

Common Syntactic Errors Committed by Preparatory School Students in Iraq in the English Writing

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the common syntactic errors in the English writing made by students of secondary schools in Iraq. The corpus of the study consisted of 97 students at the fourth grade at A-Siraj secondary school for boys in Baghdad (2015- 2016). The study uses Error Analysis to identify, describe, and classify errors and to determine their causes. It also uses the Contrastive Analysis as a method of describing the structural systems of Arabic and English. The study investigated the exam essays written by the students and the results show that verb group errors were found to be the largest group in number. The next largest groups of errors occurred consecutively in: tense, prepositions, articles, word order and voice. The study concluded that interference from the mother tongue, faulty assumptions about the target language and inconsistency of English constitute the main sources of errors. Finally, some pedagogical recommendations are presented for English teachers and syllabus designers.

1. Introduction

Iraqi secondary school students face difficulties in their production of English. They often commit syntactic errors whether they write or speak in English. This study tries to identify and explain the syntactic errors students repeatedly commit in writing. It also tries to find some pedagogical implications to help overcome such errors. In order to analyse these errors, the study follows Corder's (1973) model. The first step is collecting the data and identifying errors. The errors are then classified and counted under the following major grammatical categories: tense, voice, verb group, word order, prepositions and articles. These major categories are further classified under other sub-categories i.e. addition, omission,

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misuse. The following step is giving a syntactic analysis of each error. The final step is suggesting the sources of these errors.

The corpus of the study consisted of 97 essays written by Iraqi fourth grade secondary school students. The essays were about various topics i.e. *Picnics, holidays, pollution, lifestyle, and life at school*. Only those recurrent errors were reckoned. The subjects were often asked about what they mean by certain ambiguous sentences in order to clearly identify errors.

2.1 Errors:

Richards et al.(1992:184) define an error as the use of a linguistic item (e.g. a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc.) In the speech or writing of a second or foreign language learner, in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning.

2.2 Errors and Mistakes:

Linguists distinguished between errors and mistakes. Mistakes (also known as performance errors) are inaccuracies in linguistic production either in our native language or in the foreign language. They are caused by memory lapses, physical states and conditions such as fatigue, distraction, or strong emotion. Mistakes are not systematic, they occur accidentally. Errors, on the other hand, (also known as competence errors) are goofs in the learner's underlying competence. They are systematic and they may give valuable insight into language acquisition.

When native speakers make mistakes, they can identify and correct them immediately because they have almost full knowledge of the linguistic structure of their mother tongue. Non-native speakers and second language learners not only make mistakes, they mainly commit errors and as they have only an incomplete knowledge of the target language, they are not able to correct the errors that they make. Thus the learners' errors reflect a lack of underlying competence in the language that they are learning. (See: Corder, 1981:10; Ellis, 1997:17; Gass & Selinker, 2000:78; Crystal, 2003:165)

2.3 Attitudes Towards Learner's Errors

Teachers often used to have the fear of their students' making errors. They fear that their students might acquire the new language improperly and so they must work on adjusting every form that may be said incorrectly. This attitude goes back to the earlier belief, influenced by the behaviourist model of learning, which believes that language can be learnt by repeating correct forms until they become habitual. However, more recent approaches in the field of the second language acquisition

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commonly agree that language is not learnt in this way. The new approaches take a language learning method to be a system of rules that the learner has to acquire and errors to be natural and unavoidable parts of the learning process.

In the late 1960s the way became paved towards converting linguists' attention towards the explanation of learners' errors rather than only on their prediction. Errors are looked at, then, as the result of the learner's thinking in the rule formation process and not as a result of learning bad verbal habits. The behaviorist theory of language and language learning was disputed. Language came to be looked at in terms of structured rules instead of habits. (See: Chomsky,1959:26-58; Brown,1980:8/13; Corder, 1981:1; Krashen,1981:64; Ellis 1997:32; Gass and Selinker,2000:73).

2.4 Interlanguage:

Most linguists came to adopt the view that errors of the second language learners should not be looked at as bad habits that should be get rid of immediately, but as sources of insight into the learning processes. Besides, they found that language acquisition is a result of rules formation because learners form hypotheses about the target language rules and test them in practice. This point of view was strongly held by Selinker (1972: 201) who pointed out that "*the second language learners construct a linguistic system that draws, in part, on the first language but is also different from it and also from the target language*". He termed this linguistic system "interlanguage" which is a unique linguistic system. Errors, according to the interlanguage concept, are looked at as a natural part of the learners' developing linguistic system. And they constitute evidence of internal process controlling the learner's changeable or transitional linguistic system. Tavakoli (2012:188) noted that although Selinker's Interlanguage is the most commonly used name to this transitional system, various alternative terms have been also used to describe the same phenomenon: "*Nemser refers to Approximative system, Corder to Idiosyncratic Dialect and Transitional Competence, and Faerch et al. to Learner Language*". (See also:Corder, 1971:78; Ellis, 1997:33; Corder, 1981: 65; James 1998:6)

