

Investigating the Morphosyntactic Errors of Saudi EFL Students

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Abstract—It is widely recognized that morphosyntax plays a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA) and error-free grammar is essential for effective communication. Therefore, understanding the morphosyntactic difficulties faced by Saudi EFL Students can provide valuable insights into their language learning process. For this reason, the present study attempts to investigate the morphosyntactic errors committed by Saudi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) university students and find out the main reasons behind them. The data were collected through a test distributed to 30 subjects. The findings revealed that learners commit serious errors classified into verb tense, article, word order and subject –verb agreement. Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers develop targeted teaching materials and provide more practice opportunities for syntax, enhancing grammatical accuracy.

Index Terms—error analysis, morphosyntactic, interlingual, intralingual

I. INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential and universal language in contemporary society due to its critical role in communication and its profound impact on various aspects of our lives, including employment opportunities, international travel, and more. As a result of its status as a global language, English instruction has been implemented in every country. The English language has emerged as a focal point of education policy in the Arab world, leading to the implementation of mandatory English instruction in educational curricula.

Conversely, English is classified as a foreign language in Saudi. Arabic serves as the designated medium of instruction and official language across all educational levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary. The instruction of Arabic has been regarded as the primary and fundamental objective of the educational policy. It is implemented beginning in the initial year of primary education. Consequently, English is taught as a foreign language in universities and institutions in Saudi.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, English is taught at schools as a foreign language from seventh to twelfth grade. Every week, students receive instruction for 3.5 hours. The Grammar-Translation Method is used widely at Saudi institutions and universities to teach literacy (Hamed, 2018). The majority of English teachers at Saudi universities and other institutions use this approach. The quality of their English education is influenced by the fact that the English teachers are native Arabic speakers from certain Arab nations. "Various educational and non-educational governmental institutions in Saudi Arabia have designed their own scholarship programs to enhance the English levels of Saudis" (Alshraah et al., 2024).

Despite the fact that English instruction in Saudi Arabia has garnered significant attention from educational policy, it continues to stagnate and fail to advance due to the fact that its sole purpose is to earn passing grades and ensure exam success. Consequently, additional effort is required to enhance the language proficiency of the students. Using

conventional textbooks, materials, and technical approaches in the classroom causes instruction to become tedious and exasperating. Consequently, the educational policy must prioritize the development and enhancement of English teaching methodologies and textbooks. Furthermore, teaching English should emphasize more than mere exam preparation; it should also underline the ability to communicate effectively on a global scale, given that English is the most valuable language in the world due to its universal applicability and educational value.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Background

Saudi and other Arab learners face several challenges when learning English, resulting in errors across various linguistic areas, including phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, and phonology. These errors primarily stem from both interlingual and intralingual sources. One significant factor is negative transfer, which Richards (1976) defined as "the application of a negative language pattern or rule that results in an error or inappropriate form in the target language (TL)." This refers to the interference of the learners' mother tongue (MT) on the target language (TL) during the learning process. Another contributing factor is intralingual errors, which Richards (1976, p. 6) describes as "items produced by the learner that are generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language rather than the structure of the mother tongue." These errors arise not only from the transfer of the first language but also from incorrect generalizations of the target language's principles.

B. Literature Review

Despite the extensive focus of numerous scholars and researchers from various countries on error analysis, there remains a need for further research to explore and investigate morphosyntactic errors in different contexts and populations. This study references specific prior research in an effort to provide readers with insights into morphosyntactic errors.

One such study by Al-Awaid (2010) aimed to identify the challenges Arab EFL learners face when applying various grammatical categories, including subject-verb agreement, article usage, relative pronouns, past participles of irregular verbs, past tense, plural formation, and prepositions. The findings revealed that Arab EFL learners encounter syntactic barriers that lead to high error rates. The study found that both interlingual (language transfer) and intralingual (within-language) sources contributed to errors, but intralingual errors were more prevalent. The researcher recommended that instructors provide explanations of the origins of these errors and compare the structural differences between Arabic and English to help students differentiate between the two languages and reduce their errors.

