



## Analyzing Errors Made by Sudanese Secondary School Students in Writing Composition

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### ABSTRACT

Every EFL teacher expects that students' written composition is error-free and follows the inverted pyramid of writing. This paper aims to determine the grammar errors committed by selected secondary school students. Specifically, the study aims to answer: 1) what grammar errors are committed by the secondary school students in their written composition; and 2) what factors caused the students to commit these errors in writing as evident on their written composition. The respondents of this study consisted of secondary school students from all levels. Students' final written compositions were selected at random as input of the study using the Sloven's formula. Result showed that the common grammar errors committed by secondary school students are: subject- verb agreement, tenses of the verbs, sentence structure and word order, the use of articles and preposition, punctuation and capitalization, and spelling. Students' grammar errors as reflected in their written composition.

**Keywords:** error analysis, grammar errors, types of errors, and sources of errors.

### المستخلص

يتوقع كل معلم ان التعبير الكتابي الذي يكتبه الطلاب خالي من الاخطاء وفقاً للهرم الكتابي. تهدف هذه الورقة الى تحديد أخطاء نحوية ارتكبها طلاب مختارون من المدارس الثانوية وعلي وجه التحديد تمكنت الدراسة للاجابة علي الآتية:  
- ما هي الأخطاء النحوية التي يرتكبها طلاب المدرسة الثانوية عند كتابة التعبير.  
- ما هي العوامل التي تجعل الطلاب يرتكبون مثل هذه الاخطاء وهي ظاهرة في تعبيرهم المكتوب .  
وكان المجيبون علي هذه الاسئلة طلاب المدارس الثانوية من جميع المستويات.  
تم اختيار تعابير طلاب نهائية مكتوبة بصورة عشوائية كمدخلات للدراسة مستخدمين صيغة سولفن.  
و أوضحت نتائج الدراسة ان الأخطاء النحوية الشائعة التي يرتكبها ا لطلاب في المدارس الثانوية هي: الفعل والفاعل، و ازمنة الافعال، و تركيب الجملة، و ترتيب الكلمة، و استخدام الادوات وحروف الجر، علامات الترقيم والبدء بالحروف الكبيرة والهجائية.  
الكلمات الرئيسية: تحليل الأخطاء، الأخطاء النحوية، أنواع الأخطاء و مصادر الأخطاء.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult aspects in learning English as a foreign language is the grammar rules. English grammar is regarded as a system of syntax that decides the order and patterns in which words are arranged in sentences. Mastering grammar is a complex process that requires a series of decisions when and why to use one form rather than the other” (Celce-Murcia, 2002). In speaking or writing using English as a second language (L2) needs grammatical proficiency. Shanklin (1994) suggested that “grammatical proficiency is both an important pedagogical skill and an important part in learning the target. Basically, there are

two kinds of grammar. First is the descriptive grammar which refers to the structure of English used by speakers and writers. Second is the prescriptive grammar which deals with the syntax and word structures of a language, usually intended in learning the target language. The study of grammar all by itself won't necessarily make you a better writer. English grammar is considered as a separate part of the educational experience. Most English teachers try to integrate the teaching of grammar in the four elements of the General English language module. Memorization of grammar rules is necessary to master the language form and its functions.



People associate grammar with errors and correctness. Knowledge of grammar helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise. Grammar can be part of literature discussions, when we and our students closely read the sentences in poetry and stories. Knowing about grammar means finding out that all languages and all dialects follow grammatical patterns. Grammar has been a very delicate issue in English Language. While modern technology and social media have less formal forms of communication, employers still expect perfect grammar in professional settings. Glaring errors in sentence constructions are judged before the content of the work. To prepare the students for excellent communication, Secondary school students need to enhance their grammar skills and familiarize the rules associated in it.

The researchers came up with the study to give emphasis to the importance of grammar to prepare them before entering the university. Since students need to attain IELTS 6.0, it is a must that students need to develop and enhanced their communication skills with correct grammatical structures. Therefore, identifying the grammar difficulties and its sources of difficulties are a must. Parallel to this, looking at the grammar level proficiency of students in terms of their written composition is linked in identifying the students' performance prior to university studies.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

This study was conducted to determine the grammar errors committed by secondary school students. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What types of grammar errors are committed by the secondary school students in their written composition?

