task is assigned to the students, they will put more thought and efforts into a piece of writing that communicate their ideas and opinions to the reader. Their essays are immediately collected. Then, the essays are examined and checked for possible intended errors. The writing tasks are dealt with in terms of the following procedures:

a/ The students' answer sheets are carefully investigated and identified in terms of grammar, lexis, spelling, punctuation, and discourse errors .

b/ The students` errors are classified.

c/ After the classification of such errors, the probable causes as why such errors occur are determined and explained.

d/ The number of each error categories is counted so as to determine which area of errors is problematic.

The following topics were given to students to choose to write on:

1- "My past, present and future."

2- "My friend "

3- "How do you spend your evenings?"

The reason behind offering a variety of topics is to enable the participants to deal with issues that suit their interests, and thus can write on fluently.

3.4.3 Students' Questionnaire:

Students' questionnaire investigates the participants' perception and evaluation of their own capacities in writing. It consists of 46 questions which are divided into five sections. The first section comprises items from 1 to 9 focusing on personal factors related to the learners' judgment of their own writing performance. The second section includes the items from 10 to 17, it deals with students' perceptions of their academic writing skills and abilities. The third section involves the items from 18 to 29 focusing on linguistic factors pertaining to writing performance. The fourth section comprises the items from 30-40. It is about the reasons behind the weakness of writing. The last section comprises the items from 41- to 46 focusing on the students' suggestions to improve their writing abilities.

4.   DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 A Summary of Learners' Errors and their Probable Causes:

Here, is a random selection of instances of errors taken as examples from the written answer scripts of the EFL learners at King Khalid University, College of Science & Arts, Tanumah, with particular attention being paid to the grammatical errors, spelling errors, lexical errors, punctuation errors and discourse errors.

(1) **Grammatical Errors**: In terms of grammatical errors, the discussion focuses on errors in omission of copula, omission of third person singular, wrong tenses or wrong verb forms, errors in the use of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, articles and prepositions. These nine selected- grammatical items represent some of the main areas of difficulty faced by most EFL learners in this college under study in the field of English writing.

(a) **Omission of "be" and Copula "be":-** The copula "*be*" is among the English copula verbs that is considered to be very problematic to many learners in this study. However, the omission of the copula "*be*" is one of the most common errors committed by many learners. From the data, it is discernible that many learners tend to leave out the copula "*be*" in their writing as exemplified in the following example:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
1	He * twenty four years old.	He *is* twenty four years old.

This kind of error can be attributed to non- existence of the copula in Arabic language besides its multiplicity of forms, that is to say, the copula "be" has more distinct forms with respect to person, number, and tense than any other verb in English.

(b) **Omission of third person singular marker "s":-** The third person singular marker in English is often omitted by many learners as shown in the following examples.

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
2	He <u>live</u> in Abha .	He *lives* in Abha .
3	He <u>study</u> in English Department.	He *studies* in English Department.

The omission of third person singular inflection "s" in the above sentences can be attributed to the incomplete application of rules and insufficient practice.

(c) Errors in tense or verb forms: Many errors have been committed by learners in the use of tenses or verb forms including: wrong use of *be*, *have* and *do*, insertion of *be*, wrong use of simple, past, continuous and perfect verb tenses, errors involving verbs followed by infinitive with "to", errors involving verbs followed by an infinitive without " to", errors involving mixed – up verb tense, passive and active verb forms, confusion over use and wrong use of modal verbs. Some of these errors are shown in the following examples:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
4	I <u>live</u> in Mecca for nine years.	I have *lived* in Mecca for nine years .
5	He <u>have</u> more friends.	He *has* more friends.

The wrong selection of verbs *live* instead of *have lived* in the example (4) and *have* instead of *has* in the example (5) can be related to overgeneralization and incomplete application of rules.

The learners in this study also over-generalize the use of present simple instead of present perfect and present perfect continuous tense and as a result they produce sentences like: " *I study in this school for six years*" and "*we drive all night* " instead of " *I have studied in this school for six years*" and " *we have been writing all night*". This could be traced to the fact that Saudi EFL learners have the inclination to simplify their learning pertaining to the English tense system. Thus, they express past action by using present instead of perfect tense as required.

(d)Errors in the use of nouns: Errors in the use of nouns found in this study include errors involving countable nouns where the 's' is left out and errors involving singular countable and uncountable nouns where the 's' is included as shown in the example below:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
6	… because it is a good <u>sports.</u>	… because it is a good *sport*.
7	I have four <u>brother</u> .	I have four *brothers*.

As demonstrated in the examples above , in the example No (6) the learner commits an error by adding an "s" of plurality to the word " *sport*" .The example No (7) includes an error where the "s" of plurality is left out. This error could be attributed to overgeneralization and simplification strategy on the learner's part. Another possible explanation of the selection of the singular form is that the singular form contains the core meaning the learners need to know about the new English item. The use of the singular form could also be due to the system they encounter in the dictionary in which all the entries of countable nouns are in the singular form.

