

## EXAMINING SECOND LANGUAGE WRITTEN OUTPUT: A CASE STUDY OF A SAUDI UNIVERSITY MASTERS EFL STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The researcher used a qualitatively oriented methodology to examine the written performance of sixteen MA students majoring in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the MA Program at one of the recently established universities in Saudi Arabia. Students' final exams were thoroughly analyzed for the syntactic structures used in the students' writing. The sampling process was selective and purposeful in that it was comprised of four outstanding and four poor performances drawn from a total of sixteen students' exam results. Deviated structures, together with the correct ones, were analyzed and described with the aim of mapping common issues in writing performance at a targeted university. Two major sources of unacceptable writing performance included a lack of knowledge of the target language, together with the influence of the students' mother tongue. Additionally, diagnosing a remedy for the deviated forms was proposed. More reinforcement and support for those who were successful was also recommended.*

**KEYWORDS:** writing, performance, higher education, EFL

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### INTRODUCTION

L2-second language is often defined as “the systematic study of how people acquire a second language.” The word “second” can refer to any language that is learned after the mother tongue. Thus, it can refer to the learning of any new language, even a fourth one (Ellis, 2003, p. 3). The field of second language acquisition (SLA) is rich in the sense that much can be described, analyzed, and investigated within it.

Observation, as the first step in any scientific experiment, can be structured to observe endless numbers of cases of second language learners (SLLs), each with a diagnosis of his/her own. With a large number of exploratory studies in the literature, much can be done to help SLLs to develop and improve their L2.

In Saudi Arabia (KSA), English is valued, whether as a second language (spoken and written in various government and private institutions and companies throughout the Kingdom), or as a foreign language (taught in both public and private schools and universities). L2 is a preferred term in the context of this study because English is used both inside and outside classes.

For social purposes, L2 is – in the Saudi context – English, mainly, which is very much welcomed by individuals, regardless of their age, social status, or gender. English has recently become popular with almost all members of Saudi society, from an ambassador to a perfume vendor, because almost everybody needs it, therefore most people are strongly motivated to learn it.

Because Saudi society is rich in many ethnic groups, English, together with some other mixed codes, is used, and is preferred. In this rich area of communication, second or foreign English language learners face many problems in their learning process. From this vantage point, there is a need to observe the process of second language learning in such a context. This study aims to investigate the written output of a slice of L2 learners in a Saudi context. The purpose is to raise awareness by diagnosing the problems in lexemes, grammar, morphology, and syntax. Such an analysis will uncover common difficulties that can be addressed easily, to aid in faster and more effective L2 acquisition.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It has been established by the evidence of the written performance of MA students in the targeted university's Master of Arts degree in Applied Linguistics, that there are as many gross failures with some students as there are outstanding successes with others. The failures represent an extreme distortion of the correct use and usage of the L2. The syntactic structures in some students' writings are deviated, distorted, and unacceptable. Some students do not fit into the program, and some need special support. The problem, then, touches those students who are deteriorating within the program while their classmates are improving.

### **Aim of the Study**

The study will focus on an analysis of the written performance of six MA students majoring in English as Foreign Language (EFL) in the MA Program at one of the recently established universities in Saudi Arabia. This study aims to map common issues in writing performance in the MA program.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited to the description of the written performance of one of the MA courses' final exam essay questions. This study is confined to a description of the syntactic structures in the written performance of the six students selected in this research.

### **Procedures**

Following Ellis (2003), the researcher attempted “to find out what learners actually did” (p. 4) when they wrote answers to the essay question. The following question was asked:

*“Write short notes on how to avoid plagiarism when doing any of the following academic writing:*

- a) *Taking notes*
- b) *Summarizing*
- c) *Paraphrasing*
- d) *Choosing a style of writing*
- e) *Using the internet.”*

Therefore, the question, as shown from its wording, centers on academic writing for the MA degree in English. The major step in this approach was to collect “samples of learner language – the language that learners produce when they are called on to use an L2 in speech or writing-and analyze them carefully” (Ellis, 2003, p. 4).

The samples that were collected in this study were then synchronically analyzed with the aim of description. Most important here is that the focus has been on the syntactic structures used by the subjects mentioned in this study.

### **Research Questions**

This researcher attempted to find answers to the following questions:

- What are the most common errors in writing performance for MA EFL students at the targeted university?
- What might be the reason behind these errors?
- What recommendations can help address these errors easily to aid faster and more effective L2 acquisition?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study is investigating the description, analysis, and explanation of L2 writing output. The term ‘L2’ has historically been attached to its sister term ‘interlanguage,’ a term coined and introduced by the American linguist Selinker in 1972. It refers to “the systematic knowledge of an L2 that is independent of both the target language and the learners L1” (Ellis, 2003, p. 140).

