

## **Mechanical Errors in Students' English Writing due to Mother Tongue Influence**

A Case Study at Technical College of Al-Hait in Saudi Arabia

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### **Abstract**

Unsurprisingly, the Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) has its roots in close collaboration with the complex process of learning the 'other tongue', and so is the case with the present case study as well, which underlines the effect of the Arabic-speaking students on their learning of English as a foreign language. This paper focuses on the most recurrent mechanical errors in EFL learners' English writings that range from lexical effect, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and required space between words to mention a few, along with other grammatical errors. The paper attempts to explore the factors responsible for these repeated and recurrent errors and addresses a practical solution to rectify them in order to make EFL learning at par with English as a native language. The data samples were elicited from the final-term examination answer scripts of 30 EFL students who opted for English as a compulsory subject in the English centre at the Technical College of Al-Hait, Saudi Arabia, where I have been associated as an English Instructor. The result of the present study discovered that a single overarching cause for such a myriad range of errors is unanimously an interference or rather the negative transfer of their mother tongue in their English writings. In this regard, the basic and yet the most effective teaching philosophy of underlining the errors, analyzing the cause, and the drill exercises to overcome those errors are effective.

**Keywords:** Mother tongue influence, mechanical errors, writing skills, technical college, Saudi EFL students

## 1. Introduction

Generally, the term mother tongue refers to the language learnt in a familial setting at home, it is also referred to as the speaker's native or home language. Since it is the speaker's first language, it influences the acquisition of other languages. Mother tongue interference is a linguistic term used to describe how the learner's first language affects the target language acquisition process. The target language is the language that the learner wants to learn after his/her mother tongue. It is claimed that several major problems generally occur when English is taught and learned as a second language or a foreign language. One of the major problems is the influence of the learners' mother tongue on the acquired language. Nunan (2001) points out that if the first and second or target languages do not share the same rules, errors are likely to occur. Corder (1971) suggests that inter-lingual errors occur when a learner's first language habits patterns, and rules hinder him/ her from picking up the patterns and rules of the second language (L2). It is likely to lead to a high frequency of errors, if two languages are quite dissimilar in their rules and patterns (Ellis,1995; Richard & Schmidt, 2002).

There are two view points regarding the role of L1 in second language learning. One school of thought claims that the mother tongue is a crucial factor in the learning of a second language. The ESL/EFL learner's competency in his/her mother tongue helps him/her to acquire a second language efficiently (Lado, 1957; Deller & Rinvolcri, 2002; Galali & Cinkara, 2017). In contrast, another school of thought believes that the learner's proficiency in his mother tongue interferes with language acquisition(Seligson, 1997; Latsanyphone & Bouangeune, 2009).

English is taught as a foreign language in schools, colleges, and universities in Saudi Arabia. Several previous studies (Selinker, 1972; Al-khresheh, 2010; Murad & Khalil, 2015) explicitly reveal that Arab EFL learners commit several grammatical, syntactical, and mechanical errors in English writing due to their mother tongue influence. Although Arabic and English share some standard features to some extent, there are far more differences between these two languages. Arabic and English have different vocabulary, word order patterns and writing styles. Hence, these linguistic distinctions between these two languages frequently cause several challenges for learners in the acquisition of English.

## 2. Literature Review

Most of the earlier studies on the negative influence of the mother tongue (MT) on L2 agree that the mother tongue certainly hinders learning a target language. Karim and Nassaji (2013) suggests that the first language is transferred into L2 writing. The negative transfer of linguistic components (verb, tense, articles, preposition, etc.) from L1 to L2 causes the learners to make several grammatical errors and create inappropriate sentences in L2 as the L2 linguistic features are different from L1. However, the positive transfer assists the learners to learn a language smoothly and is usually unnoticed because it is unproblematic, and it does not create any challenge for the learners. According to Scott and Tucker (1974),

Around 14 types of English errors were identified in the Arabic-speaking learners' speech and writing, such as verbs, prepositions, articles, relative clauses, sentential complements, repetition of subject or object, nouns, pronouns, surrogate subjects, word order, quantifiers, adverbs, adjectives, and genitive constructions. (p. 7)

Besides, their research showed that verbs, prepositions, and articles are the main areas for inaccuracy. These errors occurred due to the mother tongue influence and lack of effective performance. Ridha (2012) examined the English essay writing errors made by EFL students in Iraq and found that L1 transfer or mother tongue influence is the primary reason for errors in their English writing. The vast majority of students rely on their L1 when they speak and write in their L2. Further, the results showed that grammatical errors were most predominant among the types of errors detected in the composition of the learners' essays. Similarly, according to Abisamra's (2003) research, the majority of syntactic errors made by EFL learners in their writing in Arabic are caused by interference with their native language. The negative transfer from L1 to L2 is the result of dissimilar linguistic features between the source language and the target language. Likewise, Al-Khresheh (2010) discovers that in relatively simple English phrases, Jordanian EFL students frequently commit syntactic interlingual errors in word order. These mistakes are caused by the transfer of L1 habits into L2 writing.