2.5 Error Analyses

Throughout the last few decades methods of teaching foreign languages have witnessed enormous development. A shift in attention has come into sight towards the learner's performance rather than excessive concentration on the material taught. Emphasis on the errors learners make

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has been a very beneficial teaching technique. Linguists gradually came to the fact that considering the type of errors allows specialists to get better understanding about the difficulties that learners usually face. They also agreed that analysing errors may help teachers assess the efficiency of the procedures and techniques they use. Corder (1973:265) states that the use of error analysis is most obviously practical to teachers. Errors offer feedback and they enable the teachers evaluate the usefulness of their teaching materials and techniques. Teachers can also get a clear sight of what parts of the syllabus he has been following have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. Ellis (1997:15) states that the main way of investigating second language acquisition is by collecting and describing samples of learners of a language. The description may focus on the kind of errors learners make and how errors change over the time, or it may identify developmental patterns by describing the stages in the acquisition of particular grammatical features, or it may examine the variability found in the learners of a language. James (1998: 62) refers to the importance of the error analysis in studying linguistic ignorance which investigates "*what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance*". The fact that learners find ways to cope with their ignorance makes a connection between errors and learner strategies, which is divided into learning strategies and communication strategies. Carter (1997:35) notes that considering learners' errors enhances Knowledge about how grammars works and consequently understand more about how grammar is used and misused. Sárosdy et al.(2006:122) affirm that observing Students' errors are a very useful way of giving evidence of what they have learnt and haven't learnt. So instead of regarding errors negatively as a sign of failure, teachers can see them positively as an indication of what they still need to teach. If teachers try to prevent students from making errors, they can never find out what the learners do not know. Still, teachers need to correct some errors to help students learn the correct forms of the language. Saville-Troike (2006:37) explains that error analysis is based on the description and analysis of actual learners' errors in the second language, rather than on idealized linguistic structures attributed to the first language and the second language as it is the case in Contrastive Analysis. With this way "anlysing learners' errors" over comes the "Contrastive Analysis approach" which eventually failed to predict some of learners' errors and ignored what goes in the learner's mind.

2.6 Sources and Types of Errors

Recent research within the field of error analysis has proved that the mother tongue is not the only major source of difficulty in the second language learning. Many errors, however, derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition, and from the mutual interference of items within the target language. Errors attributed to the influence of the native language are called interlingual errors which are also known as transfer errors or interference errors. Errors that are due to the difficulty of the target language and to the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition are called Intralingual and developmental errors. (See: Jain, 1969; Richards, 1970; Selinker, 1972; Dulay and Burt, 1974; Brown, 1980; Dulay et al. 1982:108; Gass and Selinker, 1983; James, 1998)

2.7 Classification of Errors

Richards et al (1992: 148) make it clear that several attempts were made to develop classifications for various types of errors on the basis of the different processes that were assumed to account for them. In the Gooficon, Burt and Kiparsky (1972:73) talk about global and local errors. Local errors include noun and verb inflections, and the use of articles, prepositions, and auxiliaries. Global errors, on the other hand, involve the use of major elements of sentence structure, which make a sentence or utterance difficult or impossible to be understood i.e. wrong word order in a sentence. Corder (1973:278) states that errors in every linguistic unit can be assigned to the following linguistic levels: orthography, phonological, syntactic and lexico-semantic in addition to referential or stylistic levels. He adds that this classification yields when combined with the superficial analytic classification of omission, addition, selection and ordering. Not far off Corder's classification, Dulay et al. (1982:146-172) point out that the most commonly used taxonomies are based on (1) linguistic category, (2) surface strategy, (3) comparative analysis, and (4) communicative effect. Linguistic category taxonomies classify errors according to the language component (phonology, syntax, morphology semantics and lexicon, and discourse) or the particular linguistic constituent the error affects or both of them. The Surface Strategy Taxonomy concentrates on the ways in which surface structures are altered i.e. (1) omission (2) additions (3) malformation and (4) disordering. Comparative Taxonomy deals with (1) developmental errors (2) interlingual errors (3) ambiguous errors and (4) the 'grab bag category' of other errors (those which simply do not fit in any of the aforementioned

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categories). Communicative Effect Taxonomy focuses on the effect of errors on the listener or reader. It deals with errors that affect the overall organization of the sentence and hinder successful communication, while errors that affect a single element of the sentence usually do not hinder communication.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion:

Types, numbers and percentages of the syntactic errors occurred in the corpus of the study are given in table (1), and then a detailed discussion of the errors is to follow:

Table (1) The number and percentages of Syntactic errors

| Type of error | Number of errors | Percentages of errors |
|--------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| -Tenses errors | 64 | 26.1% |
| -Voice errors | 11 | 4.4% |
| -Verb group errors | 81 | 33% |
| -Word order errors | 14 | 5.7% |
| -Prepositions errors | 41 | 16.7% |
| -Articles errors | 34 | 13.8% |
| Total of syntactic errors: 245 | | |

