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Analytical Study of Errors in English Language Committed by Arab Students in Tenses, Articles and Prepositions

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Abstract

The study aimed to analyze common grammatical errors among Arab students while learning English, focusing on articles, tenses, and prepositions. It was conducted on first-year students in the English Language Requirements Department at Sana'a University during the 2013-2014 academic year. The results showed weaknesses in students' use of these rules despite completing two courses, reflecting the impact of traditional teaching methods and difficulties in understanding basic grammar rules. The study used a test to analyze performance through indicators such as "Facility Value" and "Discrimination Index." Errors were prominent in articles with words starting with semi-vowel letters, and in tenses, such as using "present perfect" instead of "simple past." Errors were also observed in prepositions like "since" and "for." Statistics showed a decrease in average performance from 49.59 to 46.17 between the two semesters. The study recommends curriculum development, enhanced practical training, and the introduction of interactive methods to improve students' understanding and use of grammar in different contexts, ensuring higher levels of language proficiency

Keywords: Errors, Analysis, Requirement Courses, Tenses, Articles, Prepositions

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دراسة تحليلية للأخطاء في اللغة الإنجليزية التي يرتكبها الطلاب العرب في الأزمنة، الأدوات وحروف الجر

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الملخص:

هدفت الدراسة إلى تحليل الأخطاء النحوية الشائعة لدى الطلاب العرب أثناء تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، مع التركيز على أدوات التعريف والنكرة، الأزمنة، وحروف الجر. أُجريت على طلاب المستوى الأول بقسم متطلبات اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة صنعاء في العام الدراسي 2013–2014. أظهرت النتائج ضعف الطلاب في هذه القواعد رغم دراستهم مقررين دراسيين، مما يعكس تأثير أساليب التدريس التقليدية وصعوبة فهم القواعد الأساسية. استخدمت الدراسة اختبارًا لتحليل الأداء عبر مؤشرات مثل "Facility Value" و"Discrimination Index". كانت الأخطاء بارزة في أدوات التعريف مع الكلمات ذات الحروف شبه الصوتية، وفي الأزمنة مثل استخدام "المضارع التام" بدلًا من "الماضي البسيط". كما لوحظت أخطاء في حروف الجر مثل "since" و"for". بينت الإحصاءات انخفاض متوسط الأداء من 49.59 إلى 46.17 بين الفصلين. توصي الدراسة بتطوير المناهج، وتعزيز التدريب العملي، وإدخال أساليب تفاعلية لتحسين استيعاب الطلاب واستخدام القواعد في سياقات مختلفة، لضمان تحقيق مستويات كفاءة لغوية أعلى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخطاء، التحليل، مواد متطلبه، الأزمنة، أدوات التعريف، حروف الجر.

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I. Introduction:

English is a foreign language for many Arab students, and they often make errors in the use of tenses, articles, and prepositions. These errors can be due to a number of factors, including differences between the Arabic and English grammar systems, the lack of sufficient exposure to English, and the difficulty of learning these grammatical features

Students in departments other than the department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, are required to do two courses in Functional English. The idea is that although they should have the ability to read, speak and understand English in day-to-day life, they should be able converse with foreigners with ease and confidence, and they should have ability listen to news produced in English. They should also have the ability to obtain from the internet, from books or from library whatever information they need.

It has been observed that even when they do two prescribed courses in English they do not have the ability to do all that they are expected to do in English. Teachers in the Departments are busy most of the time with their academic program and they think that the requirement courses are weak in their serious academic concern.

II. Literature Review:

A number of studies have investigated the errors made by Arab students in English grammar. Al Khotaba (2013) found that the most common errors made by Arab ESL speakers were in the use of prepositions and adverb particles. Abushihab et al. (2011) found that Arab learners of English as a foreign language at Alzaytoonah Private University of Jordan made a number of errors in the use of articles, prepositions, and verb tenses. Hafiz et al. (2018) found that Jazan University preparatory year students made a number of errors in the use of prepositions and verb tenses. Tahaineh (2010) found that Arab EFL university students made a number of errors in the use of prepositions, including the omission of prepositions, the use of the wrong preposition, and the misuse of prepositions.

Hameed (2016) found that the most common spelling errors committed by students of English in Saudi Arabia were the omission of silent letters, the addition of unnecessary letters, and the substitution of incorrect letters. Sukasame et al. (2014) found that Thai students made a number of errors in

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the use of tenses, including the omission of the past tense marker, the use of the wrong tense, and the misuse of the present perfect tense. Bin Abdullah (2013) found that TESL college students in Saudi Arabia made a number of errors in the use of the simple tenses, including the omission of the auxiliary verb "do" in the simple present tense and the use of the simple past tense instead of the present perfect tense. Khaisaeng and Dennis (2017) found that The students made a number of errors in the use of parts of speech, including the omission of articles, the misuse of prepositions, and the incorrect use of pronouns.

