

A Quantitative Approach to Examining Academic Writing Errors Among EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

This study seeks to precisely identify and analyze common errors found in academic writing among undergraduate students. These errors might function as objective signals of writing problems at the tertiary education level in Jordan. This would enhance our knowledge of what shapes writing, and how might students develop in writing over time. This is the rationale for conducting this study. In Jordan, some undergraduate students face severe difficulty in conveying their ideas in writing; and this is a serious challenge in their writing classes. Therefore, the study intends to analyze and characterize the major writing obstacles experienced by Jordanian university students. The study sample comprises 35 undergraduate students registered in the English Department at a university in the northern part of Jordan in the academic year 2022, and have attended writing classes. In order to achieve the study's purpose, the researcher employed a quantitative approach to explore the various forms of writing mistakes. The needed data were gathered by adapting and designing a questionnaire as a tool for the study. The study's findings indicated that university students suffered from committing different errors in writing related to the lack of vocabulary, tense, mechanics of writing, relative clauses and articles. The study recommends taking advanced steps in developing writing curricula by concentrating on thought development, linguistic knowledge, and sensible and critical thinking. This study will undoubtedly enhance the current knowledge and catalyze extensive research on crucial aspects of academic writing.

Keywords: *Academic Writing, Writing Errors, Undergraduate EFL Students.*

1. Introduction

Writing has long been a focus of scientific study in the field of English language instruction (EFL). The primary justification and logic could be the apparent increase in the relevance of academic work as students pursue and progress to a higher level of education. Al Fadda (2012) defines it as an intellectual and cognitive process as it is the outcome of the mind. The researcher's interest in this current research is concentrated on English language major students' academic writing improvement which is deemed as one of the crucial and significant language-productive skills that undergraduate students need to express and exchange thoughts. It is widely recognized that in Jordanian universities teaching and learning writing, in particular, is critical and one of the primary concerns that must be addressed to promote writing growth in Jordanian higher education. Learning academic writing is seen as a crucial requirement for English language learners to succeed in their studies and contribute to the field's advancement. Around the world, academic writing is a means of communication. According to Ware and Mabe (2015),

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English is the primary language used for the production and dissemination of publications across the world.

Writing, in general, is a difficult mission and task for both native and foreign-language speakers since writers should make an equilibrium between several issues in their academic writing as mechanics of writing, objective, coherence, organization, and using correct punctuation, capitalization, and concordance (Abu Rass 2015). In the same context, Jordanians like many other students encounter several problems in writing a well-organized paragraph and essay. This is due to the disparities between English and Arabic, which came from two separate sources. Even the system of writing is different wherein Arabic language writing starts from right to left; however, in English is vice-versa. Accordingly, it is expected that Jordanian students face difficulties in learning and mastering writing skills (Mugableh and Khreisat 2019). According to Abdulkareem (2013), academic writing consists of several characteristics that help students develop critical thinking skills and provide motivation to study various aspects of academic writing such as using efficient word expressions and diverse vocabularies.

Furthermore, academic writing includes particular aspects such as critical thinking that students should perceive through certain courses they engage in. In the same context, it is described as the building and development of strategies and methods taught to organize and generate students' thoughts and critical thinking; in addition to developing expression, vocabulary, and grammar. Besides, students in writing classes should be exposed to these aspects and traits which present vocabulary, correct sentences, and organizing well-organized paragraphs based on the mechanics of writing.

As a result of the increasing need for writing skills in tertiary education, undergraduates need to be highly capable and well-qualified to write. This is because English majors must be proficient at writing clearly and precisely to effectively and creatively communicate their ideas. Still, students majoring in English in Jordan face some writing challenges. They consider writing as a difficult mission since they lack some aspects of the mechanics of writing as well as linguistics difficulties. Much research has recognized and demonstrated that Arab learners, in general, cannot write accurately at the level of paragraphs and essays, and Jordanian learners are no exception (Shawish 2018). Moreover, several studies affirmed that EFL students suffer from low performance and weakness in writing.

The researcher is aware of little research on the difficulties and barriers associated with academic writing in the Jordanian setting. As the researcher is a lecturer at a university, he has observed that English language students encounter challenges in writing at both paragraph and essay levels. Thus, the objective of the investigator is to provide a clear image of the points of difficulties that students encounter in writing and try to respond to the study question.