3.1 Tense Errors:

The number of errors in tense is (64) which comprises (26.1 %) of the total errors. These errors are divided into sub-categories as stated in table (2):

Table (2) Tenses Errors

| Type of Error | Number | Percentage of the total tense errors | Percentage of the total syntactic errors |
|---|--------|--------------------------------------|--|
| - Present simple for past simple | 42 | 65.6% | 17.1% |
| - Past simple for simple present | 7 | 10.9% | 2.8% |
| - Present continuous for simple present | 11 | 17.1% | 4.4% |
| - Present simple for present continuous | 4 | 6.2% | 1.6% |
| Total | 64 | | 26.1% |

Most of the errors in this area were limited to the use of simple present, simple past and present continuous. This seems to be due to the students who did not use various types of tenses in their essays. The following are some samples:

- Present simple for the past simple:

1. We *don't meet* the last year.
2. They *bring* a lot of presents for us.
3. We *drink* juice and eat cakes.
4. We *enjoy* ourselves a lot in the party.

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5. I meet my friends in the party. 6. I don't meet him for a long time.
7. We don't stay at a hotel. 8. We are friends at the primary school.
9. I get your address from Ahmed.

- Past simple for the present simple:

10. I'm Ali. Did you remember me? 11. Did you remember Taha Hassan?
12. Sami ate fish although he didn't like fish. 13. Mother didn't make barbecue for us at home.

Samples (1-9) occurred in a past simple context, yet; the subjects of the study put them in the present simple. Whereas, samples (10-13) appeared in present simple context and the students put them in the past simple instead. The perception of the present simple and the past simple is not difficult for Arab students due to the presence of the equivalent tenses in Arabic. Moreover, at the fourth preparatory stage students have received a six-year learning of English at school and they are supposed to have developed adequate competence in using tenses. This fact supports the view that the reason for this type of errors is certainly not of interlingual (first language interference) causes. The study suggests that the main reasons of errors in this area can be connected to one or both of the following reasons: poor materials and training or developmental error which derive from faulty comprehension of distinction in the target language.

-Present simple for present continuous:

14. At the moment, I wait for my brother to take me by his car.
15. My family plays basketball now.
16. I can't speak now because we watch football now.

-Present continuous for present simple:

17. I'm working as a policeman now. 18. He is working in our school.
19. I'm playing sports every morning. 20. I'm not liking swimming.

The perception of the present continuous tense is usually difficult for Arab students. One reason for this difficulty is that Arabic language lacks the equivalent structure for the English present continuous tense. Misuse of the present continuous and the present simple in the previous samples suggests that the learners transferred the syntactic structures they naturally use in Arabic into their productions in English. Arabic uses certain adverbs of time i.e. " الآن *alaan* now, في هذه اللحظة *fi ha:thihi al-lahtha* at the moment, في الوقت الحالي *fi al waqit alhali* in the time being" with the present simple to describe situations normally expressed by the English present continuous tense, compare:

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21. في هذه اللحظة أنا انتظرُ أخي ليأخذني بسيارته. *Fi ha:thihi al-lahtha ana antadhiru ali li ye'akhuthani bisayaratih.* (*At the moment, I wait for Ali to take me by his car.)

22. إن عائلتي تلعبُ كرة السلة الآن. *ina 'a:laty tal'abu kurata alsalati ala:n.* (*My family plays basketball now.)

Accordingly, it is obvious that the cause of the errors made by the subjects in the examples (14-20) is interlingual on the ground that thinking in Arabic and then translating into English is a common habit among beginning Arab learners of English.

Finally, it should be noted here that the absence of other tense errors in the essays of this study could be attributed to the avoidance strategy students may have used.

3.2 Voice Errors:

The small number of errors suggests the possibility that the type of compositions written by the students did not require the students to switch in use from active to passive voice. The analysis demonstrates that the number of voice errors was (11) constituting a percentage of (4.4%) of the total errors as shown in table (3):

Table (3) Voice Errors

| Type of Error | Number | Percentage of the total voice error | Percentage Of the total syntactic errors |
|------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------------|--|
| - Omission of Passive auxiliary | 4 | 36.3% | 1.6% |
| - Use of passive instead of active | 6 | 54.5% | 2.4% |
| - Use of active instead of passive | 1 | 9% | 0.4% |
| Total | 11 | | 4.4% |

Voice is defined as a grammatical category that explains sentences or clauses structures, with reference to verbs, to express the way by which sentences may alter the relationship between the subject and object of a verb without changing the meaning of the sentence. The main distinction is between Active and Passive as exemplified respectively by "*Our neighbour bought our house.*" and "*Our house was bought by our neighbor.*". The speaker's choice of either of the two types of voice is affected by certain factors i.e. emphasis, style or knowledge about the doer of an action. (See Quirk et al, 1985:159; Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002:57; Crystal,2003:495)

English and Arabic belong to different language families. Their inflectional and derivational morphemes are significantly different. Voice in English is realized with verb inflection, word order and the use of special auxiliaries besides i.e. BE or GET. Arabic, on the other hand, realises distinction in voice only with inflection in verbs, subjects, and objects.

