The Effect of EFL Learners' Mother Tongue on their Writings in English : An Error Analysis Study

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Abstract

Writing is a complex process which demands cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis .It is even more complicated to write in a foreign language , and it takes considerable time and effort to become a skillful writer. Many studies indicate that for EFL students, there tends to be interference from their first language in the process of writing in English. The present study seeks to explore EFL learners' major writing difficulties by analyzing the nature and distribution of their writing errors and it also investigates whether there is a relationship between students' L1 and their writing in English .To fulfill the aims of the study , the researcher examined English writing samples of 80 EFL college students and then categorized the errors according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical/ semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. Understanding linguistic differences between students' L1 and English may help the learners to reduce interference from their first language.

تأثير اللغة الأم لمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية على كتاباتهم باللغة الانجليزية:
دراسة أخطاء تحليلية

الملخص

الكتابة عملية معقدة ، تحتاج إلى تحليل معرفي وتوليف لغوي. وهذه العملية تكون أكثر تعقيدا عند الكتابة بلغة أجنبية، كما أنها تستغرق وقتا وجهدا كبيرا ليصبح الكاتب ماهرا. تشير العديد من الدراسات إلى أن طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، يميلون إلى أن يكون هناك تداخل من لغتهم الأم عند الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. وتسعى هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الصعوبات الكبيرة التي تعترض متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال تحليل طبيعة وتوزيع أخطائهم الكتابية.كما إن هذه الدراسة تسعى للكشف عما ما إذا كانت هناك علاقة بين لغة الطلاب الأصلية و كتاباتهم باللغة الإنجليزية. ولتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، درست الباحثة عينات كتابية ل٨٠ طالب من طلاب كلية التربية۔ قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وقسمت الأخطاء وفقا للتصنيف التالي: أخطاء نحوية، معجمية / دلالية، ميكانيكية ، وأنواع ترتيب الكلمات. أن فهم الاختلافات اللغوية بين اللغة الأصلية الطلبة واللغة الانجليزية قد تساعد المتعلمين للحد من تدخل لغتهم الأولى(الأم).

1.Introduction

It is commonly believed that the first language(L1)* has an effect on the second language (L2)* or foreign language. An English native speaker ,for example, can tell whether someone

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*L1 refers to Arabic language   as a mother tongue language
*L2 refers to English as a · second or foreign language in this study

is French , or Arab after few words of English . It probably comes as no surprise to anyone that different cultures think in different ways. Western ways of thinking and writing are very different from Eastern or Middle Eastern ways of thinking.

EF teachers are the ones who suffer from such a problem. That the most important part of their task is to teach their students how to think and to use a foreign language as its native users do. The influence of the native language is clearly shown in the written form which is the basic (main) technique , a foreign language teacher uses in testing the proficiency of his students.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in studies related to writing because such skill is very important in academic studies and outside academic institutions . It is clear that *"writing structures our relations with others and organizes our perception of the world "*(Bazerman and Paradis,1991:3;in Khuwaaileh and Al-Shoumal, 2000:174).As early as 1966, Kaplan stated that speakers of Arabic transfer rhetorical patterns from their mother tongue into their English writing .This interrelatedness is not specific to Arab students, Wang (199) also investigated the use of references in(L1)Chinese and their effect on cohesion in (L2)English.Studies which had been done in this field , showed that EFL learners commit errors because they think in their native language and that they translate their thoughts into L2 or foreign language.

2.The Definition of Errors

Errors are studied in order to find out something about the learning process and about the strategies employed by human beings learning another language (Lungu, 2003:323).The term "*error*" was defined differently by many experts . These definitions contain the same meaning while the differences lie only the ways they formulate. Two important definitions are put in this article. They are adequate to reveal the errors in written

texts. Norrish (1987:7) defines errors as *"a systematic deviation , when learner has not learnt something and consistently gets its wrong"* . A second definition is put by Cunningworth(1987 :87). He says that*" errors are systematic deviations from the norms of the language being learned"*. Thus it is clear from these two definitions that the key word is "*systematic deviation*" which can be interpreted as the deviation which happens repeatedly. In the present study , the term " *error*" is going to be used to refer to a systematic deviation from a selected norm or norms.