Crompton (2011) conducted a study to identify the most common errors made by advanced L1 Arabic learners of English. The study found that one of the most frequent mistakes was the misuse of the definite article to refer to a generic term. The findings indicated that these article errors were primarily caused by negative transfer from the students' native language, rather than by intralingual errors within English. Crompton suggested that students should be made aware of the similarities and differences between the article systems of Arabic and English to avoid making such errors.

Alshayban (2012) explored the omission of the copula by Saudi EFL learners and whether this issue stemmed from their native language. The study revealed that Saudi students frequently omitted the English copula, particularly in the present and past tenses. It was also found that intermediate-level students made more errors than advanced learners. The primary cause of these errors was identified as interference from the students' native dialect, leading them to apply the rules of their first language to English.

Azzouz (2013) conducted a study examining the interference errors made by Syrian pupils at the upper intermediate (UP) and pre-intermediate (PI) levels in the areas of syntax, lexicon, and phonology. The study found significant inaccuracies in subject-verb agreement, particularly in the use of the third person singular. The research also identified a disparity in academic achievement between UP and PI students. The primary source of these errors was interlingual interference. To improve language skills, Azzouz recommended increasing students' speaking experience.

Mohammed and Abdalhussein (2015) investigated syntactical errors in the written compositions of Iraqi postgraduate students enrolled at UKM. These students committed a variety of errors, including misuse of plural (s) endings, articles, tenses, prepositions, and active-passive constructions. Prepositions accounted for the largest proportion (22.1%) of errors. The study found that interference from the students' native language was the primary cause of these errors. The researchers suggested that tailored instructional materials, remedial instruction, and additional exercises be provided to help students overcome these challenges.

Barzanji (2016) examined the prevalent errors made by Saudi EFL learners in written compositions. The study revealed that Saudi students committed numerous errors, with the highest rate (17.86%) being the improper use of unnecessary words. Other common errors included spelling mistakes (15.66%), incorrect noun forms (6.68%), and incorrect article usage (7.68%). The research indicated that these errors were largely due to interference from the students' native language, while intralingual errors were relatively fewer.

Ababneh (2017) conducted a study focused on identifying the specific categories of errors made by female Saudi students in their written compositions. The findings revealed that errors were categorized into syntax, grammar, lexical, and substance errors. The most common mistakes were related to tenses, singular/plural nouns, articles, and subject-verb agreement. Ababneh concluded that these errors were due to a lack of practice and the influence of students' native languages. The study recommended improving instructional materials and employing appropriate teaching methodologies.

Hafiz and Omar (2018) undertook a study to identify the most prevalent syntactic errors made by Saudi students. The study found frequent errors in sentence structure, tense, articles, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, infinitives, and copulas (verb absence). The main causes of these errors were a lack of practice and intralingual sources. The researchers recommended that teachers place greater emphasis on student performance and provide a variety of activities that require intensive use of English within the classroom. They also suggested preparing appropriate teaching methods and materials.

Finally, Khatter (2019) conducted research to identify the most frequent errors in written compositions by Saudi female EFL students. The study found numerous errors in prepositions, articles, word order, punctuation, grammar, and verb tenses. The primary causes of these errors were interlingual and intralingual factors, along with insufficient motivation, inadequate practice, and the use of inappropriate materials and methods. Khatter recommended that educators provide timely feedback on students' written work and develop instructional materials and methods tailored to students' needs.

These studies collectively highlight the pervasive nature of interlingual and intralingual interference in language learning and the importance of targeted instructional strategies to address these errors.

In their investigation, Shousha et al. (2020) assessed the written compositions of Saudi female students for grammatical errors, focusing on the origins and solutions of these errors from both students' and instructors' perspectives. The results revealed that students frequently committed syntax errors, particularly related to sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary. The researchers identified both native language interference (interlingual errors) and target language issues (intralingual errors) as the principal causes of these mistakes. The study also highlighted other contributing factors such as insufficient English language practice and the use of inappropriate instructional materials. Based on the findings from the questionnaires, Shousha et al. (2020) proposed that instructional materials be tailored to address these errors and that students be provided with additional opportunities to practice English both inside and outside of class. Furthermore, students should become aware of the syntactic similarities and differences, particularly in sentence structure, between English and Arabic (Bokamba, 1989).