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Moreover, the two languages have certain verbs that are confined either to passive or active use. Henceforth, it is not unusual to see Arab learners of English commit errors in this area. (See: Haywood and Nahmad, 1965:1; Quirk et al., 1985:57 and Al-Afghany, 2003:54). The following are some samples of errors committed by the students with voice:

1. I played football and *my leg was broken*. (Use of passive for active)
2. Sally helped in the kitchen but *her hand was burnt*. (Use of passive for active)
3. *The lights and windows of the car were broken* . (Use of passive for active)
4. *The driver of the car was died*. (Use of passive for active)
5. *The cake burned in the oven* because my mother forgot it.(Use of active for passive)
6. I think *my mobile stolen* at the bus. (Omission of Passive auxiliary)
7. *We invited to a birthday* party at the hotel. (Omission of auxiliary)

In samples (1-4) the students used the passive forms (was broken, was burnt, were broken and was dead), whereas; English native speakers normally express such situations in the active voice. The reason for this error is that situations like these are generally rendered in passive in Arabic. Thus, it is a matter of mother tongue interference. In sample (5) the student used the active form ⁽¹⁾ "burned", whereas; English usually uses the passive voice to express such a situation. The reason for this error is that situations like this one are generally rendered in active in Arabic. Samples (6 and 7) reveal that the students seemed to be conscious that the situation should be expressed in the passive voice and they were successful in using the right transitive verbs but they failed to use the passive auxiliary BE. The possible reasons for such mistakes seem to be the absence of the auxiliary BE in Arabic passive construction in addition to the lack of good training.

3.3 Verb Group Errors:

This category comprises the largest number of errors among the syntactic errors discussed in this study. The number of errors in the verb group is (81) which comprises (33%) of the total errors. These errors are divided into subcategories as stated in the table below:

¹This error is the only one of its type found in the writings of the subjects participated in the study, yet it implies the possibility of errors in the area.

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Table (4) Verb Group Errors

| Type of Error | Number | Percentage of the total verb group errors | Percentage of the total syntactic errors |
|---|--------|---|--|
| - Omission of auxiliary BE | 23 | 28.3% | 9.3% |
| - Addition of auxiliary BE | 14 | 17.2% | 5.7% |
| - Omission of BE as a main verb | 21 | 25.9% | 8.5% |
| - Wrong use of other auxiliaries and main verbs | 23 | 28.3% | 9.3% |
| Total | 81 | | 33% |

The most common errors made by the subjects of the study group within this area are found in the following samples:

- Omission of auxiliary BE:

1. I ... reading a short story nowadays. (Omission of *am*)
2. I... writing to tell you. (Omission of *am*)
3. What ... you doing now? (Omission of *are*)
4. I... reading my favourite book now. (Omission of *am*)
5. We... watching T.V. at the moment? (Omission of *are*)

The omission error of the auxiliary BE in samples (1-5) has to do with incomplete application of rule error. It suggests that learners have not fully mastered the present continuous tense. They apply the -ing form of the main verb to build the present continuous tense; nonetheless, they miss the auxiliary BE. It is evident that the subjects of the study have learnt that the continuity in English is realized with use of the -ing form. Yet, they were unable to recognize that the use of the auxiliary BE constitutes an essential component of the present continuous tense along with the " -ing" form of the main verb. This is a common error mostly amongst beginner and low intermediate Arab students learning English. As mentioned before, one reason for this difficulty is that Arabic language lacks the equivalent structure for the present continuous tense. The Arabic equivalent of the verb BE "يكون *Yekoon*" is not used to realize the continuous aspect in Arabic. Thus, sentences (1-5) are realized in Arabic as in (6-10) respectively:

6. أقرأ قصصاً قصيرة هذه الايام. *Aqra'au qisasan qatheeratan ha:thihi al-aya:mu.*

7. أكتب لأخبرك. *Aktubu li-ukhbiruka.*

8. مالذي تفعله الآن؟ *Maalthee tafalahu alan?*

9. أنا أقرأ كتابي المفضل الآن. *Ana aqra'u kitabiya almufadhalu alan.*

10. نحن نشاهد التلفاز في هذه اللحظة. *Nahnu nushahidu al-telfa:za fee ha:thihi al-lahdhati.*

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Other reasons for the omission error in the above samples result from the inconsistencies of the use of BE in English. Moreover, there are differences in the use of the verb BE between the two languages. Learners often think in Arabic and then translate to English.

- Addition of auxiliary BE:

11. My brother was passed the English exams. (Addition of *was*)
12. I was got your address from Muhammad Sa'eed. (Addition of *was*)
13. I m play computer games in the evenings. (Addition of *am*)

As for the addition error, samples (11-13) demonstrate the students' efforts to learn English on their own terms and not through equivalents in the mother tongue. They evidently form false hypotheses about the target language. It is obvious that in samples (11 and 12) the learners thought of "*was*" as the marker of the past tense. Similarly, they used "*am*" in (13) because they thought of "*am*" as a present tense marker. Consequently, they wrote "...*was passed, was got and...am play*" respectively.

