Error Correction in EFL Writing: The Case of Saudi Arabia, Taif University

Naif Althobaiti

(Department of Foreign Languages, Taif University, Saudi Arabia)

Abstract: This exploratory study is a part of a larger project which explores and investigates Saudi EFL tertiary students' deficiency in writing. Specifically, it investigates students' written errors, their views, teachers' views, and teachers' practices. The purpose is to recommend and design an appropriate remedial course. Also, it aims to obtain a deeper understanding of written errors and to prescribe an appropriate remedy. As a first step to achieve these aims, the current study investigates the students' writing errors in the Foreign Language Department (FLD) at Taif University. The participants in the study are 60 students at two levels of proficiency: advanced students ($N = 30$) and beginner students ($N = 30$). Both groups of students were asked to write about six selected topics throughout the semester. Having collected the data, the students' writings were coded and analyzed according to the linguistic and surface structure taxonomies. The results revealed that both groups showed numerous errors in their writings. Some types of errors were shared, whereas others were completely different types of errors and not shared. Grammatical errors were the most frequent in both groups' productions. Also, both groups reported rather mixed results with regard to written errors and their sources. This showed that written errors are not predictable, even within the same context. The current study paves the way for future studies in the sense that it provides greater insight for the researcher to question the teachers' and students' views and preferences for error correction strategies and practices.

Key words: EFL writing, tertiary education, error correction, error types, Saudi Arabia, error analysis, surface structure taxonomy

1. Introduction

No one would doubt the importance of writing as a means of communication in all types of professions (Truscott, 2013). Writing has been considered as an important means of communication in academic contexts (Ferris, 2013). This importance is further emphasized when investigating EFL teaching/learning contexts (Tang, 2012). Its importance springs from its being a primary means by which students are able to show their progress and academic development to their teachers (Javid & Umer, 2014). If they fail to express their thoughts and opinions clearly, this may be interpreted as a sign of academic weakness. Thus, English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL writing researchers have conducted many studies to investigate the importance of writing for their students (e.g., Bitchener, 2013; Ellis, 2010; Sheen, 2012). Interestingly, most of these studies are in agreement that EFL students' writing appears weak and poor (Mahmoud, 2014). EFL students in the Arab world and Saudi

Naif Althobaiti, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Taif University; research areas/interests: written error correction, oral error correction, SLA, community of practice: professional development of English educators, and professional learning communities. E-mail: althobaiti@tu.edu.sa.

universities are no exception. Thus, it is not surprising to find the most EFL writing students face problems (Mourtaga, 2004); what is surprising, however, is that these problems continue when they can be overcome. One reason for this persistent problem could be the failure to apply researchers' recommendations for such situations (Ellis, 2010, 2012). Saudi tertiary EFL students have writing deficiencies which can be indicative of deficiencies in other English skills as well (Al-Khairi, 2013; Althobaiti, 2014).

English writing is considered a difficult task for all learners (Al-Khairi, 2013), and it is increasingly difficult for non-native speakers of English (Hopkins, 1989). Writing difficulty resides in its requirements for comprehensive knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and style of writing (Ferris, 2013; Truscott, 2013). Therefore, greater attention needs to be paid to writing skills, especially in the Saudi EFL tertiary context.

Several studies conducted in the Saudi context contributed the deficiency in students' writing to their previous experiences with writing apprehension, their deficiency in Arabic writing, and importantly, ineffective methods of teaching (Abbad, 1998; Alhaysony, 2012; Hamouda, 2011). Furthermore, students mistakenly hold teachers fully responsible for their poor performance in English writing in such contexts (Althobaiti, 2014).

Bearing these issues in mind, Arab students, including Saudi students, face a lot of challenges in their writing which, in turn, minimizes their chances of learning English properly (Al-Khairi, 2013). An obvious challenge is the frequent occurrence of production errors (Althobaiti, 2014). This brings to light the thorny issue of written error correction in Saudi EFL tertiary context.

1.1 The Importance of Error Correction

Error correction has received considerable attention from the perspective of teachers and researchers since the 1950s (Long, 2007). Researchers have reported inconclusive results about written error correction (Sheen, 2012). While earlier research viewed students' errors as sins to be avoided (Russell, 2009), the passage of time and the emergence of communicative methods of teaching have led to errors being viewed as a sign of learning (Althobaiti, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Specifically, in the EFL context, when students' commit errors this means learning takes place (Althobaiti, 2014).

Since the seminal work of Hendrickson (1978), which serves as the basis for most error correction studies, the study of error correction has moved rapidly to argue for the facilitative role of error correction in the learning process. It began by questioning whether or not to correct students' errors. Then, it became a question of what errors to correct. After that, researchers queried how errors should be corrected, by whom, and when (Russell, 2009). This emphasis on the importance of errors led researchers to examine students' errors, their interpretations, sources, and the advantages to language learning (Ellis, 2009). This trend in research is known as "error analysis".

Interest in error analysis has grown due to students' various errors (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). This variety is evident in the written production of second language learners (Nelson, Bahar, & Van Meter, 2004). It is different from one context to another due to the differences in the language from which they are transferred (Mahmoud, 2002). Thus, studying students' errors is advantageous for teachers as it helps they find the best ways to overcome such errors (Truscott, 2008). This issue is discussed further in the following section.

1.2 Error Analysis

The increasing number of foreign language classrooms nowadays has made error analysis a necessity for both researchers and teachers (Truscott, 2013). Error analysis is considered a device by which effective learning can take place (Ferris, 2012) and provides both researchers and teachers with indications of students' linguistic development (Ellis, 2010). Error analysis, that is, examining students' repeated errors when writing the target

language (TL), is of prime importance to point out the types of errors and their frequency in EFL tertiary students' production. Therefore, remedial measures can be taken and students' language skills may improve.

At Taif University, many FLD students have not developed their writing skills and have not yet achieved the required level of writing competence. This is obvious from my own experience with students and in my daily conversations with my colleagues in the FLD and their complaints. My colleagues struggle to understand what students intend to convey when they write. Also, my colleagues are concerned about the large number of errors committed by students and have expressed interest in finding out about these errors and the factors leading to them.