(e)Errors in the use of pronouns:- In terms of pronouns, the learners commit errors involving a wrong selection of pronouns and the insertion of unnecessary pronouns as shown in the following examples.

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
8	<u>He</u> name is Omer.	*His* name is Omer.

On the basis of the above example, it seems that the learners use wrong pronouns .For example, in sentence (8), the pronoun " *he*" is used instead of "*his*". A probable cause for this error can be attributed to incomplete application of rules.

(f) Errors in the use of articles: Errors in the use of definite and indefinite articles committed by learners in this study , involve instances of omission of articles, insertion of unnecessary articles and misuse of articles as illustrated in the following example :

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
9	He is <u>student</u> in King Khalid University.	He is a student in King Khalid University.

The definite article (the) and indefinite article (a, an) constitute special difficulty to learners. For example, sentence number (9) involves omission of indefinite article (a). A possible explanation for these errors is influence of Arabic language because the students here tend to equate the indefinite article (*a*) with the Arabic zero article.

Another possible cause of this error could also be as a result of incomplete application of rules. If we have another deep look at this example, we will discover that the student commits some errors by inserting unnecessary articles before nouns where no article is required for instance "*the world is a poor*", *are still at the home*" and " *with a good experience*. These errors could also be attributed to the influence of Arabic language and incomplete application of rules. However, the rudiments of English grammar regard the word " *experience*" as uncountable noun so no indefinite article must be used before it. Perhaps the ignorance of this rule can explain this insertion error.   In short, errors related to article usage found in this study indicate that many learners are either ignorant or unaware of the various conditions existing in English that require the use of different articles and the zero articles.

(g) Errors in the use of prepositions: Errors in the use of prepositions in this study involve wrong choice of prepositions, insertion of unnecessary prepositions and omission of necessary prepositions as explained in the following examples:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
10	I <u>could to see</u> my best friend.	I *could see* my best friend .
11	I <u>went to home</u> .	I *went home*.

As the above examples show, prepositions constitute one of the greatest difficulties for the learners of English. The difficulty of using prepositions can be ascribed to three main reasons: Firstly, the complexity of the prepositions system in English language itself. Secondly, the ignorance of rule restriction. Thirdly, the interference of Arabic language.

(h) Errors in the use of adjectives and adverbs: Errors in the use of adjectives and adverbs involve the wrong use of comparative and superlative adjectives. They also involve the use of an adjective in the place of an adverb or vice versa as shown in the examples below:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
12	His <u>player favorite</u> is Yasser Al Qahtani	His *favorite player* is Yasser Al Qahtani.
13	He writes <u>quick</u>.	He writes *quickly*.

A close look at the student's error in sentence (12) will indicate that the student places the adjective *favorite* after the noun *player* . A possible explanation for this error is interference of mother tongue. However, in sentence (13) the adjective *quick* is used instead of the adverb *quickly* , a probable cause for this error is overgeneralization. This error can also be related to interference of mother tongue.
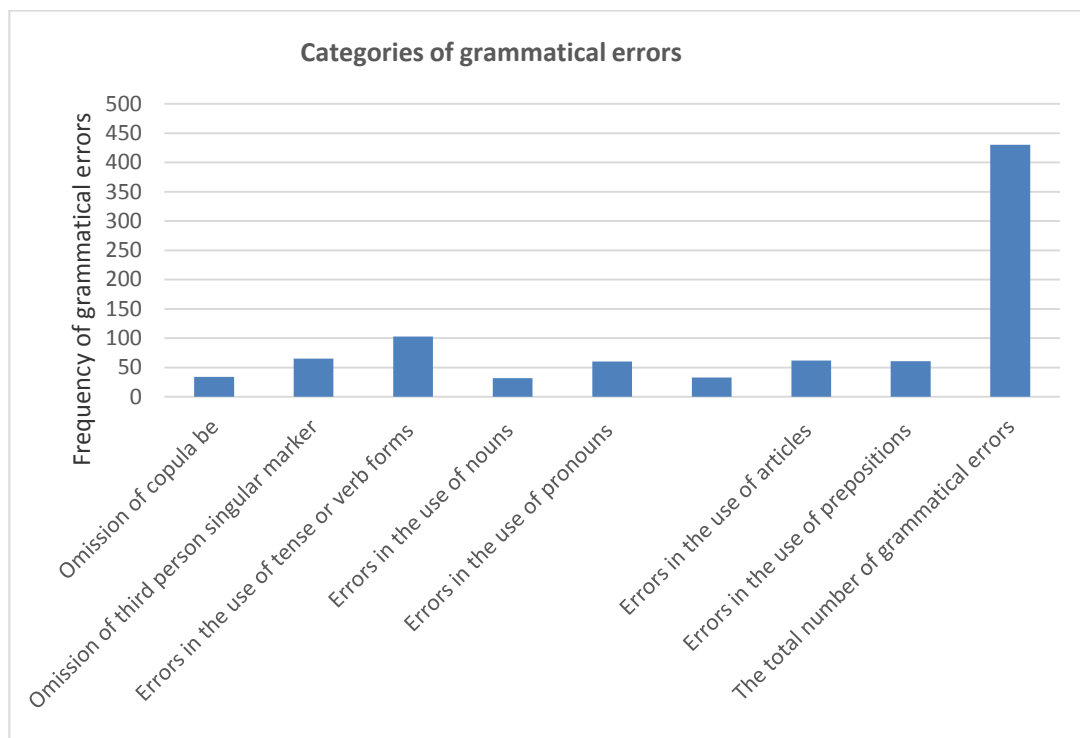
Chart .1: Categories of grammatical errors