- Omission of BE as a main verb:

14. Ali ...not good at chess. (Omission of *is*)
15. My name... Ali. (Omission of *is*)
16. My friend's name... Hassan. (Omission of *is*)
17. You... interested in History Books. (Omission of *are*)
18. This ... Mr. Kadhim. (Omission of *is*)
19. We... friends at primary school. (Omission of *were*)
20. You ... a very stressful person. (Omission of *are*)

Unlike English, Arabic nominal sentences with existential or descriptive state reference have no verb and they are timeless. However, they are usually realized in the present simple in English. (Aziz,1989:12 and Wright, 1996:252-258), Compare:

21. الولد في الحديقة. *Al-waladu fee al-hadeeqati.* (The boy is in the garden.)
22. أبوك رجلٌ كريمٌ. *Abuka rajulun kareemun.* (Your father is a generous man.)
23. ها هنا رجلٌ. *Ha huna rajulun.* (Here is a man.)

Therefore, unqualified students usually commit errors whenever they think in Arabic and write in English as we have seen in samples (14-20). Again these erroneous samples affirm that the subjects of the study do lack the basic understanding of the dissimilarities between English and Arabic in the use of the verb BE. They are unable to use the verb BE whether it is an auxiliary or a main verb. They mainly resort to apply the syntactic structures of Arabic to their English sentences because they do not know

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what is correct. Errors in the use of the verb BE in general clearly reveals that Interlanguage consequence is the main source of this type of errors.

- Wrong use of auxiliaries and main verbs:

24. Are you remember Adnan? (*are* instead of *do*)

25. What do you doing now? (*do* instead of *are*)

26. We didn't saw each other for a long time. (*saw* for *see*)

27. Ahmed can swims fast. (*swims* instead of *swim*)

28. My little sister always singing beautifully. (*singing* instead of *sings*)

29. We hadn't meet since the primary school. (*hadn't meet* instead of *haven't met*)

Errors committed in samples (24-29) show ignorance of rule restrictions on the co-occurrence of certain grammatical items within a sentence. The subjects of the study by doing these errors seem to be unaware of certain grammatical restrictions. Namely, they have gaps in forming questions, negating sentences and subject verb accord. These gaps could partially result from the inconsistencies of the rules in English and to the passive effect of the considerably different syntactic structures of Arabic.

3.4 Word Order Errors:

Errors in this area mainly lie in jumbling the subject and verb as well as misplacing noun modifiers. The number of errors in word order is (14) which comprises (5.7%) of the total errors. These errors are divided into subcategories as stated in the table below:

Table (5) Word Order Errors

| Type of Error | Number | Percentage of the total word order errors | Percentage of the total errors |
|----------------------------------|--------|---|--------------------------------|
| - Subject and verb order error | 6 | 42.8% | 2.44% |
| - Misplacement of noun modifiers | 8 | 57.2% | 3.26% |
| Total | 14 | | 5.7% |

- Samples of subject and verb order error:

1. In the evening go mum and sister shopping. 2. How you are in London?

3. Gave me Ahmed your address. 4. Saw my brother our friend Sami.

5. Slept I in the train to Basrah. 6. Why you don't come from Egypt in the holiday?

A glance on the word order of the Arabic sentence may help to decide the main cause of this type of error. The Arabic affirmative sentence allows the verb to precede or follow the subject (as in 7 and 8)

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respectively. The subject may also occur in a position after the object (as in 9). Moreover, the Arabic sentence may not have a verb (as in 10). (See: Seebawaih,1996:23/1). Compare:

7. ضَرَبَ عمروُ زيداً *Dhraba Amrun Zaidan.* (Amar hit Zaid.)
8. عمروُ ضَرَبَ زيداً *Amerun Dharaba Zaidan.* (Amar hit Zaid.)
9. ضَرَبَ زيداً عمروُ *Dharaba Zaidan Amerun.* (Amar hit Zaid.)
10. عمروُ ظريفٌ *Amrun Dharufun.* (Amar is cute.)

The same structures are applied for interrogative and negative sentences with the exception of having a question word or a negative particle (ibid:98/1-127/1). Compare:

11. ما ضَرَبَ زيداً عمروُ *Ma dharaba Zaidan Amru.* (Amar didn't hit Zaid.)
12. هل عمروُ ظريفٌ؟ *Hal Amru Dharufun?* (Is Amar is cute?)

The samples of errors found in this area clearly demonstrate that the learners' mother tongue heavily influences their productions in English. They mainly follow the Arabic sentence order especially in the affirmative and interrogative. All the samples (1-6) have the verb preceding the subject which definitely violates the word order of the English sentence. Moreover, errors like that in sample (4) has the indirect object "me" preceding the subject "Ahmed" and that what supports the assumption that students mainly transfer the Arabic patterns to English.