Error analysis, as explained by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), "a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors" (p. 51). It is worth pointing out that error analysis is not about finding errors; rather, it is about explaining their causes and trying to explore their sources. Consequently, studying students' errors is beneficial for both teachers and students. For teachers, error analysis indicates the areas of linguistic deficiencies that need to be made up, the effectiveness of teaching materials, and the parts of the syllabus that require further attention (Althobaiti, 2014). For students, the benefits of error analysis and the improved writing skills that may result are limitless. Error analysis shows students' their actual performance and competence in the language. In other words, error analysis has a didactic benefit (Gitsaki & Althobaiti, 2010). Error analysis has two purposes: diagnostic, which refers to pointing out the errors in students' production; and prognostic, which refers to plans to deal with and treat students' identified errors (Robinson, 2013). This results in improvements in teaching materials and methods. Definitely, such error analysis studies provide insightful information and recommendations to benefit day-to-day correction in the short term and, in the long term, benefit planning and design of course materials as well as integral teacher training (Sheen, 2012).

Corder's (1974) seminal research laid the groundwork for all subsequent EA studies. However, EA has been subject to criticism due to its lack of precision and accuracy resulting from the fact that it only measures what students produce, and not what students avoid (Gass, 2013; Salebi, 2004). This is obvious in the inconclusive results of the error analysis studies; for example, what are considered interference errors in one study are referred to as developmental errors in another. Also, error classification has never been inclusive for all types of errors. For example, Corder's (1974) taxonomy does not cover all error types; Ellis and Barkhuizen's (2005) are not precise either. A space for induction should be provided in order to enable accurate coding. Also, unit of analysis is an issue that deserves more attention.

1.3 Written Error Correction Studies: Types of Errors

Previous studies have considered the issue of written error correction and reported inconclusive results (Sheen, 2012). The results vary greatly from context to another; there has never been a "onesizefitsall" analyses to suit all contexts (Sheen, 2004). For example, studies conducted in Swedish context may not be applicable to those conducted in India; those conducted in India will likely be dissimilar to those in Saudi Arabia. This can be attributed to differences in teaching methods, students' readiness for learning, students' levels of proficiency, and exposure to the language outside the classroom. These may be included in the mediating factors as mentioned by Bitchener and Storch (2013).

Errors occur across a wide range of ESL/EFL contexts and many different types of errors are reported. Some studies focus on the macro classification of errors, such as grammatical errors, lexical errors, phonological errors, and sematic errors (AbiSamra, 2003; Althobaiti, 2014; Ferris, 2013). Other studies focused on the micro

classification of errors, such as the verb tense errors, the use of articles, word order, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and word choice (Alhaysony, 2012; Al-Jarf, 2008; Darus, 2012; Tahaineh, 2010; Truscott, 2008). More discussion on methods of error analysis is found in the data analysis section.

Earlier studies of error analysis have reported that there were similarities across all English learners of many different L1s in committing specific errors at certain stages of development (Darus, 2012). The similarities are in the verb tenses errors, the use of articles, and the words order (Truscott, 2013). Further, some researchers claimed that the existence of these errors is attributed to the confusion of transferring them from the source language (Alhaysony, 2012). If there is no equivalent similarity in the L1, then the students are less to commit these errors.

A few studies conducted in the Saudi context have investigated written error correction. In one such study, Alhaysony (2012) investigated written errors in the use of articles by collecting the works of 100 Saudi female FEL students at Ha'il University. Alhaysony adopted the Surface Structure Taxonomies (SST) of errors to count students' errors and found that students made omission errors (students omitted the articles) and substitution errors (students substituted errors). The study recommended that students' needed to be made aware of the use of articles in English. The results of the study cannot be generalized to the other context as it only focused on one type of errors. Thus, a more comprehensive study is required.

In a more detailed investigation, Al-Khairi (2013) conducted a study in Saudi EFL tertiary context and investigated problems with academic writing by surveying teachers' and students' to obtain their views. The results showed that students' writing was weak and their writing was full of errors. Al-Khairi also found that students' were not able to produce different types of essays. The types of written errors, as reported by teachers and students, were related to the appropriate selection of vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. However, the results of this study were interview based, and not derived from a study of the students' production.

Javid and Umer (2014) conducted a gender-based study about the problems faced by Saudi EFL students in academic writing. They surveyed 194 students: 108 males and 86 females. The study did not report any significant difference between the genders concerning the errors committed, but found that students' writing problems were related to a lack of vocabulary and difficulty expressing ideas.

These three studies typify other studies in Saudi EFL context in the sense that they did not fully investigate written error correction. Moreover, the results of these studies should be interpreted with caution as they are based on students' views and opinions, not on analysis of their actual writing, with the exception of Alhaysony's study which had a limited focus on the use of articles in students' writing.

2. Statement of the Problem

The importance of writing skills for Saudi EFL tertiary students is shown in its utilization in taking notes, summaries, reviews, writing essays, and performing tests. However, writing has been found to be the weakest skill Saudi tertiary students have, resulting in students committing lots of errors when they write. Teachers are dismayed by this weakness, especially when students write assignments or exams. The teachers call repeatedly for serious investigation into such weakness at such a critical stage of tertiary study. This study is an answer to these calls. The studies conducted in the Saudi tertiary context touched on the issue of error correction, and most showed that Saudi students' writing is weak and rife with errors (Al-Khairy, 2013; Javid & Khan, 2014). The weaknesses encountered by students include, but are not limited to, a lack of vocabulary, inappropriate grammar, and a lack of writing knowledge (Javid & Umer, 2014).

Therefore, error analysis is believed to be the first remedial step toward such weakness. It is hoped that error analysis will facilitate students' reduction of errors which, in turn, may assist learning. Analyzing students' errors helps teachers to obtain a detailed understanding of those errors and to find the appropriate strategies and teaching methods to treat such errors. Further, it is also hoped to draw students' attention to their weaknesses and errors with the aim of correction (Ferris, 2002).

3. The Significance of the Study

Saudi EFL tertiary writing has been investigated from a number of perspectives. Most studies, including those at Taif University, explored students' views and opinions on writing problems in general but did not explore written error types looking at students' actual written productions. However, the studies have reported rather mixed results because of the different contexts in which they were conducted (e.g., Ha'il University students, preparatory year students, female students). Due to this gap in the Saudi EFL tertiary literature, this study explores students' actual production and looks specifically at their written errors and their sources by examining two different proficiency levels: beginners and advanced. The present study sought to answer the following questions:

(1) What types of errors do Saudi EFL tertiary beginners and advanced students commit when they write?