Alasfour (2018) investigated the grammatical errors made by Arabic ESL students at the ACTFL Advanced Mid proficiency level. The most common errors were in the use of relative clauses, the passive voice, and the definite article. Khatter (2019) analyzed the most common essay.

III. Method:

In this paper, we are going to analyze the data obtained from the two tests administered to the first and second semester students of the first level class reading Requirement Courses in English in different Departments in Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sana'a University in the academic year 2013-2014. Also, we are going to make comparative study of each of the results. A copy of the Test Paper is appended to this paper – vide Appendix. This paper was designed to test the students' knowledge regarding the use of three areas of English grammar. These three areas are Articles, Tenses and Prepositions. The same test paper was used to administer to test the knowledge of the first and second semester students as far as the use of Article, Tenses and prepositions are concerned. The data have been analyzed statically in tables and calculations.

The early form of the test was tried only on 30 students with the propose of findings whether any of the items in the test had a negative discrimination index.

IV. Result and Discussion:

Table (1) shows the percentage of requirement students who gave correct answers. The aim of giving the test to thirty students was to find out how good or bad, technically speaking; the testing items were from the point of view of their facility value and discrimination index.

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The facility value and the discrimination index for each item was calculated. The value obtained for the facility value and the discrimination index of the items.

(Table-1) Scores in relation to the testing items in a serial order

Item No.	No. of Correct Answer	F.V[a] $= \frac{n.c.a}{n} \times 100\%$	D.I[b] $= \frac{H.s-L.s}{R}$
1.	08	26.66%	-0.1
2.	29	96.66%	0.1
3.	11	33.33%	0.1
4.	17	56.66%	0.4
5.	26	86.66%	0.1
6.	21	70.00%	0.6
7.	19	63.33%	0.4
8.	20	66.66%	0.6
9.	20	66.66%	0.2
10.	02	06.66%	0.1
11. A	28	93.33%	0.1
11. B	23	76.66%	0.2
12.	17	56.66%	0.3
13.	22	73.33%	-0.3
14.	21	70.00%	-0.3
Part B			
1.	21	70.00%	0.3
2.	15	50.00%	0.4
3.	05	16.66%	0.1
4.	20	66.66%	0.2
5.	18	60.00%	0.3
6.	13	43.33%	0.4
7.	14	46.66%	0.1
8.	10	33.33%	0.3
9.	06	20.00%	0.2

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10.	14	40.00%	-0.3
11.	21	46.66%	Zero
12.	24	80.00%	Zero
13.	14	46.66%	0.4
14.	21	70.00%	-0.1
15.	10	33.33%	0.3
16.	05	16.66%	0.2
17.	28	93.33%	Zero
18.	03	10.00%	-0.2
19.	06	20.00%	-0.2
20.	14	46.66%	0.1
21.	04	13.33%	-0.1
22.	10	33.33%	-0.2
23.	09	30.00%	0.2
24.	15	30.00%	0.1
25.	14	50.00%	0.3

Part A

Note: Total number of students are *n* =30,

a = (F.V) Facility Value = $\frac{Total\ of\ Correct\ Answer}{Total\ Number\ of\ Students} \times 100.$

b= (D.I) Discrimination Index

$= \frac{Highest\ score\ of\ student - Lowest\ score\ of\ student}{Range}$

After the testing item with a low discrimination index were all dropped. The early table indicated the facility value and discrimination index of each of the testing items in the section of test intended to find out how proficient the requirement students were in their understanding of articles, prepositions and tense forms.

On the basis of the figures in table (2) we can say that the test which was to be used as the instrument of measurement is reasonably good and the findings to be arrived at on the basis of a try–out of this test can be accepted with a fairly high degree of certainty.