1.1 Objective of the Study

The study endeavours to identify the most frequent writing errors made by Jordanian undergraduates.

1.2 Research Question

The following question guides this search:

1) What kind of errors do undergraduate students make when writing?

1.3 Limitations of the study

The study is restricted to sophomore and junior undergraduates of the English Language and Literature Dept. students at a university in northern Jordan during the academic year 2021/2022.

2. Literature Review

A lot of studies have examined the difficulties in English foreign language students' writing and the remedial procedures taken to boost and improve learners' writing skills in different contexts. Similarly, numerous studies have shown that writing in a foreign language is a challenging and complex task. As a result, the researcher offers some studies that addressed this issue in the context of the Arab world.

According to Alsamadani (2018), the difficulty of writing emerged from the fact that writing involves searching for a central idea, developing and supporting it, and arranging well-organised sentences free of errors. Similarly, Ahmed (2019) has indicated that academic writing is a complicated mission since it involves different components such as good command of grammar, word choice, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, coherence, and cohesive ties.

Similarly, Al-Khairy (2013) carried out a study at the University of Taif on the types of errors and the reasons for these errors. It sought to find and discover the solutions to surpass writing challenges. 75 students from all academic levels took part in this study. The data was collected by using an interview and questionnaire survey. Mean scores and standard deviation were utilized to analyze the gathered data. The findings revealed that English language major students committed some errors in academic writing. They committed trivial errors at the level of sentences of the essay. In the end, the study presented some recommendations in the scope of developing writing skills.

Likewise, Khan (2011) performed research to explore the key challenges that Saudi learners confront when writing. The researcher stated that students encounter vast problems in spelling, structure, spelling, language interference, articles, vocabulary, tenses, and affixes. In this regard, the researcher reviewed some studies and inferred the difficulties and problems Saudi students face due to the lack of English language curricula in writing at school and tertiary level, awful conventional methodologies, the problem of a suitable language atmosphere, and lack of motivation.

In his influential study, Fati (2013) examined the connection between writing and various types of errors committed by Moroccan undergraduates. The study's findings indicated that students continue to face significant challenges with using punctuation marks, question marks, periods, and commas. Additionally, they have problems using proper grammar, particularly, the correct use of tense, articles and spelling. Also, Alamri and Al-Tunisi (2019) contributed significantly to the body of knowledge on writing skills when it was claimed that Arab university students are weak due to a number of issues. He confirms that they write incoherent text since they have a shortage of critical writing which reflects their weakness in conveying their ideas clearly.

Similarly, Yahya (2017) applied a study on writing composition among Iraqi University students on the obstacles encountered by Iraqi English language students in writing from their own point of view. The study sought to categorize the barriers and writing challenges Iraqi students encounter. The study's participants were sophomore English majors at Diyala University who responded to the survey questions. The study used the questionnaire as a technique to pinpoint the main writing challenges. The study's conclusions showed that Iraqi sophomore students have a variety of writing issues, particularly with the mechanics of writing and tenses.

In another study, Alhaisoni, Gaudel et al. (2017) investigated 100 written samples by 100 fresh undergraduate students at Hail University in Saudi Arabia. The study's findings showed that, in addition to errors of omission, undergraduate first-year students also frequently made mistakes with definite and indefinite articles. The researcher attributed these errors to overgeneralization and transfer from the mother tongue. Concentrating on another area of difficulty.

Tahaineh (2010) investigated the use of prepositions in Jordanian university students' written paragraphs and essays. The researcher inferred that English foreign language students face critical difficulties in using suitable prepositions in writing. The researchers also concluded that the primary source of these mistakes is interference from the first language.

In the Palestinian context, Hammad (2016) applied a study to explore university students' paragraph and essay writing and the different impediments they encounter. The study sample comprised sixty students who were called to sit for a writing exam, and then answer the questionnaire items. Furthermore, the researcher interviewed three members of the academic staff to gather the required data. The study's findings demonstrated that students lacked linguistic knowledge, consistency, and style. Additionally, students embrace literal and word-for-word translation when they start writing.