Before studying errors , it is necessary to make a distinction between the two terms "*errors*" and "*mistakes*". These two terms are strongly associated with Corder in various papers (e. g 1967), the distinction is drawn between errors and mistakes. An error is *" a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker reflects the competence of the learner"*, while mistake refers to *" a performance error that is either random guess or a slip in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly"*. James (1998:83)also tried to differentiate between them. He defined the former as *" cannot be self corrected "* whereas the latter as *" can be self corrected if the deviation is pointed out to the speaker".* Errors are "*systematic* ", i.e they occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner.

Another distinction between "*error*" and "*mistake*" has been put in Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics(1992) and by Richards, and Schmidt(2002), it is mentioned that *" a learner makes mistakes when writing or speaking because of lack of attention, fatigue , carelessness, or some other aspects of performance.Thus ,mistakes can be self corrected when attention is called"* . Whereas , an error is defined as *"the use of linguistic item in a way that a fluent or native speaker of the language regards it as showing faulty or incomplete learning"*. In other words , it occurs because the

learner does not know what is correct , and thus it cannot be self corrected. Thus, in this study the focus will be on learners' errors not mistakes.

3.What is Error Analysis (E.A)?

Researchers began to suggest that learners' errors are , in fact, very important providing insight into how far a learner has progressed in acquiring a language , and showing how much more the learner needs to learn (Ringbom, 1987:69). Simply, "*it is the examination of those errors committed by students in both the spoken and written medium*"(Ali,1996:1).

Error analysis spread in 60's and 70's of the previous century. It was also the era when foundations of communicative methodology were laid . It is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. This term is strongly associated with Corder(1967). He is regarded as the "father" of this field (E.A). He dealt with errors in a totally different point of view that they were dealt with before. Corder showed that errors were regarded as "*flaws*" that should be eradicated , but he considered them as very important '*devices*' that the learners use to learn ; they are ' *indispensable*' (Abi Samra ,2003). Then after that , researchers started to deal with errors as a key containing valuable information to be used in the process of acquiring a language.

Another concept of error analysis is given by Brown (1980:160 in Hasyim, 2002:43). He defined error analysis as **"*the process to observe , analyze , and classify the deviations of the rules of the second languages and then to reveal the systems operated by learner''*.**

4.The Classification of Errors

Errors have been classified and identified in different ways .Corder(1971) in his model, classifies in terms of the differences between the learners ' utterance and the reconstructed version. This model is presented   below(in Brown, 2000:220 and Hasyim,2002:43)
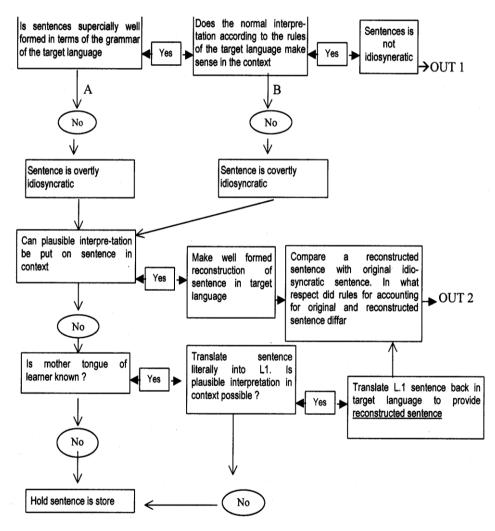

Figure 1 : Corder's Model (1971)
(Adapted from Brown,2000:221 and Hasyim, 2002:43)

Brown (2000:220) in his analysis of Corder' model , states that"*any sentence uttered by the learner and subsequently transcribed can be analyzed for idiosyncrasies. . A major distinction is made at the outset between* **overt** *and* **covert** *errors. Overtly erroneous utterances are unquestionably ungrammatical at the sentence level. Covertly erroneous utterances are grammatically well-formed at the sentence level but are not interpretable within the context of communication".* Then , Corder (1973:277) classified errors into four main categories :omission of some required element, addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element, selection of incorrect element, and misordering of elements. Within each category, levels of language can be considered: phonology, morphology, lexicon, grammar and discourse.

Burt and Kiparsky (1974:73 in Lengo, 1995:24) distinguish between **global** and **local** errors .A global is one which involves " the overall structure of a sentence" and a local error is one which effects "a particular constituent". Erdogan (2005:264) clarifies that " global errors hinder communication". They prevent the message from being comprehended , as in the example below:

* I like bus but my mother said so not that we must be late for school.

On the other hand , local errors do not prevent the message from being understood because there is usually some minor violation of one segment of a sentence that allows the hearer to guess the intended meaning as follows:

* If I heard from her, l would let you know.