While recent studies share the same focus on examining syntax and morphology errors made by EFL learners, the present study differentiates itself by specifically examining morphosyntactic errors in verb tense, article usage, subject-verb agreement, and word order. This study is conducted with level one Saudi EFL learners enrolled in the English department at Prince Sattam University, providing a unique context compared to previous research. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the nature of the morphosyntactic errors made by Saudi university students and explore the reasons behind these errors, considering factors such as native language influence, lack of exposure to English, and insufficient language instruction to recommend pedagogical strategies to enhance morphosyntactic accuracy among Saudi EFL students. For that sake, the central questions of this paper are:

- 1- What are the characteristics of the errors made by Saudi university students when speaking English?
- 2- How frequent do these errors exist in university students' speech?
- 3- How does the influence of the students' L1 manifest itself in terms of morphosyntax?

III. METHODOLOGY

To accomplish the aforementioned objectives, a systematic examination of written extracts was employed to gather qualitative data for morphosyntactic error analysis. The study was descriptive in nature and was carried out in the 2022–2023 school year. A written exam was used to collect data for this study, with an emphasis on word order, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and article use. All the students wrote about the same topic inside the classroom. They were given enough time to finish the test. Consent was obtained prior to the test, ensuring the participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntariness.

Using convenience sampling, the study sample consisted of 30 first-year college students out of 78 male students enrolled in the English department of the College of Education at Prince Sattam University. The participants in this study aged from 19 to 20 years. They have been studying English as a foreign language for a substantial period of seven years, providing them with a solid foundation in the language.

After data collection, the students' assignments were evaluated signaling out all the morphosyntactic errors. After that, the errors were coded and categorized. The categories were defined in terms of literature focusing on morphosyntactic error analysis. The frequency of each category was calculated using Microsoft Excel. According to the main categories, the data were coded and classified into several subcategories. At the end, the students' errors were re-examined to find out the reasons behind these errors.

As for the validation process, two specialists in the field were consulted for content validity to ensure the suitability of the instruments to the research objectives. Changes were made based on their recommendations. As for interrater reliability, it is calculated to be mostly 95% similar.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the present study are expected to improve the understanding of morphosyntactic challenges faced by Saudi EFL students. This will provide valuable insights for language teachers, curriculum designers, and language program administrators by highlighting the specific errors and patterns that occur most frequently. Moreover, understanding the root causes of these errors will assist in the development of effective teaching materials and strategies

tailored to the unique needs and challenges of Saudi EFL students. Upon examining the data, it is clear that first-year university students face difficulties in the area of morphosyntax. The analysis reveals that verb tense errors are the most prevalent, accounting for 58% of all errors. Following this, errors in article usage account for 20%, while word order contributes to 12% of the mistakes. Finally, subject-verb agreement errors have the lowest occurrence, making up only 10%, as shown in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY OF ERRORS

	Type of Errors	Frequency	Percentage of the errors
1	Verb Tense	700	58%
2	Articles	249	20%
3	Sentence structure (word order)	143	12%
4	Subject- verb agreement	122	10%
	Total	1214	100%

A. Tense

A significant number of errors were made by Saudi EFL students regarding tenses, with a total of 700 grammatical errors, representing 58% of all errors. These errors have been classified into subcategories based on the taxonomy proposed by Dulay et al. (1982). For further details, please refer to Table 2.

TABLE 2
CLASSIFICATION OF TENSE ERRORS

NO.	Classifications of tense errors	Frequency
1	Present simple	36
2	Past simple	55
3	Present continuous	34
4	Past continuous	58
5	Present perfect	53
6	Past perfect	72
7	Present perfect progressive	59
8	Past perfect progressive	59
9	Future simple see	58
10	Future progressive	70
11	Future perfect	78
12	Future perfect progressive	68
	Total	700