In general, this part presented a concise summary of the previous research regarding academic writing. The aforementioned studies focused on the most common errors made by English language students in academic writing at the tertiary level.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This present investigation adopted a quantitative method. It is a research strategy that is utilized to obtain information dealing with numbers (Mungungu 2010). To present the outcomes of these procedures, this method frequently employed statistics, tables, and graphs. Therefore, quantitative research is gaugable and quantifiable. Additionally, it lets results be examined, analyzed, and compared with different studies. According to Hapudin (2015), quantitative research is a type of research that employs procedures and steps to collect data in numerical form (476). Thus, the researcher used a quantitative approach and a survey questionnaire as a tool for the study. Accordingly, this investigation used a closed questionnaire to identify and categorize the main writing errors.

3.2 Sample of the Study

The study's respondents included 35 sophomore and junior learners who took the "Advanced Writing" course. Due to the students' inclusion, the sample was homogenous in terms of gender, age, and speciality. The students' ages vary from 19 to 20. Furthermore, two English Department staff instructors took part by providing additional details on the writing mistakes made by learners.

3.3 Research Instrument

Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire is a popular tool in the field of education (Cohen et al. 2011). It is a collection of questions a researcher poses that must be answered in writing. Thus, in this present study, a survey was applied as a study instrument to collect the required data. It involves fifteen items to examine and identify students' writing errors. It was designed and adapted from Hussein's study (2017) to answer the main research question. The 5-Likert Scale, where 5 is the greater level and 1 is the lower one, was employed in the current study. This scale, which asks participants to mark how much they agree or disagree with each issue on the questionnaire, is often used. There are five options on this scale:

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

3.4 Questionnaire Validity

To ensure questionnaire validity, the researcher distributed the survey to three experienced and professional lecturers in the fields of linguistics and TEFL. They are asked to ensure its suitability to the study sample, and present and provide any vital modifications, adding, or omitting that enrich the questionnaire items. The jury confirmed its suitability and suggested some modifications which have been taken into account.

Before performing the main investigation, the researcher did a pilot study. The early research included ten undergraduate students. Within 5-10 minutes, all participants were able to reply to and complete the questionnaire items. All students found these items to be straightforward and understandable.

4. Data Collection

The questionnaire was hand-delivered to students in order to collect the data, and it was subsequently put together at the institution during the second week of December 2021. This process has taken a week as a result of university procedures to protect students from the coronavirus. So, the process of collecting data has taken a week. The participants were given 30 minutes to fill out the questionnaire items. Then the researcher collected the questionnaires. In the end, the researcher collected 35 questionnaires.

5. Data Analysis

As the researcher gathered the required data, it was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version (23) of the software. The researcher tested the reliability of the questionnaire. It was found that the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the questionnaire was ($r = .85$), revealing a good degree of internal consistency. This signifies that the questionnaire and its items were a dependable instrument for achieving the study's goal. The gathered data resulted from students' responses to the questionnaire's items were displayed utilizing descriptive statistics.

6. Results

Grami (2010) indicates that studies used to examine the perspectives and beliefs of English foreign language students regarding writing frequently focused on learners' thoughts about writing, beliefs about themselves as writers, the demand for one's own voice in writing, and finally the relationship between learners' views and their academic results. The present investigation attempts to categorize and identify the types of mistakes experienced by Jordanian EFL students when writing in English. As a result, the primary goal of the questionnaire was to identify the most prevalent types of errors that undergraduate students commit while writing. Examining undergraduates' errors is a useful source of data regarding students' competence and their weak points.

Data analysis in the present study included categorizing these errors to distinguish their types. The errors committed by students were categorized in reference to their responses to the questionnaire items. Five major types of writing errors were identified: lack of vocabulary; problems related to tense; mechanics of writing; relative clauses; and lack of proper use of articles as Table 1 below shows.

Table 1. Students' Common Errors

No.	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Lack of vocabulary	4.49	0.77
2	Problems related to tense	4.43	0.60
3	Using mechanics of writing	4.22	0.82
4	Relative clauses	4.16	0.50
5	Lack of proper use of articles	4.08	0.71

7. Discussion

This section discusses the most prevalent errors made by EFL Jordanian students, as well as the reasons for such errors:

- Lack of Vocabulary

The first item had the highest mean score from the participants, 4.49, indicating that the vocabulary needed to produce a well-organized essay is limited. Thus, this finding suggests that undergraduates' first biggest writing issue is the shortage and lack of vocabulary. This conclusion is largely compatible with Rabab'ah findings (2003), which stated that the learners' restricted vocabulary prevents them from writing appropriately. The findings also demonstrated that students struggle to express themselves in their writing using the appropriate terminology.