(2) What is the most frequent type of Saudi EFL tertiary students' errors in both groups?

(3) What are the possible sources of Saudi EFL tertiary students' written errors in both groups?

(4) What are the implications revealed by this study?

4. Method

4.1 Introduction

This section describes the setting of the study, the participants, ethics, data collection, data coding, and data analysis. Also, it shows the relevance of the research questions to the sources of data. The following section describes setting and participants.

4.2 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the Foreign Languages Department (FLD) in Taif University, Saudi Arabia. Two groups of male students took part in the study: beginners and advanced. There were 30 beginners students who were classified according to their enrollment date in the FLD. They had the basics of writing in the preparatory year in Taif University. Most of the courses in which they were enrolled during the data collection period were basic skills courses. The advanced students were in their second year in the FLD and were taking content courses such as linguistics and literature courses. The medium of instruction for these courses is English. All of the participants spoke Arabic as their first language and had the same pre-tertiary educational background in the Saudi system: six primary school grades, three intermediate grades, and three secondary school grades. The students were divided into beginner and advanced groups to help find the similarities and/or differences in the emergent errors, the frequency of writing errors, as well as the sources of the errors. Participant numbers are explained in more detail in Table 1.

Table 1   Total Number of Advanced and Beginner Student Study Participants

Courses	Total number of students enrolled	Number of student-participants
Advanced writing(advanced)	50	30
Paragraph writing(beginner)	70	30
Total	120	60

As shown in Table 1, the number of enrolled students is different to those who participated in both groups. The reason was that absent students and those who did not complete the tasks on time were simply excluded. Also, those who took part typified the whole sample.

4.3 Ethics

Students' permission was sought before they took part in the study. They were informed that their writing will be utilized as a source of data for the study. They gave their consent verbally and submitted all the topics. They were informed that their personal information would be de-identified. Also, they were made aware of the possibility of reporting their written work in scientific journals or at conferences.

4.4 Data Collection Source

The main source of data consists of the written productions of 60 students in the two groups. The total of essays submitted was 90, and there was a total of 90 paragraphs submitted as well. Over a semester, students in both groups were asked to write on six different selective topics of argumentative, descriptive, and narrative natures. The topics included: Twitter or Facebook: which one do you prefer and why?; Importance of English as an international language; Autobiography; Women driving in Saudi Arabia: How to fix a flat tyre?; and FIFA World Cup 2014: Who is going to win?

4.5 Procedure

Both groups fulfilled the requirements of the course and submitted all the tasks. Each topic was requested in a separate class which lasted for 80 to 100 minutes. Those enrolled in the Advanced Writing course were asked to write in an essay format with a minimum of 200 words, whereas those who were enrolled in the Paragraph Writing course were requested to write in a paragraph format of no more than fifteen sentences and a minimum of 100 words in the paragraph. All tasks were handwritten. As students completed their tasks, they handed in the papers to the teacher. Those students who were absent on any day of the course were excluded for the sake of obtaining equal amounts of data from each student.

4.6 Data Analysis

The study was a qualitative case study, aimed at exploring a particular phenomenon in its naturally occurring context (Cresswell, 2012). The case study form helped the researcher to obtain a deeper understanding of the problems of EFL tertiary students' written productions: specifically, error types, error frequencies, and error sources. Thus, data were analyzed using the error analysis approach. The analysis draws on content analysis framework of analyzing written materials to identify specific characteristics of those materials such as the quality and the quantity or the frequency of occurrence (Schreier, 2012). Students' writing was analyzed sentence by sentence to detect the types of errors and count the total number of occurrences.

Having analyzed the data inductively to allow for as many possible emergent errors, students' errors were classified according to linguistic description into three main categories: (1) grammatical errors which included: verb tense, article, pronoun, preposition, subject-verb agreement, word form, and plural/singular; (2) lexical errors which included use of the wrong word; and (3) semantic errors which included spelling, punctuation, and

capitalization (Ferris, 2013). In addition, emergent errors were classified according to surface structure taxonomy outlined by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). This taxonomy is based on four general categories: substitution errors, omission errors, addition errors, and misordering errors. A fifth category, blend errors, has been added from Ellis and Barkhuizen's (2005) description. The frequency of each error type and the percentage of the total are counted and calculated. Furthermore, students' errors were classified according to their possible sources into interlingual or interference (i.e., errors occur as a result of transfer from L1), and intralingual or developmental (i.e., error happening due to insufficient/incomplete knowledge of TL and overgeneralization), showing the frequency of errors according to their source (Ferris, 2013; Sheen, 2012).

Guided by the research questions, the data was analyzed and steps suggested by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) were deemed appropriate and thus followed:

(1) collection of a relevant sample of learner language to answer the research questions;

(2) identification of errors, specifically, written errors;

(3) description of errors: omission errors, addition errors, misinformation/substitution errors, misordering errors, and blend errors;

(4) explanation of errors, either interlanguage errors or intralanguage errors; and

(5) error evaluation, the last step leading to drawing conclusions about analyzed errors. It distinguishes which error is more important and warrants further attention. The process of analysis is described in Table 2.

