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An Analytical Study of Academic Writing Difficulties and L1 Interference: A Case Study of EFL Freshmen at El-Mergib University

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Abstract

Academic writing is a critical yet challenging competency for EFL learners in the Libyan higher education context, where the transition to university-level discourse often reveals significant linguistic gaps. This study aims to diagnose the specific writing difficulties and the influence of first-language (L1) interference among the entire first-year cohort at the Faculty of Arts – Msallata, El-mergib University. Adopting a descriptive-analytical census design, the research analyzed the writing samples of all twenty enrolled freshmen ($N=20$) using Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework. Data collection involved a controlled descriptive writing task

and semi-structured interviews with writing instructors to triangulate findings. The analysis identified 192 errors, with grammatical inaccuracies (51%) and mechanical errors (30.2%) being the most prevalent. A critical finding was that (65.1%) of the total errors were interlingual, directly attributable to negative transfer from Arabic syntax and orthography, most notably in subject-verb agreement and the "zero-copula" structure. The study concludes that writing challenges at the Msallata campus are predominantly driven by cross-linguistic influence rather than a simple lack of vocabulary. It recommends the urgent integration of contrastive linguistics and process-oriented writing pedagogy into the

department's curriculum to prevent the fossilization of these interlanguage errors.

Keywords: Error Analysis, EFL Writing, L1 Interference, Libyan Higher Education, Census Study.

* **Background of the Study**

In the field of Applied Linguistics, academic writing is defined as a complex, recursive, and cognitively demanding process that requires the simultaneous integration of linguistic, socio-cultural, and strategic competencies (Hyland, 2019). For students within the English Department at the Faculty of Arts – Msallata, proficiency in writing is not merely a linguistic requirement but a fundamental tool for academic survival and professional advancement.

However, the transition from secondary education to university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction often reveals a significant gap between expected academic standards and actual student performance. In the Libyan context, learners frequently enter higher education with fossilized grammatical habits and a heavy reliance on their native Arabic (L1) rhetorical patterns (Abusrewel, 2014). This study explores the specific writing dilemmas faced by the current first-year cohort at El-

Mergib University, aiming to diagnose the linguistic and mechanical bottlenecks that impede their academic development.

* **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the inclusion of foundational writing courses in the first-year curriculum at the Faculty of Arts – Msallata, many students continue to exhibit a high density of errors in their written output. These issues are not restricted to surface-level mechanics such as spelling and punctuation but extend to deep-seated morphosyntactic inaccuracies and a lack of discourse coherence.

Preliminary observations suggest that the freshman cohort of twenty students struggles significantly with "Arabized" English structures, resulting from literal translation and negative L1 transfer. Without a systematic, empirical analysis of these specific problems, the department remains unable to provide targeted remedial support or modernize the current pedagogical approaches to meet international standards.

* **Research Questions**

This study seeks to address the following questions: -

1- What are the most frequent categories of writing errors (grammatical, mechanical, and lexical) committed by the first-year

English majors at the Msallata campus?

2- To what extent does first-language (Arabic) interference influence the syntactic and discourse patterns of student writing?

3- What are the underlying causes of these errors from the perspective of both students and writing instructors?

*** Objectives of the Study**

The primary objectives of this research are: -

1- To identify and categorize the systematic writing errors prevalent in the freshman cohort's compositions.

2- To analyze the role of cross-linguistic influence (L1 interference) in the production of these errors.

3- To propose evidence-based pedagogical recommendations for the English Department at El-Mergib University to improve writing instruction.

*** Research Hypotheses**

H 1: There is a statistically significant prevalence of interlingual errors (L1 transfer) compared to intralingual errors in the students' writing.

H 2: Students demonstrate higher proficiency in sentence-level mechanics than in global organizational coherence.

*** Significance of the Study**

This study is significant as it provides the first comprehensive "census" of the writing challenges

faced by the entire first-year population at the Msallata Faculty of Arts. The findings will assist curriculum designers at El-Mergib University in refining writing syllabi and will contribute local data to the broader field of North African EFL research.

*** Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

*** Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded in two primary pillars of Second Language Acquisition (SLA): -

1- Error Analysis (EA): Based on Corder (1967), errors are viewed as systematic windows into the learner's "Interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972). This study focuses on the "competence errors" rather than random "slips" of performance.

2- Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Transfer Theory: Following Odlin (1989), this study examines how the structural divergence between Arabic and English leads to negative transfer, where students impose L1 rules onto L2 production.