Chart. 1 deals with categories of grammatical errors. It shows that the total number of grammatical errors is 430. It can be seen that errors committed in the use of tense or verb forms fall between 100 and 110 and this is considered to be a problematic area to the learners in English grammar. Another types of grammatical errors fall between 60 and 65 are errors in the use of pronouns, errors in the use of articles and errors in the use preposition. Finally, both errors in the use of nouns and in the use of adjectives and adverbs fall between 30 and 35.

(2) Spelling Errors: Spelling errors found in this study include:

(a)**Omission of letters:**

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
14	He likes football, tennis and swiming.	He likes football, tennis and *swimming*.

A possible explanation for this error could be related to the fact that EFL learners tend to spell the words in the way they pronounce them. Thus they produce " *bild*, *an* and *ears*" instead of *build*, *and* and *years*.

(b) Insertion of letters:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
15	My favorite hobby is driveing a car .	My favorite hobby is *driving* a car.

A probable cause for this error could also be attributed to the way in which this word is pronounced or to bad memorization.

(c) Wrong choice of letters:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
16	He is a studant in King Khalid University.	He is a *student* in King Khalid University.

17	He has <u>fife</u> cars.	He has *five* cars.
18	………. <u>tow</u> <u>bersons</u>---	….. *two persons*.

 The main cause behind committing such spelling errors in this category in general could be attributed to the way in which these learners pronounce words, as " *fife ,besrons* ……etc". These errors could be related to the influence of the phonology of Arabic language. That is to say, in Arabic, for example there are no /P/ or /V/ phonemes, thus, the learners commit errors as *Abril, brimary, fife*, and *besrons*. In other words, these errors were caused by contrast between Arabic and English phonology: Arabic has no /P/: /b/ contrast, only /b/ which leads these learners to commit errors like, *Abril, brimary*. Arabic also has no /V/: /f/ contrast, only /f/ which leads these learners to commit errors *like* fife instead of *five*. In the example (18) the misspelled word *tow* instead of *two* can be explained as a matter of carelessness.

Finally, some misspelled words like *villige* , *pepol* and *waer* instead of *village*, *people* and *wear*, could be attributed to inconsistencies in the spelling system of English language. That is to say, to the arbitrary nature of English spelling.

(d) **Single word written as two words:**

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
19	……….. I have my <u>break fast</u> at 7.	……….. I have my *breakfast* at 7.

 A probable explanation for the occurrence of the errors above could be due to incomplete application of rules and carelessness .

(e) **Two words written as a single word:**

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
20	He is <u>ateacher</u> in Ballasmar.	He is a teacher in Ballasmar.

A possible cause of these errors could also be due to incomplete application of rules and carelessness.

(f) **Doubling of letters**

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
21	…….<u>walkking</u> in the garden.	*walking* in the garden.

A probable explanation for the occurrence of the errors above could be due to the ignorance of rules or to generalization.

(g) **Missing and overuse of capital letters**:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
22	The garden is <u>Opposite</u> my house.	The garden is opposite my house.
23	<u>hassan</u> is my friend.	Hassan is my friend.

The examples above display that capital letters have been missed or have been overused. A possible explanation for these errors could be related to the influence of Arabic language on the fact there is no capitalization in Arabic language. Another possible cause for the occurrence of such errors could be related to the ignorance of punctuation rules.
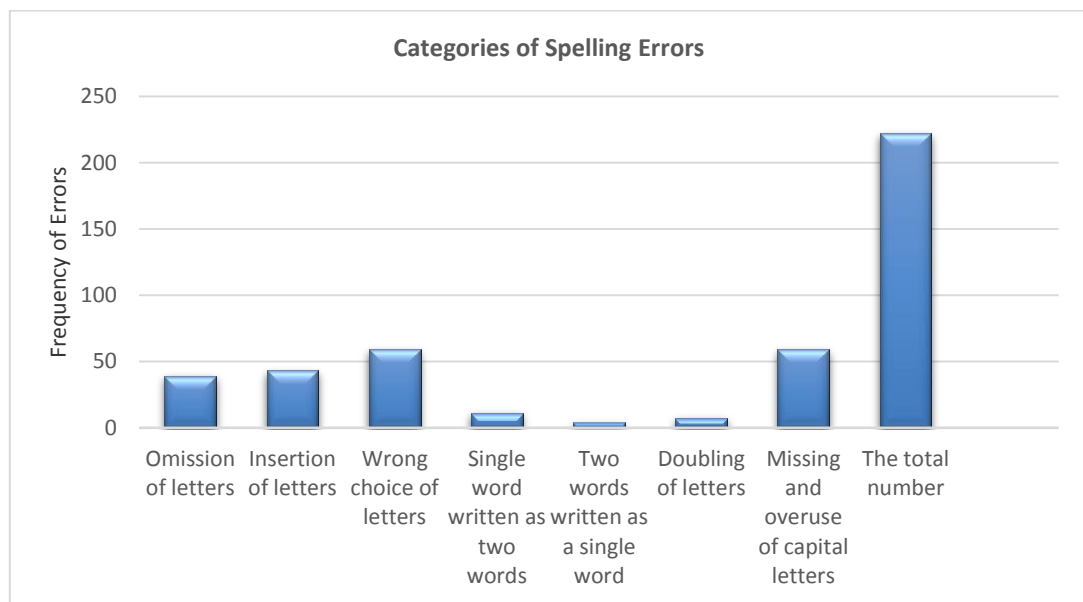
Chart .2: Categories of Spelling Errors