Table 2   Examples of Emergent Errors in Students' Written Work for Both Groups

Group	Error	Correction	Linguistic description	Blended model of surface structure taxonomy (SST) and description of errors (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005)
Advanced	FIFA selects *a many countries* to host the championship.	FIFA selects many countries to host the championship	Article: placing an indefinite article before a plural noun	Addition
	The support *it receive* …	The support it receives…	Subject-verb agreement	Misinformation
	They play *between* their audiences.	They play in front of their audience.	Preposition: incorrect use of preposition	Misinformation
	… to communicate with people *in abroad*.	To communicate with people abroad	Preposition: unnecessary preposition	Addition
	The customs in my country *are different comparison by* the Eastern Asia.	The customs in my country are different compared to Eastern Asia.	Word form	Misinformation
	I want to become in the future a translator.	I want to become a translator in the future.	Word order	Misorder
Beginners	It is a city high.	It is a high city.	Word order	Misorder
	I want improve my language.	I want to improve my language	Preposition: loss of preposition	Omission
	I study English for *many several* reasons.	I study English for several reasons or/for many reasons	Wrong word	Blends
	The world *is discover* new skills.	The world cup discovers new skills	Verb tense	Misinformation
	My father *learned* me driving.	My father taught me driving.	Wrong word	Misinformation

Table 2 shows a summary of typical errors emerging from the data for both groups: beginner and advanced students. Errors are listed in the first column, while the second column shows the correct form. In the third column, the linguistic category is identified, and, in the last column, the errors are described according to a blended model of surface structure taxonomy (SST) (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982) and Ellis and Barkhuizen's (2005) description of errors. As mentioned earlier, this table only shows examples of errors, rather than a complete list of errors. The following section reports the results of the study by listing error types, frequency, and sources in a way that answers the research questions.
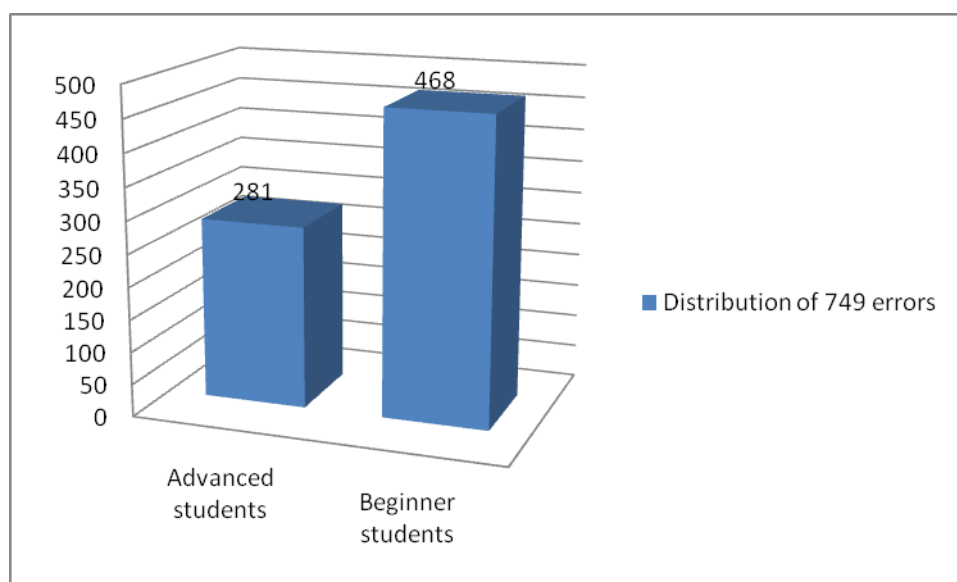
5. Results

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports and explains the results of the analyses of the study. The research questions are answered in three sections. The first research question is answered in section 5.2 on error categories. The second research question is answered by section 5.3 Error types and frequency. The third research question is answered by section 5.4 sources of errors. Each section presents the results in a paralleled way between beginners and advanced students.

5.2 Total Number of Errors by Beginner and Advanced Students

This section presents the results for the beginner and advanced student groups. The total number of errors committed by both groups was 749 as shown in Figure 1. There were significantly fewer errors made by advanced students ($N = 281$) compared to those made by beginner students ($N = 468$). The significance of this result is discussed in section 6.0.

Figure 1   Number of Errors by Beginner and Advanced Students

(1) Advanced Students

This section presents the results of the advanced students by describing the types of errors students committed, their frequency, and their sources. As shown in Table 3, advanced students had nine types of errors

which occurred more frequently than other types. In order of frequency from high to low, the advanced students made errors in their use of articles ($N = 55$), verb tense errors ($N = 51$), preposition errors ($N = 42$); and the least frequent errors were spelling errors ($N = 19$).

Table 3　Frequency and Percentage of Written Errors by Advanced Students

| Serial number	Error	Frequency	Percentage
1	Articles	55	19.57%
2	Verb Tense	51	18.15%
3	Preposition	42	14.94%
4	Subject verb agreement	31	11.04%
5	Wrong word	29	10.33%
6	Singular/plural	19	6.76%
7	Spelling	19	6.76%
8	Punctuation	18	6.05%
9	Capitalization	17	6.04%
	Total	281	100