2. What are the sources of these errors as evident in their written composition?

### **1.2 Literature Review**

This study was based on the Universal Grammar theory of Noam Chomsky (1960). This theory says that the human brain contains a limited set of rules for organizing language. This implies in turn that all languages have a common structural basis; the set of rules is what is known as Universal Grammar. He argued that the ability to learn grammar is hard-wired into the brain. Evidently, development of language in the individual must involve three factors: (1) genetic endowment, which sets limits on the attainable languages, thereby making language

### **1.3 Common Grammar Errors of secondary school Students**

acquisition possible; (2) external data, converted to the experience that selects one or another language within a narrow range.

### **2. Methods**

Using a descriptive method of research, the respondents of this study consisted of the secondary school 20 students. They were selected at random using the Slovin's Formula. The students written 2 compositions during the final examination were chosen as basis in determining grammar errors. These grammar errors were classified and categorized accordingly as reflected in the students' composition. The identified types of errors were quantified using percent distribution and ranking. Analysis of data was done and identified what makes the students commit these errors.

### **3. Data Analysis and discussion of the Results**

This section deals with the findings and analysis of data gathered. The following are the results and findings:

**Table 1:** Number and Percent Distribution of Common Grammar Errors of secondary school Students

Grammar Error	TSS (N=30)		
	Number	Percent	Rank
Subject Verb Agreement	29	96.6	1
Tenses of the Verbs	27	90.0	2
Sentence Structures and Word Order	25	93.3	4
The use of Articles and Preposition	20	66.6	6
Punctuation and Capitalization	23	76.6	5
Spelling	26	86.6	3

Table 1 reveals that Technical School Students (TSS) top most grammar error is in subject-verb agreement. It is obvious that this item has the highest percentage of error with 96.6 percent. The rest of the errors are the sentence structures and word order with 93.3

percent, tenses of the verbs 90.0 percent, spelling 86.6 percent, punctuation and capitalization 76.6 percent, and the use of articles and preposition with 66.6 percent.

**Table 2:** Number and Percent Distribution of Common Grammar Errors of secondary school Students

Grammar Error	Pre test		
	Number	Percent	Rank
Subject Verb Agreement	35	92.1	1
Tenses of the Verbs	32	84.2	2
Sentence Structures and Word Order	26	74.2	4.5
The Use of Articles and Preposition	26	74.2	4.5
Punctuation and Capitalization	25	65.7	5

Table 2 shows the grammar errors committed by 1<sup>st</sup> period students. It can be gleaned from the Table that 1<sup>st</sup> period students' top most grammar error is also the subject verb agreement with 92.1 percent and the least is the use of

punctuation and capitalization with 65.7 percent. The rest of the errors like: tenses of the verbs (84.2 percent), spelling (73.6 percent), sentence structures (74.2 percent), and the use of articles and prepositions (65.7) percent.

**Table 3:** Number and Percent Distribution of Common Grammar Errors of secondary school Students

Grammar Error	Post Test (N=33)		
	Number	Percent	Rank
Subject Verb Agreement	27	81.8	1
Tenses of the Verbs	23	69.7	3.5
Sentence Structures and Word Order	21	63.6	4
The Use of Articles and Preposition	20	60.6	5
Punctuation and Capitalization	23	69.7	3.5
Spelling	25	75.7	2

Table 3 displays the common grammar errors committed by 2<sup>nd</sup> period students. It can also be noted that subject-verb agreement is also the number 1 error committed by students with 81.8 percent. Spelling error ranked 2 (75.7 percent) while

the use of tenses of the verbs and proper use of punctuation and capitalization ranked 3 with 69.7 percent. However, sentence structures and word order and the use of articles and preposition ranked 4 and 5 respectively.

**Table 4:** Number and Percent Distribution of Common Grammar Errors of secondary school Students

Grammar Error	CSS (N=20)		
	Number	Percent	Rank
Subject Verb Agreement	15	75.0	2
Tenses of the Verbs	12	60.0	3
Sentence Structures and Word Order	9	45.0	6
The Use of Articles and Preposition	14	80.0	1
Punctuation and Capitalization	11	55.0	4
Spelling	10	50.0	5

Table 4 presents the number and percent distribution of grammar errors committed by Commerce Secondary School students. It can be seen that the use of articles and preposition is the top most error of CSS students with 80.0 percent and the least error committed is the

proper use of spelling. The rest of the errors like subject verb agreement, tenses of the verbs, punctuation and capitalization are also viewed with the rank indicated on the Table.