In this study, this definition is controversial in the sense that although the term refers to “the systematic knowledge,” which is the approach used herein; it is not completely independent of both the target language and the first language, or “mother tongue.” It is a mixture of both. When it is described, it calls on knowledge from L1 and knowledge from L2.

Wilkins (1982) stated that in this respect, “a learner uses features of his native language in his /her attempts to speak and write in the foreign language” (p. 190). That is why Robert Lado’s *Linguistics* initiated “contrastive analysis” across cultures in 1957. Brown (2007) also believed that the L1 system represented a “barrier” to L2 acquisition and “a taxonomy of linguistic contrasts” (p. 148) is required. Van Els (1984) called for an analysis of similarities and differences between the two languages in question to provide additional description and explanation of L2 problems (p. 40).

Wilkins (1982) believed that errors (as he called them) “are all cases of transfer” (p. 202). Brown (2007) tried to soften the issue by suggesting a predilection to the difficulties faced by the L2 learners “a priori,” or showing “observed difficulties in L2

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language learning,” “a posteriori” (p. 157). Vivian Cook (1993) discussed the analogy in some more detail where she clarified that both learners’ knowledge of the second language and the “actual speech of L2 learners” are contained in the term ‘interlanguage’ (p. 19). Van Els (1984) stated, “Hypotheses about the learning process are therefore usually inferred from the learners’ language product” (p. 48). He called them “creative errors” or deviations from the L2 norms. Van Els (1984) expressed that the changes in CA, EA, PA (performance analysis), DA, and deviations from the L2 norms as reflecting the changes in perspectives on the L2 learners over time (p. 37). Van Els (1984) concluded that the learners’ speed or success in L2 varies from learner to learner, and that there are many factors that determine that success in L2 (p. 101). Brown (2007) gathered all these factors together to represent a comprehensive or gestalt view of the description of L2. He emphasized three angles; Selinker’s (1972) interlanguage, Nemser’s (1971) approximative system of L2 learner, and Corder’s (1981) idiosyncratic dialect.

The first approach is important in that it includes the L2 learners’ hypotheses and the testing of the hypotheses in the actual language performance. If his/her hypotheses about L2 is deviated, s/he tries other ones. The other two approaches work as monitors, terms coined later by Krashen (1982). That is what Willkins (1972-1983) called successive hypotheses and testing them in actual performance. Keith Johnson (1996) called them “processing dimensions.” Lightbown & Spada (1993) expressed this notion by calling it “learners process the second language data” ... “rule-governed and predictable”, and “very much like the system of young first language learners” (p. 55). Johnson (1996) asked the question “why [is it] that students get things wrong?” (p. 121). She offered two reasons; the first is that students do not have “the appropriate declarative knowledge,” or have some false knowledge, and the second is a lack of “procedural knowledge” of processing ability (p. 122). This is the diagnosis of our case study here in this paper.

As has been mentioned earlier in this research, the field of SLA and the description of SLLs’ language are too much to account for in this case study. Therefore, this research focused on the most related studies that might be of closer help here. Foremost among the earlier studies is the case study by Schmidt (1983). In his study, Schmidt described his subject (Wes), an adult SLL, once as a “very poor learner” (Ellis, 2003, p. 91) and once as a good language learner. Moreover, depending on how we look at the term language, we, as language analysts, can judge whether some SLLs are good or bad. Schmidt’s subject needed the type of language that he is in real need of, (i.e., to use language for communication, to understand and be understood by people whom he works with, to accomplish things with language, and to participate in meaningful communication and social interaction). Schmidt’s subject succeeded in that task, and he proved to be a good SLL. The study was conducted within a naturalistic context.

Ellis (1992) carried out another study in a classroom context. He investigated the language of two young SLLs. The view of the term “language” here is not used for naturalistic purposes; rather, it is focused more on academic writing, and more specifically on the syntactic aspect of English. The two language learners in Ellis’ study developed the use and usage of the L2 requests successfully. The atmosphere in which

they were placed, (i.e. the classroom) helped them, and provided them with some freedom of choice, and gave them a variety of forms for constructing requests in English.

Earlier in 1981, Corder argued that errors or deviations that native speakers make are actually adventitious artifacts of linguistic performance and do not reflect a deficiency. Put in similar everyday life situations like the native speaker, the L2 learner is expected to comment on errors as well. Researchers are asked by Corder to differentiate between the two types of error for the benefit of the L2 learner. Corder (1981) recommended that deviations of performance be termed “mistakes” and those of competence are termed “errors.” He said that the first is nonsystematic, while the second is systematic. Data from L2 performance can clearly show this distinction.

The L2 learners are privileged by the fact that they possess prior knowledge of how language works since they speak and know their mother tongue. Deviations from the norm may arise from the incorrect guesses of how the L2 works, and this may lead them to make errors. Most of them also may not function fully to their cognitive ability, or to the metalinguistic awareness that they have (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Brown, 2007).