Having the errors categorized into grammatical, lexical and semantic, the most frequent type of errors made by advanced students were grammatical ($N = 143$), followed by semantic errors ($N = 45$), and, finally, lexical errors ($N = 29$) (See Figure 2).
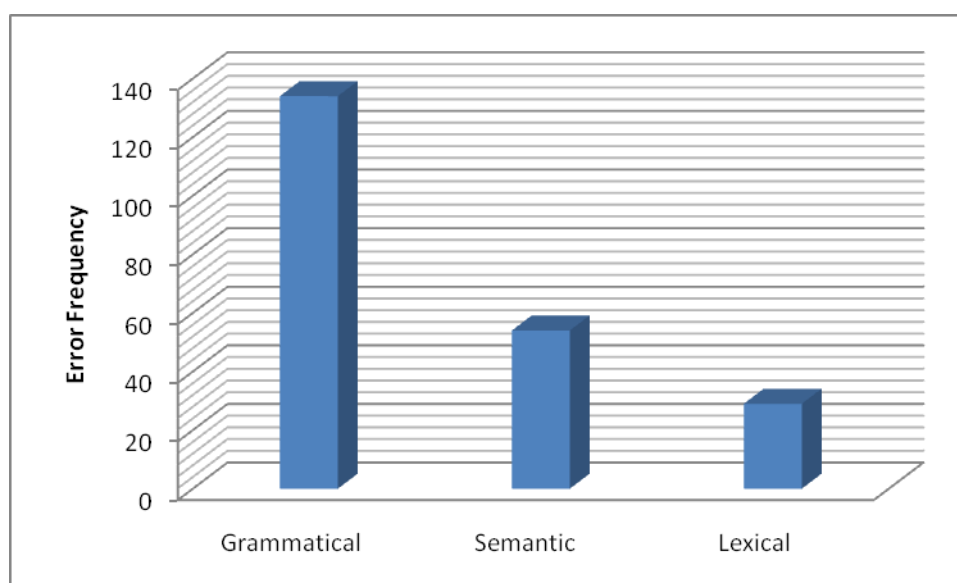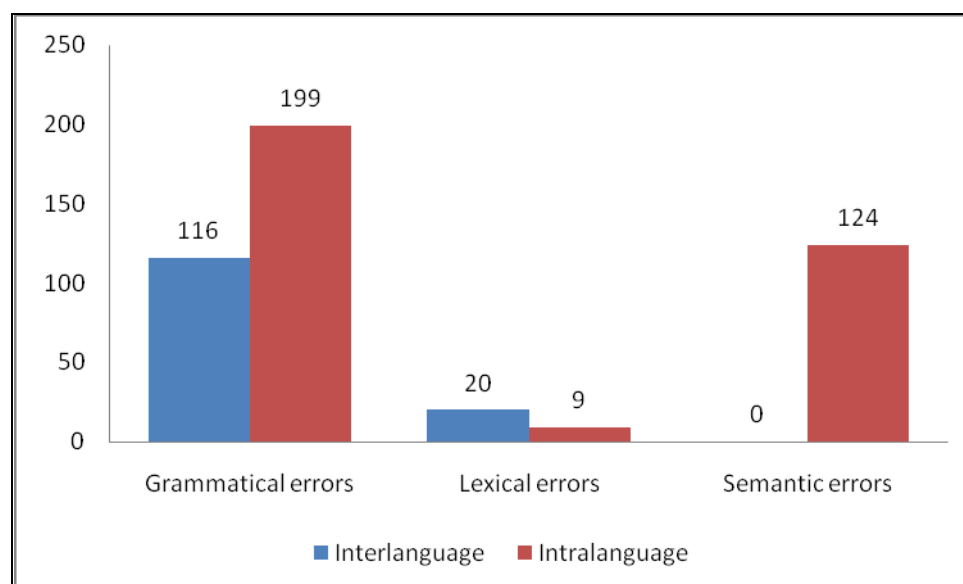

Figure 2　Advanced Students' Error Categories

Table 4　Sources of Advanced Students' Errors

Error Source	Articles	Verb Tense	Preposition	Subject-verb agreement	Wrong word	Singular/plural	Spelling	Punctuation	Capitalization	Total
Interlingual	48	0	18	6	27	11	0	10	0	120
Intralingual	7	51	24	25	2	8	19	8	17	161
Total	55	51	42	31	29	19	19	18	17	281
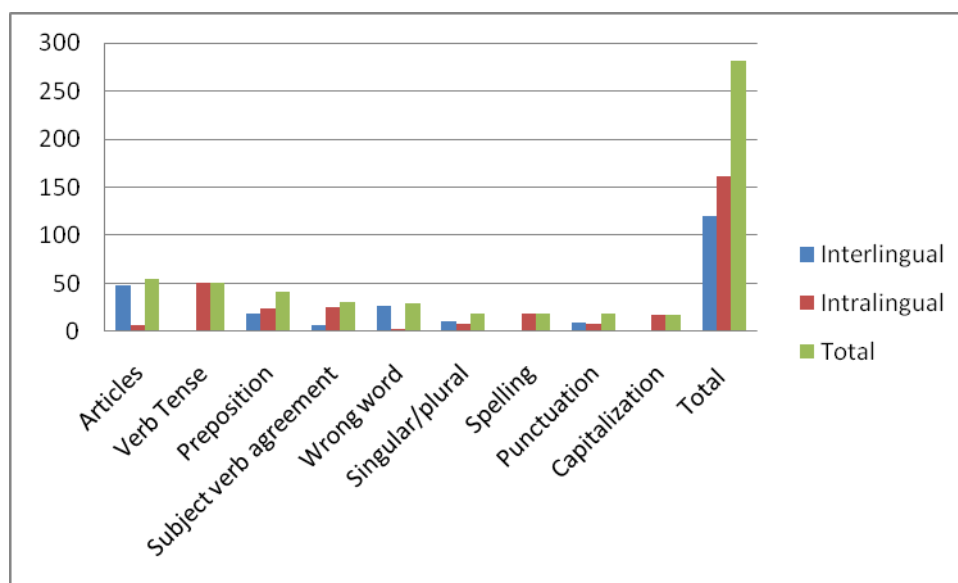
Figure 3   The Sources of Advanced Students' Errors

Table 4 and Figure 3 show the sources of advanced students' errors. The errors were classified according to their sources: interlanguage or intralanguage. The sources of advanced students' errors varied due to the different nature of each error types. Most article errors ($N = 55$) had interlanguage sources ($N = 48$), while a few article errors had intralanguage sources ($N = 7$). Verb tense errors ($N= 51$), spelling errors ($N = 19$), and capitalization errors ($N = 17$) all had intralingual sources. Most preposition errors had intralanguage sources ($N = 24$), as did most subject-verb agreement errors ($N = 25$). An almost equal distribution to both sources of errors was detected in singular/plural and punctuation errors. Interestingly, most of the wrong word errors had interlanguage sources.

Figure 4   The Association between Advanced Students' Errors Categories and Error Sources

Figure 4 shows sources of advanced students' errors. It was found that grammatical errors were the most frequent errors; 199 errors resulted from intralanguage sources while 116 errors resulted from interlanguage