**Table 5:** Summary of Common Grammar Errors of secondary school Students by Rank

Level	Grammar Errors/Rank					
	Subject Verb Agreement	Tenses of the Verb	Sentence Structures and Word Order	The Use of Articles and Preposition	Punctuation and Capitalization	Spelling
TSS	1	2	4	6	5	3
1 <sup>st</sup> per	1	1	4	4	5	3
2 <sup>nd</sup> per	1	3	4	5	3	2
CSS	2	3	6	1	4	5

Table 5 represents the overall summary of grammar errors committed by secondary school students as reflected in their written composition. It can be noted that for TSS, 1<sup>st</sup> period, and 2<sup>nd</sup> period, subject-verb

agreement is ranked 1 as the most common type of grammar errors of students in the study group. It is evident that this item had the highest percentage of errors.



In the students' essay, it can be noted that the plural subject does not agree with the singular verb. Examples of students' write up:

- If you wants to spend a better place, come to Sudan. (singular subject does not agree with plural verb)
- It encourage people to come to Sudan.

Moreover, for CSS, subject-verb agreement only ranked 2 as common grammatical error. It goes to show that students of CSS already have some knowledge of grammar rules when it comes to subject-verb agreement.

For the tenses of the verb, 1<sup>st</sup> period has the highest number of error as this error is ranked 1 for this study group. TSS got the next group with highest number on this item (ranked 2) followed by 2<sup>nd</sup> period and CSS with the same rank (rank 3). For the sentence structures, TSS, 1<sup>st</sup> period and 2 got the same rank of error. This type of error is only ranked 4 for the study group. For CSS, this error is the least in rank (ranked 6). The use of articles and preposition are another errors committed by the study group. It reflects in the Table that, CSS got the highest number of error in these items as these errors ranked 1 for this study group. 2<sup>nd</sup> period, 1 and TSS, these errors ranked 4, 5, and 6 respectively. Proper use of punctuation and capitalization show that TSS and 1<sup>st</sup> period students got the least number of errors as these items ranked 5.

However, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> period, these items is ranked 4 and 5 for the CSS. Proper use of spelling reflects that both TSS and 1<sup>st</sup> period students commit errors on this item with rank 3. Moreover, students showed highest number of errors as this item is ranked 2 for the study group. CSS, however, got the least number of errors as this items is ranked 5.

### **3.2 Factors of Errors**

Students' grammar errors as reflected in their written composition are caused by two factors: direct factors and indirect factors. Direct factors are due to interlingual and intralingual transfers. Interlingual factors are evident in the use of subject-verb agreement, tenses of the verbs, word orders, the use of articles and prepositions and the sentence structures. This is due to the learner's exposure to his native language (L1) Arabic. This interference occurs when a structure of language in the second language acquisition manifests some degree of difference and similarity with the equivalent item or structure in the student's first language" (Jackson, 1981).

High percentage of errors in this study occurred within the category of subject-verb agreement which can be gleaned as rank 1 error for the three study groups. This finding may explain that the use of English verbs was a major learning difficulty for all Arab students. The use of verb tense shows that the Sudanese Secondary students still find difficulty when and how to use the tense and the form of the verb. The tenses most commonly misused were the simple past tense, future tense, past perfect and present simple as reflected in their written composition. It can be justified by the incomprehensibility of the correct form and use and usage of the verb.

'Word Order Interference' occurs because of the differences in the composition of words, particularly noun phrases and adjectival phrases, between the foreign language and the native language. In the native language the modifier should be placed after the modified word, but, in the foreign language, the modifier word should be put before.



#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Common Grammar Errors

It can be noted that, 1<sup>st</sup> period 1, and 2<sup>nd</sup> period, subject-verb agreement is the most common type of grammar errors. It is evident that this item had the highest percentage of errors. In the students' essay, it can be noted that the plural subject does not agree with the singular verb.