Bhela (1999) discovered that whenever learners encounter gaps in their L2 syntactic structures for writing in L2, they turn to the syntactical elements of their native tongue. This is how the first language gets transferred into

the target language. Murad and Khalil (2015) demonstrated that EFL Arab learners commit several linguistic errors in their English writing because they are highly affected by a negative transfer of their mother tongue Saudi students' poor English writing is primarily the result of their inadequate schooling and poor understanding of grammar rules (Ansari, 2012; Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2013). Besides, it was found that spelling errors are one of the major challenges among Arab EFL students. Benyo (2014) asserts that errors in spelling are the root of all the sound issues in writing.

As mentioned above, several previous studies conducted on the influence of mother tongue (MTI) on English as a target language claimed that EFL Arab learners make several grammatical errors (Murad & Khalil, 2015; Karim & Nassaji, 2013; Ridha, 2012) and syntactical errors (Bhela, 1999; Abisamra, 2003; Al-Khresheh, 2010). However, the previous studies failed to study errors in the mechanics of writing in English which is considered one of the most important components of writing skills. Thus, this study attempts to bridge this gap.

### **3. Major Objectives**

The following are the primary goals of the current paper.

1. To investigate the most frequent errors in the mechanics of writing made by the students at the Technical College of Al-Hait
2. To identify the factors that are responsible for these errors.

### **4. Methodology**

The methodological process for the present work is derived from previous studies (Corder, 1974; Brown, 1994; Ellis, 1995). The process of data collection entailed identifying errors, classifying errors, analyzing and explaining errors.

#### **4.1. Participants**

Thirty male students of the Technical College of Al-Hait in the region of Hail in Saudi Arabia voluntarily participated in the present study. I have been an English Trainer in the college. It is one of the branches of the Hail College of Technology. Before joining the college, the students already had exposure to English as a foreign language for more than 6 years at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Their age bracket

ranges from 20 to 26 years (average age being 23 years). There were no disorders or neuropsychological symptoms among the participants.

**4.2. Data Collection**

During the data collection, the final-term exam answer scripts of the 30 participants were selected to examine the mechanical errors in their English writing.

**4.3. Data Sample**

One of the questions in the final exam was to write an essay on 'Myself' in English within 60-80 words (approximately 10 sentences). Three hundred (30 students x 10 sentences in an essay) data samples were collected during the data elicitation procedure. For the study, around 300 sentences were examined and analyzed in order to explore the mechanical errors.

**4.4. Data Analysis**

The answer scripts were examined to identify the linguistic errors in writing skills in English. Several errors were detected, including spelling, tenses, articles, prepositions, word order, verb forms, plurality, punctuations, capitalization, and syntactic errors. However, the present study mainly focuses on mechanical errors (punctuation, capitalization, and spelling).

**5. Result and Discussion**

The main objective of the present work was to investigate the most common mechanical errors committed by technical students in their English writing. Also, it aimed to identify the factors responsible for the errors. Table 1 below presents the total occurrence of subtype errors along with their frequency and percentages.

**Table 1:** *Frequency and Percentage of the Mechanical Errors in English Writing Committed by the Learners Due to Their Mother Tongue Influence (MTI)*

<b>Errors</b>	<b>Sub-types</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Punctuation	Spacing between words	96	19%
	Full stop usage	50	10%
	Comma usage	33	7%
	Question mark usage	25	5%
Capitalization	Proper noun writing	50	10%
	First letter of a new sentence	80	16%

	Capitalization of a common noun	20	4%
Spelling	Substitution of a letter in a word	86	17%
	Omission of a letter in a word	60	12%