sources. All of the semantic errors, the second most frequent errors, resulted from intralanguage sources. Lexical errors, the least frequent errors, mostly resulted from interlanguage. The following section presents the results of the beginner students' errors.
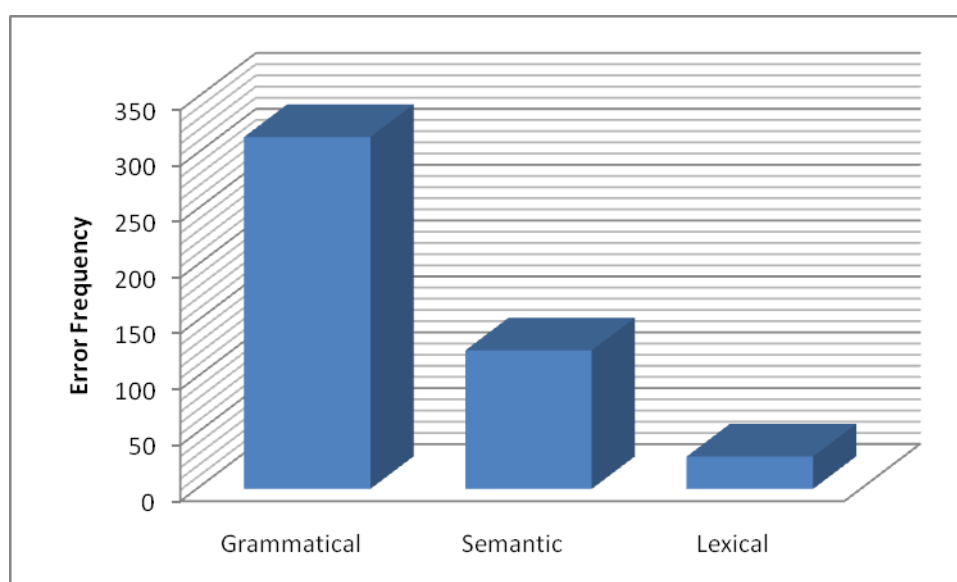
(2) Beginner Students

This section presents the results of the beginner students' errors. It shows their frequency, their sources, the association of the types of beginner students' error s and their sources. As mentioned earlier, the number of errors committed by beginner students was 468. They are discussed in Table 5.

Table 5   Frequency and Percentage of Written Errors by Beginner Students

Serial number	Error	Frequency	Percentage
1	Verb Tense	123	26.28%
2	Spelling	104	22.22%
3	Word order	70	14.95%
4	Subject verb agreement	45	9.62%
5	Singular/plural	31	6.63%
6	Wrong word	29	6.20%
7	Pronoun	22	4.70%
8	Capitalization	20	4.27%
9	Article	15	3.21%
10	Preposition	9	1.92%
	Total	468	100

Table 5 indicates that there were ten frequent beginners' errors. The most frequent errors were those of verb tense ($N = 123$), followed by spelling errors ($N = 104$), word order errors ($N = 70$), subject verb agreement errors ($N = 45$), singular/plural errors ($N = 31$), wrong word errors ($N = 29$), pronoun errors ($N = 22$), capitalization errors ($N = 20$), and articles ($N = 15$) consecutively. The final and least frequent errors were preposition errors ($N = 9$).
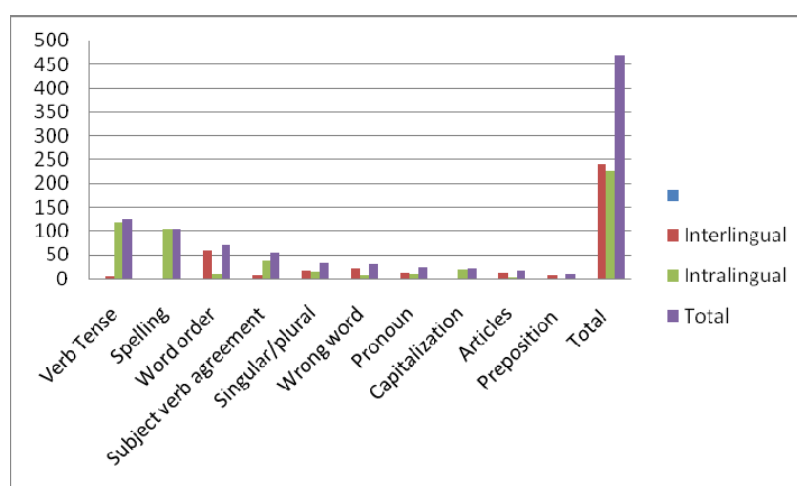

Figure 5   Beginner Students' Error Categories

Beginner students' errors were categorized into grammatical errors (i.e., verb tense, word order, subject verb agreement, singular/plural, pronoun, article and preposition), lexical (i.e., wrong word), and semantic (i.e., spelling, capitalization). As seen in Figure 5, grammatical errors were the most frequent ($N = 315$). The second most frequent errors were semantic ($N = 124$), whereas the least frequent errors were lexical ($N = 29$).
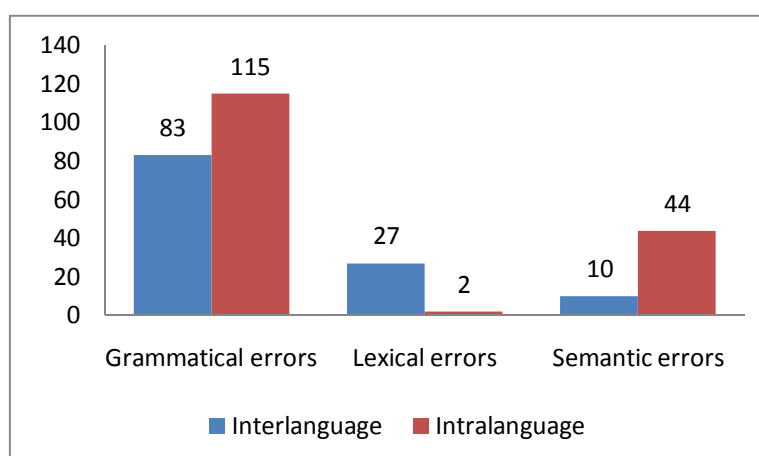
Table 6   Sources of Beginner Students' Errors

Error Source	Verb Tense	Spelling	Word order	Subject verb agreement	Singular/ plural	Wrong word	Pronoun	Capitalization	Articles	Preposition	Total
Interlingual	4	0	59	7	16	20	12	0	11	7	240
Intralingual	119	104	11	38	15	9	10	20	4	2	228
Total	123	104	70	54	31	29	22	20	15	9	468

Figure 6   Sources of Beginner Students' Errors

As shown in Table 6 and Figure 6, beginner students' errors were almost equal in the sense that they resulted from interlanguage ($N = 240$) and intralanguage ($N = 228$). Most verb tense errors ($N = 119$), spelling errors ($N = 104$), subject verb agreement errors ($N = 38$), and capitalization errors were intralanguage. Most of the word order ($N = 59$), wrong word ($N = 20$), articles ($N = 11$), and preposition errors ($N = 7$) were interlanguage. Singular/plural errors and pronoun errors were almost equally distributed between interlanguage and intralanguage.