The importance of vocabulary in learning any foreign language cannot be overstated. As a result, lacking vocabulary learners would be unable to connect with others or convey their opinions and concepts in writing. When students have a big vocabulary in a foreign language, it is easier for them to communicate how they feel and what they think in writing. Thus, one of the difficulties that Jordanian students have while writing is a lack of vocabulary.

- Problems Related to Tense

The second-highest mean score from the participants, (4.43), demonstrates that tense difficulties plague students' academic writing. This study supports the conclusions of Al-Khasawneh (2010), who confirmed that grammar proves challenging for EFL students, particularly the tense. He went on to argue that language is critical for conveying the appropriate information in the proper setting. Moreover, Al-Khairi (2013) has confirmed that grammatical errors were the most prevalent challenge among Arab English major students. Since the grammatical structures of Arabic and English are different, Sabra (2020) claims that learners experience difficulty with using the correct tense in sentences. Their native tongue hinders their learning since it produces interference, which leads to a variety of faults in their learning.

- Mechanics of Writing

According to undergraduate English students' replies, the mechanics of writing is the third challenge that faced undergraduates in their academic writing with a mean of (4.22). They generally experienced difficulty or misusing when utilizing mechanics of writing such as apostrophes, commas, colons or semicolons, when encountering a piece of writing. Furthermore, the findings of the study are congruent with those of Abosnan (2022) at Benghazi University. According to the study results, one of the most prevalent mistakes made by Libyan EFL learners was not using proper writing techniques. It was found that capitalization and punctuation mistakes were among the most prevalent in students' written work. In the same context, Sawalmeh (2013) found that Arabic interference is the primary cause of most capitalization problems. These inaccuracies and causes of errors are mostly caused by the disparity between the languages of Arabic and English styles of writing.

- Relative Clauses

The fourth-highest mean score from the respondents, (4.16), shows that students' academic writing suffers considerably from problems related to relative clauses. This outcome is consistent with Al-Jamal's (2017) finding that relative clauses, grammar, and article errors were the most frequently committed by Arab undergraduate students.

- Use of Articles

According to study results, undergraduate students also have trouble using articles properly in their academic writing. The mean score was (4.08). Because of this, it might be challenging for non-native students to utilize articles in English. They have no power over how definite and indefinite articles are used. This is consistent with findings from Abu Rass (2015) and Sabbah (2016) showing Arab students struggle to correctly employ English articles. The definite article "the" is often misused by Arab learners, according to studies. Learners muddle up how such articles should be used. In other words, they utilize the definite article when it is unnecessary and avoid using it when it is required. The difference in how articles are used in Arabic and English is what causes this problem.

8. Conclusion

Some investigations performed in Jordan and other Arab nations show that students learning English as a foreign language usually struggle with their writing abilities, which hinders their scholastic advancement. Tenses are regarded as one of the most important components of a sentence; nevertheless, many Jordanian students have difficulty employing them effectively in their writing. This is because, unlike English sentences, an Arabic sentence may exist without a verb. As a result, students need to discriminate between first and second language rules to understand how to deal with both languages and prevent making further mistakes later.

Based on the data presented, the researcher draws the following inferences about the types of writing mistakes shown by undergraduate students:

- According to the present study's findings, it can be stated that students of the English Language in Jordan have several challenges in their academic writing. This is because they are unaware of the importance of writing and how hard effort and patience are required to be highly competent to write well.
- Undergraduate students frequently make mistakes in their academic writing. This is because English and Arabic have different linguistic variations. Both languages are descended from two discrete origins, and the writing system, number of alphabets, and writing style are all distinct.

9. Further Research and Recommendations

The researcher presents the following recommendations:

- The current study might be replicated on a larger scale with diverse communities and educational levels to evaluate the issues and barriers of writing.
- Further research with exclusively male or female students may be conducted to better understand the effect of gender on academic writing errors because the current study included both male and female undergraduates as participants.
- Students must write extensively for the majority of their academic courses, and it is the instructors' responsibility to motivate students to enhance their writing abilities.

- Finally, the study recommends taking advanced steps in developing writing curricula by concentrating on thought development, linguistic knowledge, and sensible and critical thinking.

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