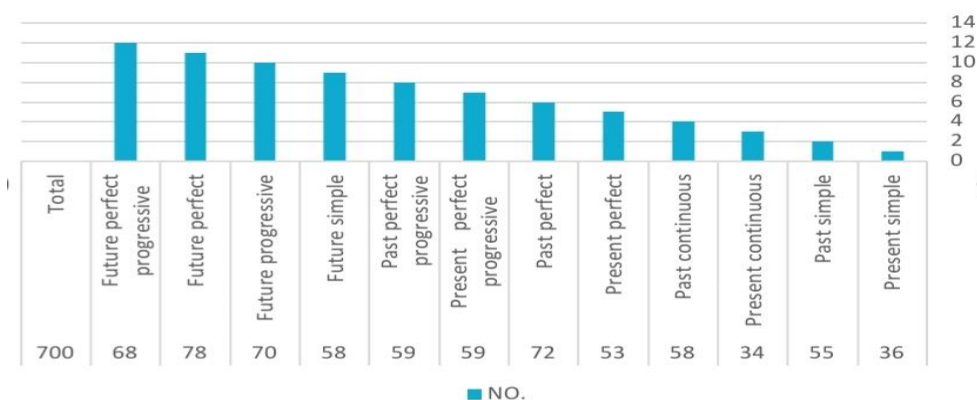


Figure 1. Tenses Errors

According to the data presented in Table 2, students face considerable challenges in using English tenses, resulting in numerous errors across various tense forms. The highest error frequencies occur in tenses such as future perfect, future progressive, past perfect, future perfect progressive, present perfect progressive, and past perfect progressive. The research suggests that these errors are primarily due to differences in the syntactic structures of English and the students' native language, particularly in verb tense usage. Tenses like the future perfect and future progressive, which are absent in the students' native language, pose significant difficulties. This syntactic disparity causes students to struggle with understanding and correctly applying these forms. As shown in Table 2, the findings underscore the need for targeted instruction that emphasizes the unique features of English tenses, especially those that differ from the learners' native language, to reduce errors and improve proficiency.

TABLE 3
SAMPLE OF TENSE ERRORS

Classification of Errors	Frequency	Identification of Errors	Correction of Errors
1-Past simple instead of Past perfect	29 after I <i>took</i> the medicine. after I <i>had taken</i> medicine.
2-Present simple instead of present continuous	31	It always <i>is snowing</i> here in January.	It always <i>snows</i> here in January.
3-Present simple instead of present perfect	31	I <i>don't see</i> him for a weak	I <i>have not seen</i> him for a weak.
4-Present simple instead of past tense	38	Ali <i>passes</i> the B.A degree examination in 1969.	Ali <i>passed</i> the B.A degree examination in 1969.
5-Present perfect progressive instead of past perfect	44	I <i>have just been putting</i> the washing out when it started to rain	I <i>had just put</i> the washing out when it started to rain
6-Present perfect progressive instead of past perfect progressive	50	How long <i>you have been driving</i> before you crashed?	How long <i>you had been driving</i> before you crashed
7-Future simple instead of future progressive	38	Next summer, his wife and his children are on holiday, he <i>will learn</i> English.	Next summer, his wife and his children are on holiday; he <i>will be learning</i> English.
8-Future simple instead of Future Perfect	50	I <i>will complete</i> the report by 5pm tomorrow.	I <i>will not have completed</i> the report by 5pm tomorrow.

According to the data in Table 3, it is evident that students struggle with effectively using tense. For example, they frequently used the past simple tense instead of the past perfect tense, as seen in the sentence, "after I took the medicine" instead of "after I had taken the medicine." This demonstrates their difficulty in distinguishing between these two tenses. Moreover, students often utilize the present simple tense instead of the present continuous tense. For instance, "Snowfall is a common occurrence during the month of January" was used instead of "Snowfall is occurring during the month of January." This error occurs frequently, as many students forget to include the auxiliary verb "to be" and fail to add "-ing" to the main verb, resulting in incorrect usage of the present simple tense. These mistakes are often influenced by the syntax of their mother tongue.

In addition, as seen in examples (7) and (8) in Table 3, students consistently used the future simple tense instead of the future continuous and future perfect tenses. For instance, "I will finish my homework by 7 PM" was used instead of "I will have finished my homework by 7 PM." This can be attributed to the structure of their mother tongue, which only includes the future simple tense, making it challenging for students to grasp the nuances of other future tenses in English.