Figure 7   Association between Beginner Students' Errors Categories and Error Sources

Figure 7 indicates the association between beginner students' errors and their sources. Grammatical errors were almost all the result of intralanguage, while lexical errors were mostly related to interlanguage. However, sematic errors resulted primarily from intralanguage.

6. Discussion

This study investigated the errors committed by the beginner and advanced students in the Foreign Language Department at Taif University. It also explored the sources of these errors for both groups. This section discusses the results of the data analyses as framed by the research questions of the case study. The data presented in the last section are discussed in comparison with similar studies conducted by other researchers in the area of written error correction either in the field of EFL or ESL. The discussion revolves around three issues: types and frequency of written errors in Saudi tertiary EFL students, the sources of those written errors, and the significance of investigating beginners' and advanced students.

The study reported that most of students' productions, if not all, included errors. This is evident in the total number errors committed, which was 749. Readers may wonder if the total number is correct compared to the number of writings submitted. The issue is that the unit of analysis counted three errors as one error, so the advanced students' errors were significantly fewer compared to the beginners' errors. Such a result is somewhat normal in such an EFL context. The difference in the number of errors is attributed to the language development and the students' awareness of their production.

The study reported that advanced students' and beginner students' errors were similarly distributed for the three main categories of errors: grammatical errors as the most frequent, lexical errors the second frequent, and semantic errors as the least frequent. Interestingly, verb tense errors as a type of grammatical error were highly frequent in both groups. Further, the results showed that most of the verb tense errors in particular and grammatical errors in general for both groups were attributed to intralanguage. These results can be interpreted in three possible ways. First, it shows that EFL students are no different than other English learners in the sense that they made common grammatical errors, such as errors on verb tense, which is in line with Ferris'sclaim that there are common errors committed by most English learners irrespective of their L1 (Ferris, 2013). Also, it is in line with Abi Samra's (2003) study, which reported that grammatical errors were the most frequent errors in students' production.

A second interpretation of the results is that the sources of these errors were from intralanguage because students in neither group achieved the requested grammatical competence; they either applied the verb tense rules incorrectly or they simply they had insufficient knowledge about the written grammatical rules. This confirms Darus's study (2010), which reported that students' grammatical errors were due to the students' incorrect application of the verb tenses even though they were fully aware of the grammatical rules. However, it could be argued that the high frequency of grammatical errors is the result of the teacher's zealous error hunting or hard lining. This is a possibility and the argument has precedence in the history of error correction. Truscott (1999), for example, called for abandoning grammar correction or at least reducing it to a minimum. However, an argument such as this is not immune to challenge. At the very least, the frequency of verb tense errors merits further attention. A third interpretation of the results may be attributed to the myriad of different perspectives from which every teachers sees students' errors.

Both the beginner and advanced groups had similar frequent lexical errors, specifically, wrong word errors, which were attributed to interference from the students' L1, which is Arabic. The students relied heavily on their mother tongue, indicating a lack of appropriate vocabulary in English to express their thoughts. This result confirms Al-Khairi's (2013) findings that a common Saudi EFL tertiary writing problem is the lack of necessary vocabulary when writing.

The results revealed that two error types, spelling and word order errors, that were frequent in beginners' production were almost absent in the productions of advanced students. Presumably, this result is evidence of the advanced students' progress. In addition, it shows the struggle of beginner students with spelling, a result which is in line with Al-Jarf's (2008) assertion that spelling is a demanding complex cognitive task that takes time to master.

It is worth mentioning that preposition errors were highly frequent in the advanced students' writing. This result is similar to Kharma and Hajjajs' (1997) results which stated that Arab students had a major problem in using the correct preposition, and that even native speakers found proper preposition use challenging. It is possible that a lack of understanding of their communicative value is one explanation for the inappropriate use of prepositions.

For the advanced students, article errors were the most frequent, while for the beginners, they were the second least frequent. This result contradicts the views expressed in Al-Kahiri's study which suggested that article errors were not as serious as vocabulary errors. Article errors were attributed equally to both interlanguage and intralanguage. This is in line with Alhaysony (2012), who found that most students relied heavily on L1 transfer in order to judge the appropriate articles to be used, which tended to be incorrect. Also, the high number of article errors resulting from interlanguage or L1 transfer is in line with Alhaysony (2012) who found that article errors either added or deleted are frequent in the production of students. It is really due to the existence and the absence of such a feature in the L1 which is Arabic.

The reason why beginners make less frequent article and punctuation errors than advanced students is not due to their mastery of those skills, but rather because, as beginners, they use simple sentences and avoid compound sentences where more mistakes can be made. This provides further impetus for more error analysis research to cover all aspects of the errors and their possible reasons.

Interestingly, some students were found to commit errors which were not indicative of a lack of TL knowledge or violations of the rules of the TL; rather, these errors were related to more deliberate misspellings, such as *4* for *four* and *2* for *two*, and common shorthand texting abbreviations, such as *OMG* and *LOL*. These types of written errors and the use of Web 2 applications on mobile devices could be a topic for further research.

7. Conclusion and Implications

It is hoped the results of this study provides teachers with increased knowledge about the types of errors their students are making, with the aim of finding appropriate ways to treat these errors and thus reduce them. Moreover, teachers are encouraged to find effective teaching materials to assist students' with grammatical deficiencies as they were the most frequent errors. Teachers should be aware that the development of writing skills occurs on a continuum and, as such, is a process that requires ongoing care and nurturing. Also, error detection should not be overemphasized to students as it may damage their self-esteem as well as their motivation to study a second language. This study should provide useful information that will benefit the larger project to explore and

remediate students' writing in the EFL context. For students, the provision of some necessary vocabulary at the beginning of the class may assist in the reduction of lexical errors. Further consolidation of students' knowledge with regard to spelling may occur with the adoption of more rigid assessment or by making extra effort to teach spelling to accommodate students' needs.

The way ahead

Although this study was a small case study, its results should not be underestimated. It enabled the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the differences between the productions of male beginner and advanced students' written productions. However, a longitudinal gender-based study would be useful to obtain a comprehensive, detailed account of the different types of errors committed which would allow for more appropriate design of curriculum and teaching materials.