Moreover, for CSS, subject-verb agreement only ranked 2 as common grammatical error. For the tenses of the verb, 1<sup>st</sup> period has the highest number of error. TSS, however, got the next highest number of errors followed by 2<sup>nd</sup> and CSS with the same rank. For the sentence structures, TSS, 1<sup>st</sup> period and 2 got the same rank of error on this item. For CSS, this error is the least in rank. The use of articles and preposition are another errors committed by the study group.

It reflects that, CSS got the highest number of error in these items. 2<sup>nd</sup> period, 1 and TSS, these errors ranked 4, 5, and 6 respectively. Proper use of punctuation and capitalization show that TSS and 1<sup>st</sup> period students got the least number of errors as these items ranked 5. However, for the 2<sup>nd</sup> period, these items is ranked 4 and 5 for the CSS. Proper use of spelling reflects that both TSS and 1<sup>st</sup> period students commit errors on this item. Moreover, students showed highest number of errors in this item. CSS, however, got the least number of errors as this items.

##### 4.2 Factors of Errors

Word order interference is the second highest error occurrence in the students' composition. The first example stated in Table 5 shows that the student uses his mother tongue in producing the sentence

since in Arabic the adjective follows the noun while in English the adjective precedes the noun. Thus, error in word order occurred. In the second example, the student's overgeneralization in forming the right question in English has made him to commit such an error due to the incomprehensibility of the question word order.

Many experts said that interlingual errors are those which are related to the native language (NL). They said that interlingual errors when the learners' NL habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent them, to some degree, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (SL) (Corder, 1971). Interference (negative transssfer) is the negative influence of the mother tongue language (MTL) on the performance of the target language (TL) learner (Lado, 1964).

Intralingual errors are those due to the language being learned, independent of the native language. According to Richards (1971) these are items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. The learner, in this case, tries to "derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language".

In other words, they produce deviant or ill-formed sentences by erroneously applying their knowledge of TL rules and structures to new situations. Richard says that intralingual interference is due to overgeneralization which is associated with redundancy or reduction of words. Students tend to create a deviant structure that makes



their sentences grammatically incorrect. Ignorance of rules and structures of English is another factor for intralingual errors.

Most of the students apply rules to context to which they don't apply. Meanwhile, indirect factors are due to the students' low motivation in learning the L2. Learners have low motivation in learning because their parents give them little support. They have low motivation to study because they themselves have no interest to learn. It appears that some parents do not give their children enough support to study at home. They do not have the habit of giving a reward, for example, if their children are successful in their English achievement.

No parents give their children extracurricular lessons of English such as in the form of private lessons. Another factor maybe a teacher factor. It seems that a teacher is not creative enough in conducting the writing classes. He does not utilize enough media in his teaching-learning interactions. On the other hand, he is still stuck to the textbook when he carries out the teaching learning process. It is no wonder that the English instruction runs monotonously and boringly. In most cases, when students are given a writing task, they get difficulties to do it. In the same way, the teacher's frequency in teaching writing is low. There is no lesson plan for the writing skill among eight kinds of lesson plans. In addition, the teacher's supervisor admits that the instruction process of writing has very low frequency.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

In light of the findings, the researchers concluded that the common grammar errors committed by secondary school students: subject-verb agreement, tenses of the verbs, sentence structure and word order, the use of

articles and preposition, punctuation and capitalization, and spelling. Subject-verb agreement is the highest number of error committed by secondary school students and the least number of error is the use of punctuation and capitalization. Students' grammar errors as reflected in their written composition are caused by two factors: direct factors and indirect factors. Direct factors are due to interlingual and intralingual transfers. Interlingual factors are evident in the student's use of subject-verb agreement, tenses of the verbs, word orders, the use of articles and prepositions and the sentence structures due to the student's exposure in native language (L1) Arabic. Intralingual errors are due to the language being learned, independent of the native language. Therefore, it is recommended that English Grammar should be taught separately as a separate module to familiarize the grammar rules. Review of English grammar should also be taught equally on all the four macro elements of General English language module. Teacher teaching the General English Language should also be a competent user of L2. Teachers should encourage students to write a composition with accuracy, apart from proficiency. Learners should be encouraged to think in the target language rather than in their native language when writing. Students should be encouraged to read more in order to familiarize themselves with the correct usage of standard English. Students should be encouraged to use L2 as often as possible.

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