Finally, in examples (5) and (6), the students incorrectly used the present perfect progressive instead of the past perfect or past perfect progressive tenses. For example, "She has been working here before she got married" was used instead of "She had been working here before she got married." This indicates their difficulty in mastering English syntax and applying the correct verb tense in context. These examples collectively highlight the students' struggle with understanding and accurately applying English verb tenses.

In summary, the research findings indicate that Saudi students encounter significant challenges in using "English tense" due to the syntactic differences between the Arabic and English languages. The data highlights frequent errors across various verb tenses, including the present progressive, past progressive, present perfect, past perfect, present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive, future progressive, future perfect, and future perfect progressive tenses. The prevalence of these errors, as illustrated in Table 3, suggests that the students' native language (Arabic) plays a significant role in shaping their acquisition of English verb tenses. Specifically, the errors can largely be attributed to interlingual factors—influences stemming from differences between the students' first language and English—rather than intralingual factors, which arise from within the target language itself. This finding aligns with studies conducted by Mohammed and Abdalhussein (2015) and Ababneh (2017), both of which identified language interference as the primary cause of errors. Similarly, Khatter (2019) identified two main sources of language errors: interlingual and intralingual factors, with interlingual interference being dominant in this context.

To address these issues, the study recommends that teachers provide students with more opportunities to practice verb tenses in meaningful contexts. Additionally, students should be guided to understand the similarities and differences between the syntactic structures of Arabic and English, particularly in relation to verb tenses. Such comparative awareness could help learners mitigate errors and improve their mastery of English verb tenses.

B. Articles

The study's findings reveal that students face challenges in using articles correctly, as illustrated in Table 4.

TABLE 4
SAMPLE OF ARTICLE ERRORS

Classification of Errors	Identification of errors	Correction of Errors
Article	I bought <i>the</i> pair of shoes. They are staying <i>at the</i> hotel. Juan <i>is the</i> Spanish. I live in <i>the</i> apartment. <i>A</i> apartment is new.	I bought <i>a</i> pair of shoes. They are staying <i>at a</i> hotel. Juan is ϕ Spanish. I live in <i>an</i> apartment. <i>The</i> apartment is new.

For instance, they often use the definite article instead of the indefinite article, as seen in examples (1) and (2), where phrases like **"I bought the pair of shoes"* were used instead of **"I bought a pair of shoes."* Additionally, they tend to

include unnecessary articles, such as in example (3): "Juan is the Spanish" instead of simply "Juan is Spanish." Another common error involves using "the" instead of "an," as in the sentence: "I live in the flat. The flat is brand new."

These errors can be attributed to the influence of the students' native language, Arabic. Arabic features a single definite article, *(Al)*, which corresponds to the English definite article *(the)*. Unlike English, Arabic does not distinguish between definite and indefinite articles in the same way. In English, the definite article *(the)* is used to refer to something specific, whereas the indefinite articles *(a, an)* are used to refer to a nonspecific or generic item within a class. This disparity in article usage between the two languages is the primary reason for the students' mistakes. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research by Barzanji (2016) and Crompton (2011), both of which identified interlingual interference as the main factor contributing to errors in article usage. This underscores the importance of addressing the specific linguistic challenges posed by the differences between Arabic and English to improve students' mastery of article use.

C. Word Order

Based on the results of this study, students encounter difficulties in using proper word order, with approximately 12% of students struggling in this area. Table 5 illustrates this issue:

TABLE 5
SAMPLE OF WORD ORDER ERRORS

Classification of Errors	Identification of errors	Correction of errors
Word order	1-I have heard some <i>information interesting</i> about our competitors. 2-There are many <i>ways useful</i> to improve your English.	I have heard some <i>interesting information</i> about our competitors. There are <i>many useful</i> ways to improve your English.