A larger study could be conducted over a long period of time in which students' may be requested to submit their writings via MW to find out the most resistant problems in students' production irrespective of the mechanical ones. Also, some of the data analysis engines could be appropriate. Further, students' writing could be explored by assigning students into free writing groups where they work on essays as homework, and controlled writing groups where they work on their writings during class. Also, it would be helpful to examine teachers' instructional practices of written error correction techniques alongside an exploration of teachers' beliefs about such techniques.

References

AbiSamra N. (2003). "An analysis of errors in Arabic speakers' English writing", in: Mourtaga K. (Ed.), *Investigating Writing Problems Among Palestinian Students Studying English as a Foreign Language*, unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Alhaysony M. (2012). "An analysis of article errors among Saudi female EFL students: A case study", *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 8, No. 12, pp. 55–66, available online at: http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n12p55.

Al-Jarf R. (2008). "The impact of English as an International Language (EIL) upon Arabic in Saudi Arabia", *Asian EFL Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 193–210.

Al-Jarf R. (2010). "Spelling error corpora in EFL", *Sino-USA English Teaching*, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 73.

Al-Khairy M. A. (2013). "Saudi English-major undergraduates' academic writing problems: A Taif University perspective", *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 6, No. 6, p. 1, available online at: http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n6p1.

Al-Khasawneh F. M. S. (2010). "Writing for academic purposes: Problems faced by Arab postgraduate students of the college of business", *UUM. ESP World*, Vol. 2, No. 9, pp. 1–23, *Proceeding of the Global Summit on Education GSE 2014*, 4–5 March 2014, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Althobaiti N. (2014). "Error correction in EFL writing: The case of Saudi Arabia, Tai University", paper presented at the *17th Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée World Congress 2014*, Brisbane, Australia.

Bitchener J. and Storch N. (2013). *Written Corrective Feedback for SLA: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Research*, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Chen L. L. (2006). "The effect of L1 and CAI on grammar learning: An error analysis of Taiwanese beginning EFL learners' English essays", *Asian EFL Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 1–19.

Javid C. Z. and Umer M.(2014). Saudi EFL Learners' Writing Problems: A Move towards Solution. *Proceeding of the Global Summit on Education GSE 2014*, 4-5 March 2014, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA.

Corder S. P. (1974). Error Analysis. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Creswell J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (4th ed.), Boston, MA: Pearson Education Inc.

Darus S. (2012). "Error analysis", in: Peter Robinson (Ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Second Language Acquisition*, New York: Routledge, pp. 213–215.

Darus S. and Subramaniam K. (2009). "Error analysis of the written English essays of secondary school students in Malaysia: A case study", *European Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 483–495.

Dulay H. C., Marina K. Burt and Stephen Krashen (1982). *Language Two*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis R. (2010). "Second language acquisition, teacher education and language pedagogy", *Language Teaching*, Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 182–201.

Ellis R. (2012). *Second Language Classroom Discourse: Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., pp. 75–114.

Ellis R. and Barkhuizen G. (2005). "Error analysis: Analyzing learner language", in: R. Ellis & G. Barkhuizen (Eds.), *Analyzing Learner Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 51–71.

England L. (2006). "Methodology in Arabic language teacher education", in: *Wahba Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century* (1st ed.), LEA Publishers, New Jersey, pp. 381–388.

Ferris D. R. (1999). "The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes: A response to Truscott 1996", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1–11.

Ferris D. R. (2002). *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Ferris D. R. (2013). *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing* (2nd ed.), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, retrieved June 5, 2014, from Project MUSE database.

Gass S. M. (2013). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*, New York: Routledge.

Gitsaki C. and Althobaiti N. (2010). "ESL teachers' use of corrective feedback and its effect on learners' uptake", *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 197–219.

Hamouda A. (2011). "A study of students and teachers' preferences and attitudes towards correction of classroom written errors in Saudi EFL context", *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 128.

Hyland K. (2007). "Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 148–164.

Javid C. Z. and Umer M. (2014). "Saudi EFL learners' writing problems: A move towards solution", *Proceedings of the 2014 GSE Global Summit on Education Conference*, 4–5 March, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Kharma N. and Hajjaj A. (1997). *Errors in English among Arabic Speakers*, Beirut: Librairie du Liban.

Krashen S. D. (1984). *Writing: Research, Theory, and Applications*, Oxford: Pergamon Institute of English.

Lee I. (2009). "Feedback revolution: What gets in the way?", *ELT Journal*, Vol. 65, pp. 1–12.

Lee I. (2013). "Research into practice: Written corrective feedback", *Language Teaching*, Vol. 46, pp. 108–119.

Mahmoud A. (2002). "Interlingual transfer of idioms by Arab learners of English", *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 12, available online at: http://iteslj.org.

Mahmoud S. S. (2014). "Email and Facebook to promote foundation year students' EFL writing at King Abdul-Aziz University", *International Review of Social Sciences & Humanities*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 157–172.

Mourtaga K. (2004). *Investigating Writing Problems among Palestinian Students*, Bloomington, Indiana: Author House.

Robinson P. (Ed.) (2013). *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Second Language Acquisition*, New York: Routledge.

Salebi M. (2004). "Saudi college students' perception of their errors in written English", *Scientific Journal of King Faisal University: Humanities and Management Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 2.

Schreier Margrit (2012). *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Tahaineh Y. S. (2010). "Arab EFL university students' errors in the use of prepositions", *MJAL*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 76–112.

Tang R. (Ed.) (2012). *Academic Writing in a Second or Foreign Language: Issues and Challenges Facing ESL/EFL Academic Writers in Higher Education Contexts*, New York: Bloomsbury.

Truscott J. (1996). "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes", *Language Learning*, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 327–369.

Truscott J. (1999). "The case for 'The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes': A response to Ferris", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 111–122.

Truscott J. (2004). "Evidence on the effects of correction: A response to Chandler", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 13, pp. 337–343.

Truscott J. (2007). "The effect of error correction on learner's ability to write accurately", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 16, pp. 255–272.

Truscott J. and Hus A. Y. (2008). "Error correction, revision, and learning", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 17, pp. 292–305.