*** Literature Review: The Libyan Context**

Previous scholarship on Libyan EFL writing has consistently highlighted the challenges of L1 interference. Bintahir (2015) identified that Libyan university students face extreme difficulty with

the English tense-aspect system due to the lack of direct equivalents in Arabic. Similarly, Mohamed (2016) conducted a study at El-Mergib University. He found that punctuation and capitalization remained the most neglected aspects of student writing, largely because Arabic script does not utilize capitalization.

* Previous Studies on Arabic-Speaking Learners

Regionally, studies across the MENA region (e.g., Richards, 2015) suggest that the "zero-copula" structure in Arabic (omitting the verb "to be") is a universal source of error for Arabic-speaking freshmen. Furthermore, research into the "Process vs. Product" approach suggests that students in traditional environments, such as Msallata, often lack the drafting and peer-review skills necessary to self-correct these interlingual errors before submission (Tribble, 1996).

* Methodology

1- Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical census design utilizing a mixed-methods approach. A census design was selected because the target population is small and manageable ($N=20$), allowing for the inclusion of the entire first-year cohort at the Faculty of Arts –

Msallata. This approach eliminates sampling error and provides a definitive linguistic profile of the group. The quantitative component involves the frequency analysis of writing errors, while the qualitative component utilizes semi-structured interviews to explore the underlying causes of these errors, ensuring a triangulation of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

2- Participants and Setting

The participants of this study are the entire population of first-year English majors ($N=20$) currently enrolled at the Faculty of Arts – Msallata, El-Mergib University. This cohort was selected through purposive sampling as they represent the critical "transitional phase" in EFL writing development. All participants are native Arabic speakers between the ages of 18 and 20, having completed six years of English instruction at the primary and secondary levels.

3- Data Collection Instruments

Two primary instruments were employed to gather the data: -

1- Controlled Writing Task: Participants were required to produce a descriptive paragraph of 150–200 words on a familiar academic topic ("Description of Msallata"). This task was designed to elicit the students' Interlanguage in a naturalistic yet

controlled linguistic environment (Selinker, 1972).

2- Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with two senior writing instructors from the department. The goal was to gain pedagogical insights into the students' recurring challenges and to validate the findings from the writing samples.

4- Procedures for Data Analysis

The analysis followed the rigorous five-step procedure for Error Analysis (EA) established by Corder (1967): -

1- Collection of Samples: Student scripts were collected under supervised classroom conditions to ensure authenticity.

2- Identification of Errors: Each script was read line-by-line. "Slips" (accidental lapses) were distinguished from systematic "Errors" (breaches in competence).

3- Description and Categorization: Errors were coded using a multi-tier taxonomy: Grammatical (SVA, articles, tenses), Mechanical (punctuation, capitalization), and Discourse (cohesion, L1 transfer).

4- Explanation: Inaccuracies were traced to their sources, specifically comparing Interlingual (L1 interference) versus Intralingual (developmental) origins.

5- Evaluation: The errors were assessed based on their impact on the overall intelligibility of the academic text.

5- Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the English Department at El-Mergib University. Participants were provided with informed consent forms and assured of their anonymity. To protect student privacy, all data were anonymized using alphanumeric codes (e.g., Student 01, Student 02) during the analysis and reporting phases.

6- Reliability and Validity

To ensure inter-rater reliability, a sample of the coded scripts was cross-checked by a second experienced instructor to confirm the accuracy of the error categorization. The use of a standardized error taxonomy (Table 4.2) ensured that the quantitative results were consistent and replicable.

*** Results and Discussion**

1- Quantitative Analysis of Error Frequencies

The analysis of the 20 writing samples elicited a total of $N=192$ identified errors. These errors were categorized into four primary domains: Grammatical, Mechanical, Lexico-Semantic, and Discourse.

Table 4.1 illustrates the frequency and percentage of these occurrences..

Table 4.1: Frequency and Percentage of Writing Errors (N = 20 Participants)

Error Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Rank
Grammatical	98	51.0%	1
Mechanical	58	30.2%	2
Lexico-Semantic	24	12.5%	3
Discourse	12	6.3%	4
Total	192	100%	

As indicated in Table 4.1, Grammatical errors represent over half of the total inaccuracies, followed by Mechanical errors (30.2%). This distribution suggests that while students struggle with the rules of English syntax, they also lack foundational literacy in English punctuation and orthography.

2- Detailed Analysis of Grammatical Errors

A granular analysis of the grammatical category ($f=98$) was conducted to identify specific syntactic bottlenecks.