Chart .2 deals with categories of spelling errors. It reveals that

- The total number of spelling errors is 222

- Both errors in the areas of wrong choice of letters and the area of missing and overuse of capital letters have the largest number of errors which fall between 55 and 60.

- Insertion of wrong letters has the second largest number of errors which fall between 40 and 50, while errors in the area of omission of letters fall between 35 and 40.

- Errors in the area of single words written as two words fall under 15 and 10, whereas errors in doubling of letters errors and errors in the area of two words written as a single word is below 10.

(3)Lexical Errors: Lexical errors found in this study include:

(a)Wrong choice of words:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
24	He travelled to Makkah to <u>take</u> Omrah .	He travelled to Makkah to perform Omrah.
25	He is <u>form</u> Tanumah.	He is from Tanumah.

 The errors in the sentences above reflect the difficulties which EFL university students face in the use of lexis. However, some of errors above could be related to Arabic language interference or to the nature of English language synonyms, or to both. A possible explanation for the errors in example (21) could be related to the interference of Arabic language because the learner here thinks in Arabic and tries to translate what he intends to write from his first language into English. For example the student uses *take* instead of *perform*. The use of the word *form* instead of *from* in the example 25 could be attributed to the carelessness and bad memorization. The errors in the other sentences could be attributed to the ignorance of differences between English language synonymous words.

(b)Errors of verbosity:

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
26	I live with my <u>father and my mother.</u>	I live with my parents.

The above mentioned example involves an error of verbosity in which the student tries to say too much. He uses "*my father and mother* " instead of " *my parents* ". A probable explanation of this error could be related to ignorance of differences between English vocabularies.
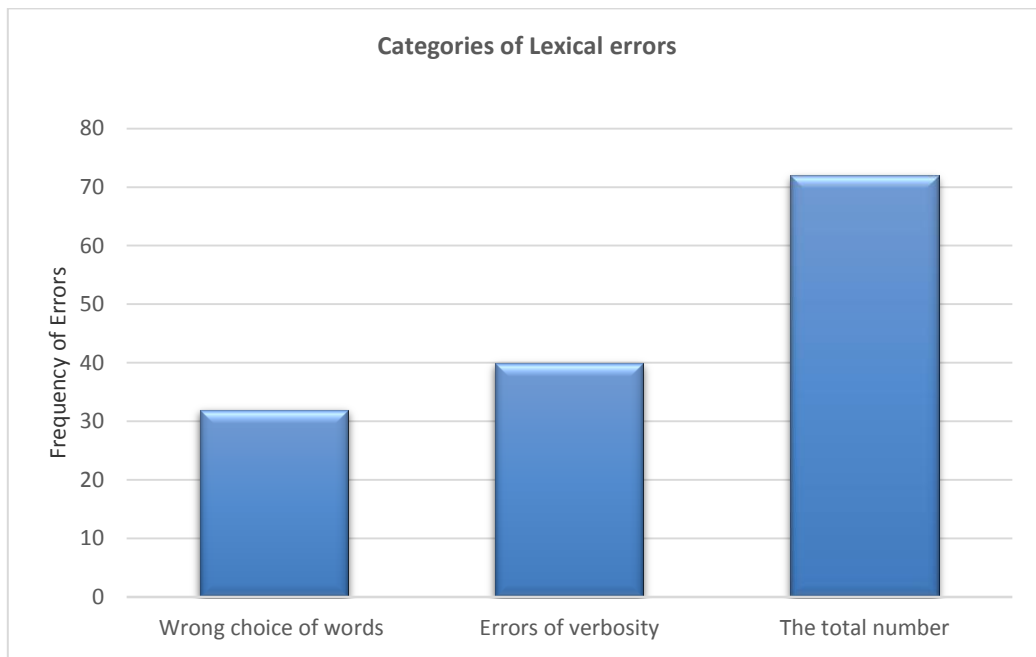

Chart .3: Categories of Lexical errors

The chart 3 reveals that the total number of lexical errors is 72 and that 40 of these errors are in the areas of the errors of verbosity and 32 errors are related to wrong choice of words .