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(Table-2) Frequency of correct responses with items in a serial order

ITEM NO.	No. of Correct Answer	F.V = $\frac{.?}{T.n} \times 100\%$	D.I = $\frac{H.s-L.s}{R}$
Part A			
1.	29	96.66%	0.1
2.	11	33.33%	0.1
3.	17	56.66%	0.4
4.	26	86.66%	0.1
5.	21	70.00%	0.6
6.	19	63.33%	0.4
7.	20	66.66%	0.6
8.	20	66.66%	0.2
9.	02	06.66%	0.1
10.	28	93.33%	0.1
11.	23	76.66%	0.2
12.	17	56.66%	0.3
Part B			
1.	21	70.00%	0.3
2.	15	50.00%	0.4
3.	05	16.66%	0.1
4.	20	66.66%	0.2
5.	18	60.00%	0.3
6.	13	43.33%	0.4
7.	14	46.66%	0.1
8.	10	33.33%	0.3
9.	06	20.00%	0.2
10.	14	46.66%	Zero
11.	24	80.00%	Zero
12.	14	46.66%	0.4
13.	10	33.33%	0.3
14.	05	16.66%	0.2
15.	28	93.33%	Zero
16.	14	46.66%	0.1
17.	09	30.00%	0.2
18.	15	30.00%	0.1
19.	14	50.00%	0.3

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From the facts listed in table (3), it is clear that during the first semester the average of the students did not learn much from the course taught to them. The pass mark for this course, as for all other courses in the Departments is 50 and the average marks obtained by the students were 49.59, that is, a little less than fifty.

(Table –3) Results of the First Test of English Requirement Students

No.	The Rules	Results
1.	H.S	**80**
2.	L.S	**20**
3.	The Mean	**49.59**
4.	The Median	**49**
5.	The Mode	**45**
6.	Range	**60**

Note: Total Number of Students =100

(HS) Highest Score = Total Number of Students – Total Number of Lowest Students Score.

(LS) Lowest Score = Total Number of Students – Total Number of Highest Students Score.

Mean = $\frac{\sum x}{n} = \frac{sum\ of\ all\ markes}{total\ number\ of\ Studens} = \frac{4{,}959}{100} = 49.59$

Median = the Middle Score, When in Order

Mode = the Most Common of Score Number

Range = the Highest Score – the Lowest Score, 80 - 20 = 60

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The figures given in table (4) show the performance of the students during the second semester. The average mark obtained by the students was 46.17, which is much less, than the mark required by them to pass the examination.

What is disappointing, indeed shocking, is that at the end of the first semester students obtained an average of 49.59 and at the end of the second semester they obtained a lower average of 46.17. This indicates, enough it does not conclusively prove it, that instead of improving their competence in English, students deteriorate with the passage of time.

(Table –4) Results of the Second Test of English Requirement Students

No.	The Rules	Results
1.	The Highest Score	78
2.	The Lowest Score	18
3.	The Mean	46.17
4.	The Median	45
5.	The Mode	50
6.	Range	60

Table (5) gives a comparative view of the requirement students' performance during the first and the second semesters. The expectation was that, as it was the same test given to them as the test given for the first time, at the end of the second semester students' performance would improve considerably. But the figures in this table belie that expectation. The highest score obtained by the second semester students is slightly lower instead of being higher.

The lowest score obtained by the second semester students is lower than the lowest score obtained by semester 1 students. The average definable in terms of the statistical mean is also lower than what it was for semester 1 students. It can, therefore, be said with a high degree of certainty, that instead

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of learning, students go down the level of their ability with the passage of time.

It was expected that the range of students' abilities in English would be reduced. But as is evident from the figures listed in this table, the range of their ability in the second semester is exactly the same as it was in the first semester.

(Table –5) A Comparative of the Results in the First and the Second Semesters

V. Concluding Observations :

This section is intended to summarize, highlight and interrelate the significant observations made in the previous section on the discussion of data.

This section is divided into two parts. Part I is intended to be the findings and part II is intended to be a set of recommendations that this researcher would like to make to those involved in planning the policy and designing teaching materials and structuring proficiency tests and achievement tests for measuring students' competence in English.

No.	Rule	1st Semester English Requirement Students	2nd Semester English Requirement Students
1.	The Highest Score	80	78
2.	The Lowest Score	20	18
3.	The Mean	49.59	46.17
4.	The Median	49	45
5.	The Mode	45	50
6.	Range	60	60

a. Findings

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1. It was found that all the three areas taken together i.e. articles, tense-forms and prepositions are problem areas for students studying English as requirement subjects in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Intuitively, it was thought that these three areas were areas of difficulties for these students and that intuitive understanding turned out to be true. As we all know research consists not only in discovering something absolutely new, but also in trying to find facts in support of one's intuitive understanding of the situation and then to conclude whether that intuitive understanding was sustainable with facts. Intuition suggests a hypothesis and it is for the researcher to find whether that hypothesis needs to be:
    i. Accepted with a high degree of certainty.
    ii. Accepted with a low probability
    iii. Rejected altogether.

In this case, the researcher intuition turned out to be factually sustainable.