**Figure 1:** Pie Chart of the Mechanical Errors in English Writings in Percentage

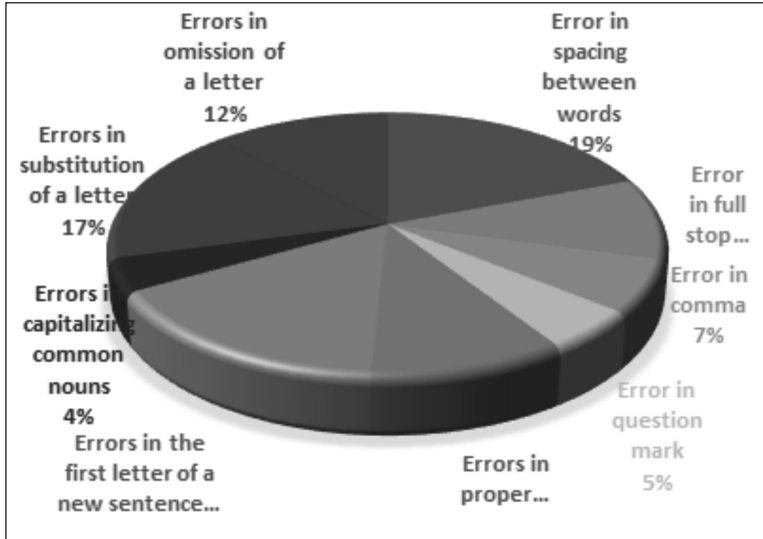


Figure 1 represents the recurrent mechanical errors in percentage made by the students in their English writing. In punctuation errors, the chart displays that the error of spacing between words in the sentence shows the highest number with a percentage of 19 per cent (96), followed by the errors of full stop usage with 10 per cent (50), followed by the errors of a comma usage with 7 per cent (33), followed by the errors of question mark usage with 5 per cent (25). Further, in capitalization errors, the errors in capitalizing the first letter of a new sentence present the highest value with a percentage of 16 per cent (80), followed by the errors of capitalizing the first letter of a proper noun with 10 per cent (50), followed by the errors in capitalizing a common noun with 4 per cent (20) in the text. Furthermore, in spelling errors, the result shows that the errors of substitution of a letter in the word manifest the largest value with 17 per cent (86), followed by the errors of omission of a letter with 12 per cent (60). Thus, punctuation shows the highest number of errors with 41 per cent among all errors. The capitalization and spelling show 30 per cent and 29 per cent of errors, respectively in the text.

## 6. Explanation of the Errors

### 6.1. Spacing Between Words

The present finding revealed that most of the EFL students were unable to provide a gap or space between words in the sentence in English writing, as shown in the examples below. It is one of the major writing errors in English. Due to this error, it is extremely arduous to read the text and decode the semantic meanings unambiguously. English is orthographically written from left to right in an alphabetic writing style, and it is obligatory to leave the required space between words in the sentences. Having a sufficient gap between words facilitates a comprehensive and unambiguous reading of the text. According to Morris, Rayner and Pollatsek (1990), when space is eliminated, reading speed typically decreases by up to 50 per cent. However, Arabic is written from right to left in alphabetic script systems in a cursive style and a gap between words is not necessarily obligatory. Thus, the students are habituated to their native language writing script which results in the error of lack of spacing between words in when they write in English.

#### Example

*mynameisomar.	(My name is Omar.)
*a penis inmy bag.	(A pen is in my bag.)
*Imstudnt.	(I am a student.)
*ihavtw brothars.	(I have two brothers.)
*Igotocolleg.	(I go to college.)

### 6.2. Capitalization

The primary observation exhibited that most of the students did not write the first letter of a new sentence with a capital letter. Further, it was noticed that the first letter of proper nouns was not capitalized, but a common noun was capitalized surprisingly. In English, the capitalization rule is considered as one of the most significant mechanical components of writing skills. However, in Arabic grammar, there is no concept of capital and small letters. Therefore, although the students were aware of the capitalization rules in English, they were unable to apply the capitalization rules correctly in writing because they were highly affected by their first language writing habits. Consequently, they produce an error of capitalization rule in English writing.

**Example**

*oneday iwill go toindia.	(One day, I will go to India.)
*hemet me insunday.	(He met me on Sunday.)
*mybrothar name muhammed	(My brother's name is Muhammad.)
*ihavtw Cars.	(I have two cars.)

**6.3. Punctuation**

Punctuation is one of the most essential mechanical elements of writing skills both in English and Arabic. However, Arabic slightly differs from English. For instance, the Arabic comma (،) and question (؟) marks are typically written just as opposite to the English comma (,) and question (?) signs. Unlike in English, a comma is not used to separate the parts of the single items in Arabic. Instead, a conjunction (و/ *wə* / 'and') is used. For example, "I have a book, a pen, and a pencil." ("لدي كتاب وقلم و رصاص / *lədəee kitab wə qələm wə qələm-rəsas/*). Consequently, a comma is not placed at the right location accurately in the text.

Further, it is observed that the learners did not place a question mark and a full stop correctly at the appropriate positions in the sentences. It suggests that EFL students are highly influenced by their mother tongue writing systems and have poor understanding and practice of punctuation rules in English. Hence, they construct an error of punctuation marks in their English writing.