(4) **Punctuation Errors**: Punctuation errors found in this study involve the following points:

(a) **Omission of punctuation mark:**

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
27	I live in Abha * It is a big city.	I live in Abha . It is a big city.

A full stop has been omitted after the word *Abha*.

(b) **Wrong choice of punctuation marks:**

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
28	I play football with my friends, football is a good sport.	I play football with my friends. Football is a good sport.

The comma has been wrongly chosen instead of the full stop.

(C) **Insertion of unnecessary punctuation mark:**

No	Learners' errors	Corresponding corrections
29	My age is about (20) years.	My age is about 20 years.
30	…… they did no't want to go …	…… they did not want to go ….

No bracket must be used in example No (29). No need to use the apostrophe in example No (30) since the letter "O" is existed. The occurrence of punctuation errors could be related to the ignorance of rules of punctuation marks. Also these errors could be due to the teaching techniques in which most classroom teaching and learning take place at the single (mostly, simple) sentence level, in most cases as question – answer dialogue between the teacher and the students. Therefore, in writing practice, the students write an endless sentence. Another probable cause of these errors could be related to mother tongue interference in which few punctuation marks are used in modern written Arabic today so the EFL learners tend to join sentence unduly.
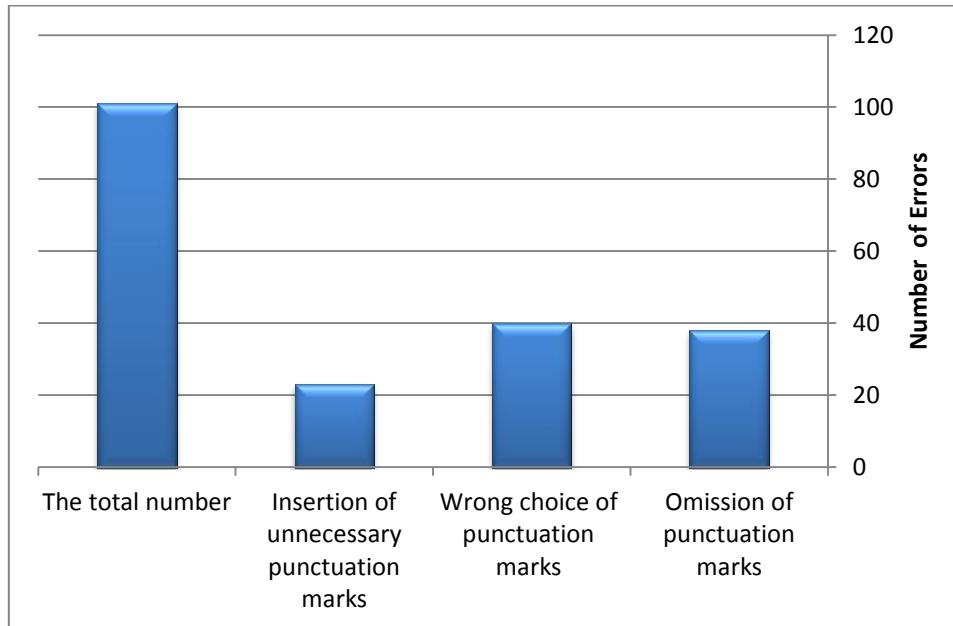
Chart.4: Categories of Punctuation Errors

From the above chart, it can be inferred that the total number of punctuation errors is 101. The total number of wrong choice of punctuation marks is 40 errors which represents 39.5 % while the total number of errors in the area of omission of punctuation marks is 38 errors which represents 37.5 % and the total number of errors in the insertion of unnecessary punctuation marks is 23 errors which represents 23% .
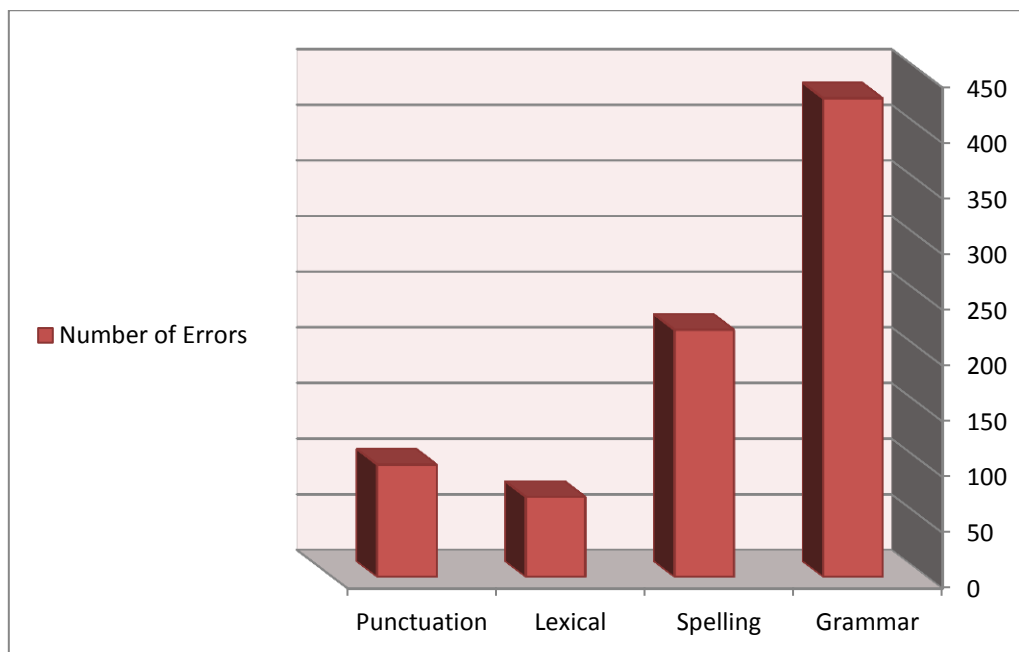
Chart.5: Distribution of Grammatical , Spelling , Punctuation and Lexical Errors.