One of the Studies on modified language input and comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) have stressed the fact that this receptive factor is crucial in the acquisition of L2. L2 acquisition will occur if the challenge between the new input and the L2 learners’ level of competence in language are met. Krashen’s input hypothesis occurs among other hypotheses, which are altogether necessary conditions for the optimal achievement of L2 acquisition (Dulay et al., 1982; Lightbown, 1987; Long 1985; Sachs et al., 1981; White, 1987; White et al., 1991).

### **Relevant Research on Writing Performance Output in the Saudi Context**

Among the performance studies that have been conducted to describe the written output of Saudi learners is the study carried out by Alsulmi (2010). It was about the interference of Arabic and English articles among other sources. It was a multiple-choice study at Qassim University, which is also one of the recently established universities in Saudi Arabia; just as the targeted university of this research, the study focused more on the errors attributed to the use of learning strategies rather than the L1; Arabic interference.

Alamin and Sawsan’s (2012) study investigated some basic English grammatical problems with Taif University freshmen. The study concluded that errors were attributed to intralinguistic interference and the developmental sequence of the learning of the English language.

Zughoul and Husain (1985) found three problems in their students’ writing, namely; lack of lexical variety, subordination difficulties, and heavy reliance on redundancy.

Scott & Tucker (1974) classified Arabic-speaking students written products into verbs, prepositions, articles, relative clauses, sentential complements, repetition of subjects or objects, word order, adjectives, adverbs, and genitive constructions.

## METHODOLOGY

### Subjects

The subjects of this study are 16 participants, “MA EFL students” enrolled in the *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. They were deliberately chosen as cases in this research. Four of them represented the optimal, or highest scores achieved in the course, and the other four were representative of the lowest scores achieved by the total number of students in the group, which consisted of sixteen students. The reason for the choice of the highest and lowest scores is to match the output of the comprehensive test with the input that the students received during the course. The subjects of this study attended the course together. They were exposed to the same procedures of instruction. All the students shared the same content of the course, made presentations in class, submitted classroom assignments, and had the same final exam.

### Data Collection

This case study was conducted using data from sixteen written comprehensive test outputs “scripts” done by sixteen MA students enrolled in level one of the MA programs. The collection of the written outputs was done in an intentional way out of a total of sixteen students.

### Data Analysis and Findings

The following anomalous structures were identified from the subjects’ written outputs, which represented the corpus of this study. The researcher checked these anomalous structures. Several cooperating staff members at the Department of Foreign Languages were also involved in the consultation, identification, and classification of the deviated structures in the subjects’ outputs. Bilingual staff members within the department participated in the judgment of whether the cause of the deviation could be attributed to interference from the mother tongue, or lack of knowledge of the syntactic structures on the part of the subjects. Table 1 (below) summarizes the main errors from the analysis of the students’ exams:

Summary of the Most Common Errors	
a)	Misuse of compound prepositions
b)	Misuse of gerunds
c)	Incorrect spelling
d)	Morphological deviations with incorrect spelling
e)	Subject-verb agreement
f)	Incorrect use of prepositions
g)	Misuse of capitalization
h)	Incorrect use of relative clauses
i)	Use of fragments
j)	Deletion of head nouns
k)	Unacceptable word order
l)	Incorrect use of infinitives
m)	Insufficient detail in answers

Table 1 A Summary of the Most Common Errors Noted from the Students’ Written Output

The following are some examples of the errors that can be attributed to a lack of knowledge of the syntactic structures of the target language, and the rules of the application of that knowledge:

***Misuse of compound prepositions:***

Misuse of compound prepositions include incorrect use of expressions such as “according to...”

- “According Hacker (2010) to prevent unintentional plagiarism...”

It should be noted that the deletion of “to” from the compound preposition “according to” (Stageberg & Oaks, 2000, p. 148), is not due to the influence of the mother tongue (interlanguage error), or to deficit in the target language (intralinguistic error). Rather, it is most likely due to the lack of a minimum level of proficiency in English. It could have had a positive transfer. The student might have had a lack of knowledge of the mother tongue as well. There is an equivalent compound preposition similar to the English one in Arabic, but the student does not know it. Therefore, there is also a lack of knowledge of some syntactic structures in the students’ mother tongue.

***Misuse of gerunds:***

Some examples of incorrect use of gerunds include:

- “For take not, unless you identify borrowed.”
- “And for avoid plagiarism...”
- “Try use exact word when you quote it.”