2. The students' knowledge of these three areas was a little lower than the average required for their passing the examination in this subject. A student is expected to secure a minimum of 50 marks for passing the examination in this subject as in any other subject of the undergraduate course in this faculty. The average marks secured by students in the first test given to them was only 49.59. Statisticians tell us that the average should be understood not only in terms of the mean score but also in terms of the median and the mode. In the case of the first test given to these students the median was 49 and the mode was 45.50. It does not matter how we understand the concept of the average, the students' performance was less than the pass mark required for them.
3. It is expected that at the end of a course learners in any subject will perform better than what they did at the end of the course. It is shocking to find that at the end of the course these requirement students went down in their ability to handle the grammar of English. This is evident from the fact that the mean score obtained by them at the beginning of the course was 49.59 and the mean score obtained by them at the end of the course was only 46.17. It is also expected that the range of abilities the learners have at the beginning of the course will be considerably reduced at the end of the course. In other words, the good students will learn but the bad ones will work harder to catch up with the good ones, with the result that the range of abilities i.e. the distance between the highest score and the

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lowest score will be appreciably reduced. It was disappointing to find that the range of their abilities was not reduced at all. The range at the beginning of the course was 60 and it continued to be 60 even towards the end of the course. This is evident from the figures listed in table No.14.

4. About the use of articles it turned out that the majority of mistakes were relatable to the mistaken use of articles before words beginning with a semi-vowel. Students, for example, would think vowels to be vowel sounds and would use the article *an* and not the article *a* before words like *university*, *union,* and *one riyal.* They also made mistakes in the use of articles before words beginning with consonant letters but vowel sounds. Most of them, for example, preferred the use of the article a before expressions like *MA, MRCP* and *FRCS.*
5. Most of the mistakes in the use of tense-forms were in those sentences which had time adverbials in them, for example, they preferred expressions like *" He has done it yesterday"*, to its standard grammatical equivalent, *" He did it yesterday".* These errors seem to have a reason out of the mistaken notion that if one should use the present perfect tense and that if something happened in the distant past one should use the simple past tense. Little did they seem to realize that whether the reference is to distant past or to immediate past, the tense form can only be the simple past form which has a time adverbial in it. In other words, they did not seem to have realized that, *"he did it only a second ago"* is grammatically correct, but *"he has done it only a second ago"*, is grammatically
6. Most of the errors in the use of prepositions were relatable to the use of *"since"* and *"for".* They did not seem to have realized that *"for"* is used for a duration of time, whereas, *"since"* is used when there is reference to an event *(since the World War II)*, a year *(since 1947),* a day *(since Monday),*a date *(since 4th of July)* or a point of time *(since 4:35 in the afternoon).*

b. Recommendation

It is recommended that the use of articles particularly the use of a and an should be taught differently from the way it has been taught traditionally so far. The traditional way of teaching in many parts of the world has been to say that if a word begins with a vowel, it should be preceded by an and that if it begins with a consonant it should be preceded by a.

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This researcher recommends that the rule about a and an should be taught not in terms of only two concepts, vowels and consonants but in terms of three: vowels, semi-vowels and consonants. The rule to be taught should be as follows:

i. If a word begins with a vowel it should be preceded by an, and if it begins with a semi-vowel it should be preceded by a. if that is done, mistaken use of articles in expressions like *'an university'*, can be avoided.

ii. This researcher also recommends that when teaching the use of a and an, the important difference between vowels and vowel letters should be clearly highlighted. It should be made clear to the learners that a, e, i, o, u are not vowels, they are vowel letters. Vowels are essentially sounds and there are as many as 20 vowels in English. Words like *army, ant,* and *age* begin with the same vowel letter but they begin with three different vowels (Vowel Sounds). The word *'read'* and the word *'weep'* have two vowel letters each, but there is only one vowel in each of these two words. Writers of books and supplementary teaching materials and similarly the designers of syllabuses must give prominence to the teaching of the difference between vowels and semi-vowels and the difference between vowels and vowel letters.

iii. It is also recommended that the difference between time and tense should be adequately emphasized during the teaching of tense-forms in English. It should be made clear to the students that difference between time and tense is like the difference between sex and gender. Sex is a physical reality, whereas gender is a grammatical form. All over the world sex is understood in terms of the two, the male and the female. The grammars of some languages have two genders, whereas some others have three. The Arabic word for *'the sun'* is considered to be a feminine word in Arabic grammar, but the Arabic word *'the moon'* is considered to be a masculine word. All this will make the learners separate the concept of gender from sex. Similarly, examples should be given for the learners to make a difference between time and tense and it should be made clear to them that the past tense, for example, does not always refer to the

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past time and that time in English is indicted not only with the help of tense-forms but also with help of time adverbial.

iv. In the last, this research recommend prepositions should teach in pairs.

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