This chart focuses on grammatical , spelling , punctuation and lexical errors only. According to this chart, the total number of grammatical errors is 430 which represents 52 % and this indicates that English grammar is very problematic compared with the other aspects of the language namely spelling, punctuation and lexis . However, the total number of spelling errors is 222 which constitutes 27 % , the total number of punctuation errors is 101 which represents 12 % and the total number of lexical errors is 72 which represents 09 %. In the light of the analysis of the above mentioned charts and the students' writing samples, it can be inferred that students face more difficulty in grammar ,organization, capitalization, punctuation and vocabulary .
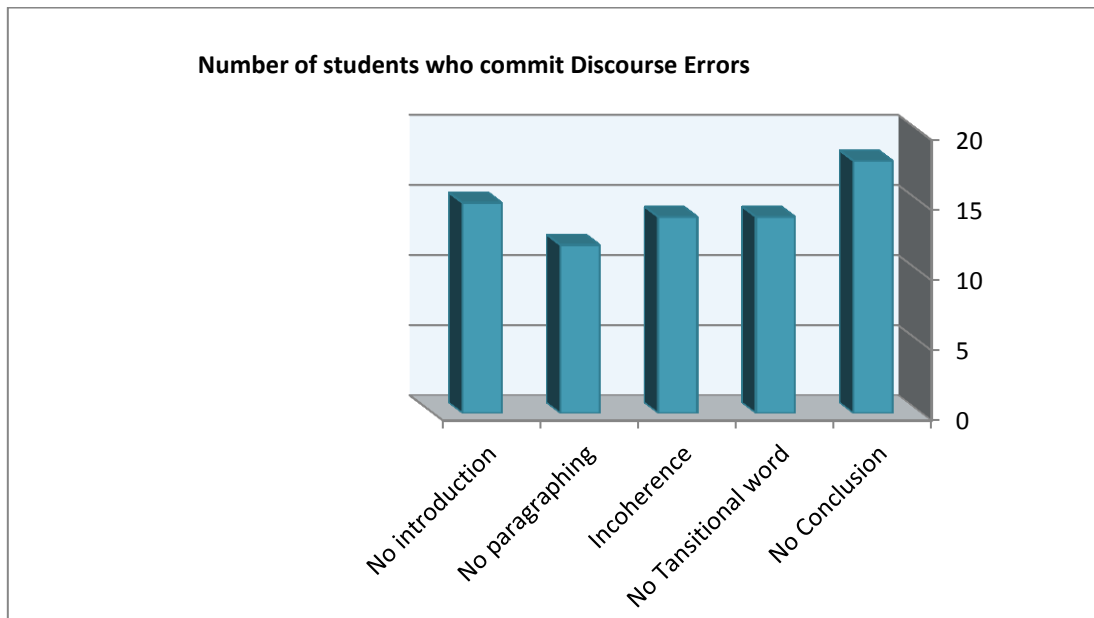
Chart .6: Number of students who commit discourse errors

With reference to the above chart, it can be inferred that:

- 75 % of students did not write introduction.

- 60% of students did not paragraph their essays.

- 70 % of students did not write a coherent essay.

- 70 % of students did not use transitional words.

- 90 % of students did not write conclusion.

On the basis of the analysis of writing performance of EFL learners, it can be concluded that the discourse errors can be attributed to the following factors:

- The learners don't know the basic formats for writing essay. However, they don't know how an English essay should be composed, organized, paragraphed and constructed and how the transitional words should be used.

- Lack of writing practice in and outside classroom.

- There is no close and continuous follow-up to the students' writing activities.

- There is no immediate feedback given to the students.

4.2 Analysis of the interview:

According to the analysis of the structured interview conducted on the EFL university teachers, the following points can be inferred:

- 93% of the EFL university teachers believe that Saudi EFL university learners at College of Science and Arts in Tanumah have weak academic writing performance.