***Incorrect spelling:***

Many misspelt words were found in the students’ written output; examples include:

- “unintentionation” for “unintentional”
- “significted” for “signified”
- “munshen” for “mention”

It was clear to the reviewers that these types of deviations are more likely due to interference from the mother tongue. As native speakers of Arabic, reviewers know that in Arabic every single letter is pronounced. The students transferred the spelling habits of Arabic to English, which means that they did not know the inconsistencies between orthography and pronunciation in English.

***Morphological deviations with incorrect spelling:***

It was found that the students showed several morphological deviations, which were closely connected with incorrect spelling, for example:

- “unintentionation” for “unintentional”

***Subject-verb agreement:***

Examples include:

- “There **are** different **style** of documentation.”
- “There **is** a short **notes**...”
- “...**the part** of the subject **show**...”

There is no influence of the mother tongue here. In Arabic, there is always agreement between the subject and the verb, and between nouns and the complements in singularity, duality, plurality, femininity, and masculinity. However, despite these facts about Arabic subject/verb agreement, the lack of knowledge on the part of the students was inevitably the major cause of deviation. The students failed to articulate their hypotheses and to test these hypotheses.

***Incorrect use of prepositions:***

Examples include:

- “We have to write with our word...”
- “Researcher should emphasize on the key-words.”

Here, the mother tongue influence was the most important factor. In Arabic, the verb “write” is mostly used with the preposition “with”, and accordingly, it was negatively transferred to English.

***Misuse of capitalization:***

Examples include:

- “...the most imPortant Point...”
- “...the imPortant inFormation...”
- “avoid Plagiarism must Put the...”

Here, the deviation from the norm of writing English letters, whether capital or lowercase, is very systematic. The student used the letter “p” in its capital form in five different situations. The phenomenon of fossilization can also be studied here; in that the student did not ever make any improvement in this error throughout her years of study. The deviation had become an inevitable habit.

***Incorrect use of relative clauses:***

Examples include:

- “All the sources that we take the information from it.”
- “The information which we need it in our writing...”

Here, the cause of the deviation is most likely due to influence from the mother tongue. In Arabic, the object-forming suffix is attached to the verb of the relative clause. As a synthetic language, this is a rule. The influence of Arabic probably represents the cause of the incorrect output.

***Use of fragments:***

For example:

- “...and use the not right the imPortant...”

This is another example of mother tongue influence. In Arabic, a sentence could be as long as one can extend it. Commas can be used to separate ideas only. The students in this case study probably made incorrect hypotheses when they wrote them in English. They still deviate from the English norms when writing English sentences.

***Deletion of head nouns:***

For example:

- “Unless you identify borrowed.”

In Arabic, the head nouns could be deleted if the verb is in the passive form. A negative transfer undoubtedly took place here.

***Unacceptable word order:***

For example:

- “Summary report signified fewer formation by own word than the text source.”



Here, students probably negatively transferred this structure from Arabic because it is a free word order language.

***Incorrect use of infinitives:***

For example:

- "...try use exact word..."

Probably, this is a dialectal transfer because Standard Arabic has a similar structure. However, it is likely that the students did not have a mastery of that structure in their native tongue.

***Insufficient detail in answers:***

Compared to the top four answers of the best subjects, the four poorest answers contained deviations that characterized the subjects as "poor language learners." The performance of "good language learners" showed that these learners knew the structures of the target language, and they also knew the rules of using that knowledge. A look at the deviated structures by the poor learners showed that the two major sources of the unacceptable performance are a lack of knowledge of the target language, together with mother tongue influence. The good learners possibly thought in the native language and performed in the target language. It is likely that the poor learners thought in the native language and performed in the native language as well. This performance was due to a lack of awareness of the forms and structures of the target language, and the insufficient use of the rules of that language. Poor learners deviated from the target language norms. Good learners did not. Poor learners misused the structures that have been mentioned above.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study attempted to describe and analyze adult students' written performance in an advanced academic English program (MA in Applied Linguistics). From the results of this study, it has been found that the major cause of the deviated written outputs is most likely due to a lack of knowledge of the target language's systems, or a lack of the application of the rules of writing academic English.

If the students had this knowledge, they would have shown that knowledge in their comprehensive exams. The good language learners in this study have shown thus appropriate knowledge. A comparison between the good language learners and the bad language learners has shown that the first type knew the language system, but the second type did not.

A second cause for the deviation between the two groups is the interference of the mother tongue, together with other cultural factors attached to it. The method of analysis followed here could be utilized to describe other forms of ESL or EFL outputs, such as other written non-comprehensive and spoken outputs.

A final concluding remark on description and analysis of ESL/EFL output: it has provided the field with too much data that needs to be dealt with in an explanatory way; to make the theory of SLA more practical, the explanation of causes of deviated output

should be emphasized. In other words, more work needs to be done on the explanation of the causes of deviated outputs. This might have more pedagogical implications for the development of L2 learners in both their spoken and written performance.

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