Table 4.2: Breakdown of Grammatical Sub-categories

Sub-category	Frequency	% of Category	Student Example (Sic)
Subject-Verb Agreement	38	38.8%	"Msallata have many old buildings."
Article Misuse (a/an/the)	30	30.6%	"It is a ancient city."
Tense/Aspect	18	18.4%	"I living here for ten years."
Prepositions	12	12.2%	"I am proud at my town."

The prevalence of Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA) errors suggests a lack of internalized inflectional morphology, which is a common characteristic of the early stages of Interlanguage development.

3- Etiology of Errors: Interlingual vs. Intralingual

To address the research question regarding L1 interference, errors were classified by their source.

Table 4.3: Attribution of Errors to Linguistic Sources

Source of Error	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Interlingual (L1 Arabic Transfer)	125	65.1%
Intralingual (Overgeneralization)	67	34.9%

The data confirms that 65.1% of student errors stem from Interlingual interference. A notable example found in several scripts was the "Zero-Copula" error (e.g., "Msallata very hot"), which directly mirrors the Arabic nominal sentence (Al-Msallata harra jiddan).

4- Discussion of Findings

The results of this census study reveal three critical insights into the writing proficiency of freshmen at the Msallata Faculty of Arts: -

1- Syntactic Fossilization: The high frequency of SVA and Article errors indicates that these rules are "learned" but not "acquired."

Students can likely state the rule in isolation but fail to apply it during the cognitive load of active writing.

2- L1 Rhetorical Mapping: In addition to grammatical transfer, there is evidence of Rhetorical Transfer. Students used long, "run-on" sentences connected by the conjunction "and," reflecting the paratactic style of Arabic prose rather than the hypotactic (subordinate) nature of English academic writing.

3- Mechanical Negligence: The 30.2% rate of mechanical errors (specifically lack of capitalization) suggests that students do not view mechanics as essential to meaning. This is likely due to the lack of capitalization in the Arabic script, leading to a negative transfer of orthographic habits.

* Discussion

The findings of this census study reveal a systematic pattern of "Interlanguage" development among the freshman cohort at the Faculty of Arts – Msallata. As illustrated in Table 4.1, the preponderance of grammatical errors (51%) suggests that students are currently operating within a transitional linguistic stage where target language rules have been partially internalised but not yet automated.

1- Interlanguage and Fossilization

Linking these results to Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory, the high frequency of Subject-Verb Agreement inaccuracies (38.8% of grammatical errors) indicates that these learners are navigating a "third language" system. This system is neither pure Arabic nor native-level English but a hybrid. The consistency of these errors across the $N=20$ participants suggests a risk of fossilization; if these morphosyntactic lapses are not addressed at the freshman level, they may become permanent features of the students' academic discourse.

2- Error Analysis and Competence vs. Performance

Following Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework, the data in Table 4.3 distinguishes between random "slips" and systematic "errors." The fact that 65.1% of the inaccuracies are Interlingual (L1 Transfer) suggests a "competence error" rather than a mere lapse in concentration. Students are actively projecting Arabic syntactic logic—such as the zero-copula and paratactic sentence structures—onto their English output. This confirms that for the Msallata cohort, the mother tongue remains the primary cognitive resource during the writing process,

leading to the "Arabized" English structures identified in the results.

* **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

1- Conclusion

This research has provided a comprehensive diagnostic profile of the entire first-year population at the Faculty of Arts – Msallata. The study concludes that writing difficulties in this context are not merely a result of vocabulary deficiency but are deeply rooted in cross-linguistic influence. With 65% of errors originating from Arabic interference, it is evident that the structural divergence between the two languages is the primary obstacle to academic writing fluency. Without targeted intervention that acknowledges the role of the L1, these students will continue to struggle with the clarity and coherence required for higher-level undergraduate study.

2- Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Based on the empirical evidence gathered, the following recommendations are proposed for the English Department at El-Mergib University: -

1- Introduction of Contrastive Linguistics: Since the majority of errors are interlingual, the department must integrate Contrastive Analysis (CA) into the "Writing I" and

"Writing II" syllabi. Explicitly teaching the structural differences between Arabic and English (e.g., auxiliary verbs, article systems, and punctuation) will help students develop the metalinguistic awareness needed to self-correct.

2- Shift to Process-Oriented Pedagogy: The high rate of mechanical errors (30.2%) suggests a lack of revision habits. Moving from a "product" approach to a "process" approach—incorporating drafting and peer-feedback—will allow students to filter out L1 interference before final submission.

3- Small-Group Remedial Workshops: Given the small cohort size of $N = 20$, the department should implement "Writing Labs" where students receive individualized feedback on their specific error logs, preventing the fossilization of the morphosyntactic issues identified in this study.

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