Based on their experience, most of the EFL university teachers think that the following are the factors behind writing errors of Saudi EFL university learners at College of Science and Arts in Tanumah :

- Interference of mother tongue of Saudi EFL university learners in learning and teaching process.

- Inappropriate teaching methods and strategies.

- EFL learners' lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary.

- Lack of writing practice in the classroom.

- EFL teachers in elementary and secondary schools haven't provided learners with enough opportunities to learn composition skills.

- There is inefficiency in writing because EFL learners don't get the suitable feedback.

- Insufficient use of dictionaries by EFL learners.

- Most of the EFL writing teachers do not focus on the discourse features that contribute to the production of unified and coherent texts.

- Absence of appropriate and learner-centered curricula to cater for the specific EFL needs of the learners.

In order to reduce writing errors of Saudi EFL university learners , the EFL teachers at the college propose the following suggestions:

- Diagnosing students' problems in academic writing.

- The problem of writing deficiencies will not be solved until the principles of writing are taught and practiced in primary and secondary schools.

- Frequent use of modern teaching facilities.

- Frequent dictionary usage.

- Students should be given a lot of class-work as well as home work on writing because practice makes the students good writers.

- Using pair and group work strategies .

- Using peer reviews.

- Timely correction of students' errors.

Concerning the role of the EFL University teachers in developing learners' writing abilities, the EFL university teachers propose the following suggestions:

- Teachers should help students access a number of grammatical resources which could help them improve their writing competence.

- Teachers should focus on the discourse features that contribute to the production of unified and coherent texts.

- Teachers should encourage their students to use writing as a means of expressing meaning.

- Teachers should encourage students to focus on the whole text rather than on individual sentences while they are writing.

- Teachers should help students increase their stock of vocabulary by providing them with reading materials

- Teachers should give immediate feedback to students.

- Teachers should organize students writing as a series of stages.

4.3 Analysis of the students' questionnaires:

In the light of the analysis of the questionnaire conducted on EFL students, the following points can be inferred:

Section one: Personal factors related to EFL learners' writing proficiency:

- 65% of students think that their attitudes towards English language affect learning the language.

- 75% of students believe that they are weak in English writing skill.

- 80% of students have poor linguistic knowledge that makes them unable to develop a particular topic into a unified and coherent text.

- 85% of students usually commit errors in their writing performance.

- 80% of students usually ignore the role of cohesion in achieving the link between ideas.

- 70% of students have limited English vocabulary.

- 65% of student think that English syllabuses they learn do not suit their needs.

- 85% of students feel uneasy and lack confidence when they write in English.

- 65% of students believe that they are careless in learning English.

Section two: Students' perceptions and views about their academic writing skills and abilities

- 80% of students agree that writing lessons are very difficult to them.

- 60% of students think that writing is the least important skill.

- 80% of students agree that writing improves their academic achievement.

- 75% of students agree that writing strengthens their critical thinking.

- Writing helps 90% of students communicate and look for the best ways of self-expression.

- Writing helps students master other skills.

- 90 % of students see that writing lessons are not enough.

- 80% of students don't like to write regularly.

Section three: Linguistic Factors pertaining to writing performance:

- Writing is a major problem for 90% of students.

- Spelling error is a serious problem for 85 % of students when writing an English essay.

- English grammar is a challenge for all students when writing an English essay.

- 75 % of students cannot identify the topic sentence when writing an English essay.

- 90% of students cannot provide enough relevant ideas when writing an English essay.

- 85 % of students are unable to write cohesively.

- 85 % of students have problems with spelling and how ideas should be organized.

- 90% of students have problems with punctuation.

- 80% of students cannot express their ideas easily when writing an English essay.

- 90% of students cannot link sentences together.

- For 55% of students, two hours of learning English writing per week are not enough.

- Most of students agree that English courses of writing skill can help them write well in other courses.

Section four: The reasons behind the students ' weakness in writing: Most of students relate the following factors to their weaknesses in writing performance:

- Interference of Arabic language in learning and teaching process.

- The weakness of materials and the design of university English language curriculum.

- Inappropriate teaching methods and strategies.

- Lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary.

- Lack of writing practice in and outside classroom.

- EFL teachers in intermediate and secondary schools haven't provided students with enough opportunities to learn the art of composition.

- Most of students have limited vocabulary because of their insufficient use of English dictionary.

- Most of the EFL writing instructors do not focus on the discourse features that contribute to the production of unified and coherent texts.

- Most of the examinations of writing use multiple choice which do not involve much writing.

Section five: What would you suggest to improve your writing ability?

For improving their writing ability, most of the learners propose the following suggestions:

- Learners should practice writing skill by writing many essays.

- Learners should revise their English essays based on teacher's comment and feedback.

- Learners should read many English essays and study the structure of the essays for themselves.

- Learners should increase their vocabulary by reading many different topics.

- The number of hours allocated to the teaching of writing per week should be increased.

- The teaching methods used for teaching writing should be reevaluated.