**Example**

*lastyer iwias inmadina withfamily.	(Last year, I was in Medina with family.)
*ihav fathar andmothar andbrothar.	(I have a father, a mother and a brother.)
*idont lik spicyfood ilik fastfood.	(I don't like spicy food. I like fast food.)
*aryou techar.	(Are you a teacher?)

**6.4. Spelling**

Spelling refers to both the ability to spell words correctly and the correct arrangement of the letters in a word skilfully. It is an integral part of English writing skills. Spelling is directly related to communication skills (Stirling, 2011). Spelling is one of the fundamental skills both in English and in Arabic. However, English differs from Arabic in its phonetic and orthographic representations.



### Example

*ihav fathar andmothar andbrothar.	(I have a father, a mother, and a brother.)
*he iz myfrend.	(He is my friend.)
*myfathar com colleg.	(My father comes to college.)
*idontlikspicyfoodilikefastfood	(I do not like spicy food. I like fast food.)
*ihav twbens.	(I have two pens.)

In Arabic, there is often one-to-one correspondence between a letter and a sound. Arabic words are spoken and written in the same way. However, English is not phonetic in its nature. So there is no one-to-one correspondence between a letter and a sound. English words are usually spoken and written differently. Thus there is a huge difference between English phonology and Arabic phonology. The data demonstrate clearly that mother tongue influence is one of the major grounds for spelling errors in Saudi EFL students. Generally, they listen to a word and try to spell and write it in English as they hear it. Further, in Arabic sound patterns, many sounds do not exist as they do in English. For instance, a bilabial voiceless sound /p/ does not exist in Arabic. Therefore, it is often replaced by a bilabial voiced sound /b/ as in[ben] instead of [pen] in both spoken and written English. In addition, in words like 'brothar/mothar/fathar', the letter 'e' is substituted with the letter 'a' and pronounced as /ə/in English. Therefore, the letter 'e' is replaced by the learners with the letter 'a'. Furthermore, in the words 'com/hav/lik/colleg and/tw/', the last letters /e/& /o/are omitted, respectively because while pronouncing the words, the last letters are not produced. For instance, in the words, 'come' /kʌm/, and 'have' /hæv/, the last letter 'e' is not pronounced. Conversely, in Arabic, all written letters in a word are generally pronounced while writing. Therefore, the learners follow the Arabic pronunciation pattern instead of the English spelling pattern which causes spelling errors in English.. Additionally, data reveal that the vowel letters are comparatively omitted and substituted more in the word than the consonants. Thus, this result supports Cook's (1999) findings of a leading percentage of vowel substitution that occurs in Arab students' spelling errors.

### 7. Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of the current work was to study the mechanical errors in the learners' English writing at the Technical College of Al-Hait. Also, it made an attempt to identify the factors that caused the errors. The

findings of the present case study indicate that EFL learners were highly affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue. Due to the mother tongue influence (MTI), many mechanical errors were produced by the students in their English writing. Additionally, it was observed that the errors of spacing between words in the sentence in English writing was one of the major problems of the students. Furthermore, it was found that punctuation marks had the highest number of errors with a percentage of 41 per cent, followed by errors of capitalization at 30 per cent, followed by errors of spelling at 29 per cent. For the present work, only two types of errors were identified; errors of substitution and omission. The results of the present investigation support the findings of many previous studies (Abi Samra, 2003; Mohammad, 2015; Murad & Khalil, 2015; Sabbah, 2015). The study indicates the factors that are responsible for the mechanical errors in English-Firstly and expectedly, the most pivotal factor is the influence of the mother tongue on English. Secondly, poor quality of English education at schools also can be identified as a factor. This is because the mechanical elements (spelling, capitalization, punctuation) are the primary concepts of writing skills of a language and these are to be taught and learnt at the school level. Despite having around more than 6 years of learning English at school, the learners were unable to apply the capitalization, punctuation, and spelling rules in English writing. The points made here in the present study are in agreement with Huwari and Al-Khasawneh (2013) and Ansari (2012).

The present study sheds light on the influence of the mother tongue on the students' writing skills in English at the Technical College of Al-Hait. It is recommended that the mother tongue influence can be minimized by repetitive and drilling techniques for reinforcement. Further, the teacher can make the learners practise writing frequently. Writing practice sessions should be informative, interactive, and interesting. Mechanical errors should be the focus of such writing practice. Furthermore, several online websites and readily accessible mobile apps can be used by the learners to improve their writing skills like *Grammarly*, *Grammar Checkers*, *Grammar Girl*, etc. Finally, the present study can be helpful for the teachers and stakeholders to design an English syllabus based on integrated skills, and an effective curriculum for English as a foreign language at educational institutions like English Training School, Vocational Training Centre and Technical College.

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