The data highlights specific examples, such as the phrase "I have heard some interesting information" being used instead of "interesting information about our competitors." These errors demonstrate challenges in arranging words correctly, particularly with the placement of adjectives and nouns. This issue is evident in examples (1) and (2), where students incorrectly use adjectives after nouns. This pattern reflects the influence of their native language, Arabic, in which the word order differs from English. In Arabic, adjectives typically follow nouns, whereas in English, adjectives precede nouns. As Hamed (2018) stated that this structural difference often leads to errors as students transfer the syntax of their native language into English. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing word order issues in language instruction, particularly for learners whose native languages differ significantly from English in syntactic structure.

D. Subject-Verb Agreement

According to the findings, errors related to subject-verb agreement represent the lowest percentage of mistakes, accounting for only 10%. However, the data reveals that students still face challenges in ensuring that verbs agree with their subjects in terms of person and number. For singular subjects, the verb should be in singular form, whereas for plural subjects, the verb should be in plural form.

TABLE 6
SAMPLE OF SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Classification of Errors	Identification of Errors	Correction of Errors
subject-verb agreement	1-Physics <i>seek</i> to understand the mysteries of the physical world. 2-Each of the boys in the class <i>have</i> his own notebook. 3-The professor and the student <i>agrees</i> on that point. 4-She <i>scratch</i> her chin when it itch 5-My brothers <i>wants</i> me to be a doctor.	Physics <i>seeks</i> to understand the mysteries of the physical world. Each of the boys in the class <i>has</i> his own notebook. The professor and the student <i>agree</i> on that point. She <i>scratches</i> her chin when it itches. My brothers <i>want</i> me to be a doctor.

The table highlights several instances of incorrect usage. For example, students wrote "Physics seek to understand" instead of the correct form, "Physics seeks to understand." This demonstrates their omission of the third-person singular marker (s). Similarly, in example (2), students used the plural form (have) instead of the singular form (has). On the other hand, in examples (3) and (5), students incorrectly added (s) to verbs used with plural subjects, further illustrating their difficulty with subject-verb agreement.

The findings of this study are consistent with Azzouz's (2013) and Saddam and Hasan (2024), which attributes such errors to interference from students' native language. This occurs when students rely on the syntactic rules of their first language while learning a new one. Additionally, some errors arise from the incomplete application of English grammar rules, demonstrating a lack of full understanding of subject-verb agreement within the language itself. These results underscore the need for targeted instruction to address both interlingual interference and intralingual misunderstandings, helping students develop a more accurate grasp of subject-verb agreement in English.

V. CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this research was to identify the most frequent morphosyntactic errors made by Saudi university students and their root causes. The findings reveal that first-year EFL learners from Saudi Arabia struggle significantly with morphosyntax. These errors were categorized into four main areas: verb tense, which represented the highest percentage at 58%, article usage at 20%, word order at 12%, and subject-verb agreement at 10%.

The study highlights that the differences between English and Arabic morphosyntactic structures are a major contributing factor to these errors. This suggests that most of the students' mistakes stem from interlingual sources— influences from their native language—rather than intralingual sources, which involve incomplete understanding of English grammar itself. Based on these results, it is recommended that teachers place a strong emphasis on clarifying the similarities and differences between Arabic and English morphosyntactic rules. This approach can help students understand and avoid common errors. Additionally, the study suggests that teachers develop targeted teaching materials that address these specific challenges. Providing students with more opportunities to practice syntax, particularly focusing on verb tense, is strongly advised to enhance their grammatical accuracy. By addressing these issues in teaching strategies, educators can better support students in overcoming morphosyntactic challenges and improving their English language proficiency. It is highly recommended for further study to focus on both genders to identify morphosyntactic errors by both male and female from educational background.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Finally, rather than concentrating just on level two students, it is advised that further study be done to examine writing errors made by foundation year students at more varied levels in the course. In order to better understand how students develop their writing skills and discover more about the potential reasons of these errors, it is recommended to compare the writing errors made by high school students and university students. These areas were troublesome for EFL Arab learners, as seen by the high frequency of mistakes made by the individuals in the challenges examined by this study. Consequently, further research in these fields is necessary to better understand the nature of these challenges and develop solutions for them. Lastly, in this study the number of participants is limited. Therefore, further research is possible on a larger number of students including both genders, i.e. male and female.

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