5.   RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Results of the study:

With reference to the analysis and discussion of the students' writing performance and the analysis of both the interviews and questionnaires, the study has come out with the result that the following factors contribute to most of errors committed by Saudi EFL university students in their writing performance:

(1) Interference of mother tongue of Saudi EFL university students in the learning process.

(2) Learning strategies adopted by Saudi EFL university students such as: overgeneralization and simplification of the target language rules.

(3) Incomplete application of English language rules.

(4) Ignorance of English language rule restrictions.

(5) Poor gradation and presentation of teaching items.

(6) Carelessness and lack of memorization of spelling of words.

(7) Influence of the phonology of Arabic language on the spelling system of English language.

(8) Inconsistency and arbitrary nature of spelling system in English.

(9) Lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation of English language has been a very important source of spelling errors.

(10) Ignorance of grammatical and punctuation rules.

(11) Complexity of English article and preposition systems

(12) The ignorance of semantic properties of synonymous and antonymous words is considered a major source of lexical errors.

(13) Insufficient activities and practice of basic techniques of writing besides lack of follow-up to the students' writing performance.

(14) Some errors can be attributed to non- existence of the copula in Arabic language besides its multiplicity of forms

(15) Inappropriate teaching methods and strategies.

(16) EFL learners' lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary and insufficient use of dictionaries by EFL learners.

(17) Lack of writing practice in and outside classroom.

(18) EFL teachers in elementary and secondary schools did not provide learners with enough opportunities to learn composition skills.

(19) There is inefficiency in writing because EFL learners don't get the suitable feedback.

(20) Most of the EFL writing teachers do not focus on the discourse features that contribute to the production of unified and coherent texts.

(21) Absence of appropriate and learner-centered curricula to cater for the specific EFL needs of the learners.

(22) Most of the examinations of writing involve questions such as: multiple choice, fill the blanks and other questions which do not focus on much writing and which do not foster thinking abilities of the learners.

5.2 Recommendations and Pedagogical Implications of the Research Paper:

According to the results arrived at in this part, the following points should be considered relevant pedagogical implications and suggestions which may represent some guidelines for the EFL teachers and EFL students:

(1) Teachers are required to study their students' errors carefully because knowing the source of errors would help the teachers treat these errors more efficiently. Also they should, at early stages of teaching, focus on problematic areas to solve them as these will not be easy in the later stages of teaching.

(2) Since the study has identified a number of errors that are attributable to the interference of Arabic language, it is important to minimize or eradicate the chances of committing these interlingual errors through intensive tasks and ample practice of the target language, and through pointing out the differences between the system of English and Arabic language in terms of grammar, spelling…….etc.

(3) There is a need to revise or review the basic techniques of writing with reference to the students' own errors.

(4) Examples should be given by using coherent paragraphs rather than giving simple rules. Accordingly, grammar should be taught through contexts not to be taught through rules and forms. Then students should be encouraged to derive the rules from the contexts by themselves.

(5) As for preposition errors, sufficient exercises should be given on the confusing types of prepositions to avoid false analogies which resulted from the interference of the Arabic language.

(6) Students should be encouraged to study the use of articles in meaningful and interesting texts, trying to explore the reasons why a writer has made a specific article choice.

(7) It is of paramount importance to teach lexical items in context by pointing out the semantic features of words in terms of synonym and antonym.

(8) Students are to be guided to the basic techniques of composition writing and they should practice reading good composition models so as to view how writers composed, organized, paragraphed and constructed their compositions. Teachers should give their students sufficient activities of composition writing besides giving more emphasis to the teaching of coherence, using of transitional words, paragraphing…..etc. Moreover, there should be close and continuous follow-up to the students' writing activities.

(9)Teachers should encourage their students to read books of literature in the target language in order to enrich their vocabulary and broaden their horizons. Such exposure to the target language will help students acquire the vocabulary they need for writing.

(10) It is recommended that English language curriculum at intermediate and secondary level should be re-evaluated, reformed, rehabilitated and redesigned.

(11) Finally, teachers should remember that feedback is of utmost importance to the writing process. Without individual attention and sufficient feedback on errors, improvement will not take place at all. Students require overt feedback from teachers not only on content, but also on the forms and structures of writing. However, if this feedback is not part of the teaching process, then students will not improve their writing performance and they will continue to commit errors.

(12) It is advisable that EFL teachers should attend some training sessions in order to be aware of the latest development in the field of ELT. In addition, keeping in view the educational and cultural backgrounds of the students, teachers may devise more ways to tackle the identified problems in the best possible manner.

5.3 The Role of Teachers in Developing Learners' Writing Abilities:

- Teachers should help students access a number of grammatical resources which could help them improve their writing competence.

- Teachers should focus on the discourse features that contribute to the production of unified and coherent texts.

- Teachers should encourage their students to use writing as a means of expressing meaning.

- Teachers should encourage students to focus on the whole text rather than on individual sentences while they are writing.

- Teachers should help students increase their stock of vocabulary by providing them with reading materials Teachers should give immediate feedback to students.

- Teachers should organize students writing as a series of stages.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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