- Adjective and noun order error:

Another dominant type of error in this area lies in the inability to decide the correct position of adjectives. The following are some samples:

13. We stayed at a hotel very nice.
14. We travelled by our car sporty.
15. We went to a hotel luxury.
16. I think martials plastic will affect the environment.

Samples (11-15) again reveal that the mother tongue language interference has the greater influence on the subjects' production of English. English adjectives precede the noun they modify, however, the students' erroneous sentences seem to follow the Arabic rule "the adjective follows the noun it modifies" (See: Quirk et al, 1985: 53 and Al-Gala'eeny, 1993:15). Compare:

17. فازَ التلميذُ المجتهدُ . *Fa:za altlmeethu al-mujtahidu.* (The clever pupil won.)
18. انهٌ مجدٌ *Inhu mujidun.* (He is hard-working.)

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3.5 Prepositions Errors:

Another significant syntactic error found in the students' essays is the use of the prepositions. The total number of errors in this area is (41) comprising a percentage of (16.7%) of the total errors and this reveals that the use of prepositions is a major problematic area for the subjects of the study. A detail of errors in this area is illustrated in the following table (6):

Table (6) Prepositions Errors

| Type of Error | Number | Percentage of the total prepositions errors | Percentage of the total errors |
|----------------------------|--------|---|--------------------------------|
| - Misuse of prepositions | 25 | 60.9% | 10.20% |
| - Omission of prepositions | 10 | 24.3% | 4.08% |
| - Addition of prepositions | 6 | 14.6% | 2.44% |
| Total | 41 | | 16.7% |

Before we discuss the samples of preposition errors, it is useful to go through a short description of the English prepositions. We may see then why many of the subjects were unable to use the suitable preposition or unable to decide where they need a preposition. Quirk et al. (1985:673) point out that prepositions convey a wide range of information related to space, time, origin, cause, goal, means, support, opposition, quality, quantity, concession, exception, addition etc. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002:288) describe a preposition as a grammatical word that expresses a relationship between two entities. It links the complement in the phrase to some other expression. DeCapua (2008:146) notices that in English a preposition of a phrasal verb no longer has a literal meaning. The preposition following the verb is a part of the verb itself and gives it an idiomatic meaning. This is a concept that is difficult for both native speakers of English and English learners. However, for Arab learners the choice of appropriate prepositions is often hindered by the big number of the English prepositions and the wide range of relations they denote. Besides, the difference in use of prepositions between English and Arabic adds an extra trouble for learners in this area. The following samples show some of the errors committed by the group of the study in the use of prepositions:

- Wrong use of a preposition:

1. I met you in the party. (*in* instead of *at*)
2. I meet him in the beach every day. (*in* instead of *on*)
3. We reached London in Monday. (*in* instead of *on*)
4. I'm worried on you. (*on* instead of *about*)
5. We were friends from primary school. (*from* instead of *in*)

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In samples (1 and 2), the subjects of the study use the preposition "in" which is a literal translation of the Arabic preposition "في *fee*" to express the idea of being "at the part and on the beach". They couldn't recognize that English has some more prepositions other than "in" which may also express the idea of being in a place. The same is true about "in" of sample (3) where student seem to use the Arabic patterns of prepositions. In samples (4 and 5) the subjects fail to use the appropriate prepositions and again resort to literal translation from Arabic. In Arabic the adjective "قلق *qaliq* worried" could be followed by "على *ala*, لأجل *li'ajl*, حيال *hiyal*...etc". The preposition "on" is the literal counterpart of the Arabic "على" and this very preposition is what the learners used in (4). In sample (5) "from" is used instead of "in" and this undoubtedly reflects poor training in the use of English prepositions.

- Omission of a preposition:

7. Ahmed likes...wear casual. (Omission of *to*) 8. I got...finish now. (Omission of *to*)

In samples (7 and 8) the verbs *like* and *got* don't have prepositions. The errors committed above reflect that the main cause for such errors is weak training. Moreover, the mother tongue language of the learners seems to have some more effect here. The idea is clear when we know that the Arabic equivalents of "like and got" also lack prepositions as exemplified in (9 and 10) respectively.

9. يحب أحمد أن يرتدي ملابس غير رسمية. *Yahubu Ahmedu an yartadi mala:bisan ghairu rasmeeatin.*

10. يجب أن أنهى الآن. *yajibu an unhaia ala:n.*

11. We are waiting ... my father to take us to the beach. (Omission of *for*)

The same can be said about sample (9) where the preposition "for" is omitted after the verb "wait". However, in the same sentence the student was able to use "to" before the infinitive "take" which is a literal translation of the preposition "لـ *lee*" plus the verb "يأخذ" *ya'khuthu*". This could make a good evidence that interference from Arabic along with poor training combine to cause learners err in this area.

- Addition of a preposition:

12. I must to finish now. (Addition of *to*) 13. I got to exam tomorrow. (Addition of *to*)

14. I phone from on the beach. (Addition of *on*) 15. This affect on the environment. (Addition of *on*)

Again the above samples clearly signify poor training, inconsistency of the use of English prepositions and interference of Arabic as essential factors of errors in this area. The addition of extra "to" in samples (12 and 13)

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evidently indicates the lack of knowledge about the English prepositional system.

In samples (14 and 15), the students wrote "on" after "from and affect" respectively which is a literal translation from Arabic. Compare:

16. أكتبُ لك من على الشاطئ. *aktubu laka min ala al-shati'*.

17. هذا سيؤثرُ على البيئة. *ha:tha: sayo'thiru ala albeea'ti*.

3.6 Articles Errors:

Another problematic area for Arab learners of English is the use of articles. The number of errors with articles occurred in this study is (34) and the percentage is (13.8%). A detail of errors in this area is stated in table (7):

Table (7)Articles Errors

| Type of Error | Number | Percentage of the total articles errors | Percentage of the total errors |
|------------------------|--------|---|--------------------------------|
| - Omission of articles | 14 | 41.1% | 5.71% |
| - Addition of articles | 9 | 26.4% | 3.67% |
| - Misuse of articles | 11 | 32.3% | 4.48% |
| Total | 34 | | 13.8% |

Indefinite reference in English is normally indicated by the indefinite articles "a/an" and definite reference is indicated by the definite article "the". The use of "a/an" depends on the initial sound of the following noun. For nouns with generic reference identifying an undifferentiated whole class, English uses zero articles i.e. "Dogs make good pets". (Quirk et al., 1985: 253-282 and Greenbaum & Nelson,2002:107)

In Arabic, the definite article "ألـ al " is the only article. It is used for all noun cases, genders and numbers. Arabic has no indefinite article, but only an indefinite form. Arabic uses the definite article more frequently than English. One reasons is that nouns referring to abstract things, whole collectives and generic terms generally take the definite article, i.e. "ألـ علم نور" *al-ilmu nurun* science is light." , "الكلابُ حيواناتٌ" *al-kilabu hayawanatun* Dogs are animals." .(See: Wightwick and Gaatar:2008:105). It is hoped that this rapid review of the article systems in Arabic and English will help us understand the cause of the article errors committed by the students of the group of this study.

- Omission of an article:

1. My old brother is ... very stressed person. (Omission of *a*)
2. Yesterday, we had ... wedding party. (Omission of *a*)
3. You always wanted to be ... doctor. (Omission of *a*)
4. He had ... wonderful car. (Omission of *a*)
5. John is ... very faithful friend. (Omission of *a*)

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6. I saw ... amazing festival in London. (Omission of *an*)
7. I've changed over ... years. (Omission of *the*)
8. I have to read for ... exam. (Omission of *the*)
9. My brother became ill because he got ... little sleep. (Omission of *a*)
10. I bought the scooter for ... hundred dollars only. (Omission of *a*)

In samples (1- 6) it is clear that the subjects of the study tried to express the idea of indefiniteness with the nouns "person, party, doctor, cake, and festival" respectively; however, they failed to understand that indefinite countable nouns in English must be preceded by an indefinite article. In samples (7 and 8), they used "years and exam" respectively to convey definiteness, but they didn't use the definite article before them. They unconsciously produced the counterpart of the Arabic language structure. Thus, it is noticeable that this type of error is due to the mother language interference. As for samples (9 and 10), the learners are not operating simply in terms of the mother tongue equivalents. They must have over-generalized an existing rule which they must have learnt i.e. "a" only precedes singular countable nouns, so they didn't use "a" before "little" and "hundred" as long as " little" refers to quantity and "hundred" refers to more than one.

- Addition of an article:

11. The picnic was very an interesting. (Addition of *an*)
12. The receptionist is a kind. (Addition of *a*)
13. I remember you from a primary school. (Addition of *a*)
14. We travelled by our the wonderful car. (Addition of *the*)
15. I like reading the police stories. (Addition of *the*)
16. My little brother likes riding the bike. (Addition of *the*)
17. I like the swimming more than the football. (Addition of *the*)
18. We went to the Iraq. (Addition of *the*)

In samples (11 and 12) an article is added for each before the adjective where the adjective is not followed with a noun. In sample (13) the indefinite article "a" is added before a noun with a generic reference. In samples (14-18) the students used the definite article before nouns with generic reference.

The samples above generally show that the subjects of the study have not yet clearly understood the correct use of articles in English. Moreover, it is obvious that in (12-18) the subjects of the study followed the Arabic language structure in dealing with nouns with generic reference "the police, the swimming – the football, the Iraq" where their Arabic counterparts are preceded with the definite article "...ال".

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- Wrong use of an article:

19. We don't have a work so we will play very much in the holiday. (*a* instead of *zero article*)

20. We didn't come to you because my father has a work. (*a* instead of *zero article*)

21. My brother Zain became sick and father brought the doctor. (*the* instead of *a*)

22. He is on a same course with me now. (*a* instead of *the*)

The indefinite article "a" is used in samples (20 and 21) before an uncountable noun, namely "work". The students think of the word "work" as a singular noun and not as a noun with generic reference or an uncountable noun that needs no article. In sample (22) the definite article is used where the context requires the indefinite article. In sample (23), the indefinite article "a" is used in a definite context. The reason for the errors in these samples noticeably lies in the students' poor training.

4. Conclusion:

The analysis of the errors committed by the subjects of this study show the following:

- 1- It is found that the errors that occurred in the students' writing are mainly influenced by both interlingual and intralingual causes.
- 2- More than 50% of the errors found in the subjects' writing are interlingual.
- 3- Interlingual errors occur mainly wherever there is a difference in structure between Arabic and English i.e. errors in the continuous and perfect aspects, copula be, word order, prepositions and articles.
- 4- It is found that most of interlingual errors occurred when the students used the structures of Arabic to produce English.
- 5- The areas that got the highest percentage of the total errors were the verb group errors comprising about 33% followed by tense and prepositions errors comprising about 26% and 16% respectively.
- 6- Most of the verb group errors occurred when the learners tried to use verb to BE (auxiliary or main verb) comprising about 72% of the verb group errors and about 24% of the total errors.
- 7- The study also revealed that most of the intralingual errors are originated from the inconsistency of the syntactic structures of English.
- 8- It is found that about 25% of the errors neither corresponds to the mother tongue nor to the target language. The learners must have built faulty assumptions about the rules of the target language.

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- 9- Syntactic errors generally reveal that Arabic structure cannot be used as a pattern to learn the English language since the two languages differ a great deal in their structural patterns.
- 10- About 95% of the errors found in the subjects' essays were systematic. In other words, the students exhibited notable consistency; they committed the same types of errors.
- 11- As errors can be used to measure the language performance of learners, Iraqi students who have been studying English for about six years cannot write a short paragraph without making serious syntactic errors.
- 12- Students at the fourth preparatory stage are definitely still in their interlanguage stage and errors are inevitable.

5. Recommendations

- 1- There is a need for students to recognize the significance of errors which occur in their writing. In other words, they should look at errors as a technique they have for testing their hypotheses about English. On the other hand, teachers need to work on raising students' awareness of their abilities to overcome errors.
- 2- Brief grammar rules may be essential to help learners realize errors resulting from overgeneralization and wrong analogy. Learners should always be encouraged to do remedial exercises.
- 3- When dealing with the errors of the whole class, it is better to present the remedial point as though it were a new item and not something that has been taught unsuccessfully once.
- 4- As far as the negative transfer is concerned, it is useful for teachers and syllabus designers to consider the differences in structures between Arabic and English.
- 5- For the intralingual interference, it is obvious that some specific rules in the target language may be rather confusing and may have some exceptions in which the students need to understand, memorize and practice in order to acquire them.
- 6- One of the possible causes for errors which the teachers must consider is their teaching style and techniques.
- 7- Teachers should think of using different techniques and ideas to help learners write correctly i.e. cards to write mistakes and their corrections to help students improve their writing.
- 8- It is the teachers' responsibility to adopt, modify or even develop remedial procedures that can raise students' level and minimize their errors.

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الأخطاء النحوية الشائعة التي يرتكبها طلاب المرحلة الإعدادية في العراق عند الكتابة باللغة الانكليزية

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المستخلص

تحاول هذه الدراسة التحري عن الأخطاء الشائعة عند الكتابة باللغة الانكليزية والتي يرتكبها طلاب المدارس الثانوية في العراق. تتكون عينة هذه الدراسة من 97 طالب في الصف الرابع الإعدادي في ثانوية السراج للبنين في بغداد للعام الدراسي 2015-2016. تتبع هذه الدراسة أسلوب تحليل الخطأ لغرض تعيين ووصف وبيان أسباب الأخطاء الواردة في هذه الدراسة. كما وتستخدم أسلوب التحليل المقارن لغرض وصف التراكيب البنيوية لكل من اللغتين العربية و الانكليزية. وتم في هذه الدراسة فحص المقالات التي كتبها الطلاب عينة البحث وكانت النتائج كما يلي: أن الأخطاء في الافعال كانت الاكثر عددا وتليها على التوالي اخطاء الزمن ، حروف الجر ، ادوات التنكير والتعريف، ترتيب كلمات الجملة واخيرا البناء للمعلوم او المجهول. وأهم ما أستنتجه هذه الدراسة ان التأثير السلبي للغة الأم والمفاهيم الخاطئة التي يتبناها الطلاب عن اللغة التي يحاولون تعلمها بالإضافة لعدم انتظام قواعدها تشكل اهم مصادر الاخطاء. وأخيرا تقدم الدراسة بعض التوصيات للمعلمين ولواضعي المناهج الدراسية الخاصة بتعليم اللغة الانكليزية.