Errors may also be viewed as two related dimensions: **domain** and **extent**. This suggestion is put by Lennon (1991), and they are defined as the following: "domain is the rank of linguistic unit from phoneme to discourse that must be taken as

context in order for the error to be understood", and "extent is the rank of linguistic unit that would have to be deleted , replaced , supplied or recordered in order to repair the sentence"(in Brown , 2000:224). This classification is similar to that one which is put by Corder(1973) and had been mentioned above.

5. Sources of Errors

To analyze students' errors , it is necessary to determine the sources of errors .Two main sources are mentioned by Brown (2000:224). They are : **interlingual** and **intralingual**.

5.a. Interlingual (Interference) Errors

Errors found to be traceable to first language interference are termed "interlingual" or" transfer errors". This kind of errors is the main concern of this study. Those errors are attributable to negative interlingual transfer. The term "interlingual " was firstly introduced by Selinker (1972). He used this term to refer to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learner's L1 and the target language(Abi Samra, 2003:5).While the term "transfer" , which is derived from the Latin word "transferre", means "to bear' , "to carry" or "to print" a copy from one surface to another(Webster 's third new world international dictionary , 1986). It is also defined(ibid) as " a generalization of learned responses from one type of situation to another ".

According to Kavaliauskiene (2009:4), transfer of errors may occur because the learners lack the necessary information in the second language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate second language routine. Transfer is of two kinds: positive and negative . The transfer may prove to be justified because the structure of the two languages is similar – this case is called 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation', or it may prove unjustified because the structure of the two languages are

different – that case is called ' negative transfer' or 'interference'(Wilkins, 1972:199). The primary focus of this study is to analyze the students' errors that are attributed to first language interference . Interlingual errors may occur at different levels such as transfer of phonology , morphologi-cal , grammatical and lexical –semantic elements of the native language into the target language.

5.b. Intralingual (Developmental) Errors

Intralingual errors are the errors which result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer (Keshavarz, 2003:62;Fang and Xue-mei , 2007:11) .Erdogan (2005:266) adds " intralingual errors occur as a result of learners ' attempt to build up concepts and hypotheses about the target language from their limited experience with it". These errors are common in the speech of second language learners and they are often analyzed to see what sorts of strategies are being used by the learners. Intralingual errors include: overgeneralization , simplification, communication- based and induced errors .

6. Methodology
6.1 Research Objective

The objective of the current study is to examine the errors Iraqi EFL college students make while writing and to analyze the sources of these errors . The types of errors will be presented in the following divisions: grammatical errors, mechanical errors, semantic/ lexical errors and word order errors. The study , more specifically , attempts to answer the following questions :-

1- Is negative transfer a cause of errors in the writings of EFL students?

2- What types of errors common in the writings of EFL students, in other words which of these errors are due to the influence of the students' first language?

6.2 Limitation of the Study

The data that was used for this research is derived from the written production of only 80 third year EFL students at college of Education , University of Basrah . The data that was collected came from one piece of writing that was produced in a monthly exam .

6.3 The participants

The participants were eighty third- stage Iraqi students from the Department of English, College of Education at the University of Basrah for the academic year 2007-2008. The subjects were similar in age, rating from 19-21 years old, but factors such as age or sex were not controlled in this study.
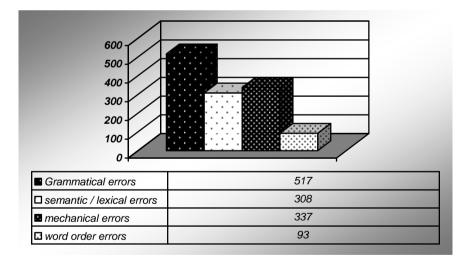
The participants were requested to write on one of the three following different topics [women rights (an argumentative essay), an orphan story(a narrative essay), the qualities of a good neighbor(a descriptive essay)]. The essays were ranged from one and a half to two single spaced pages in length. The students did not know that their writings are going to be under investigation. Eighty essays were collected and analyzed to check various interlingual errors and numbers and ratios were counted.

6.4 Results and Discussion

The interligual errors in this study are classified as follows:-

The grammatical errors(analyzed at both word and sentence levels in relative to tense, singular /plural markers, prepositions, articles and pronouns), the mechanical errors, semantic/ lexical errors, and word order. A total number of interlingual errors

amounted to 1255 out of 1767 total number of errors. The classification of interligual errors were as the following: 517 were of the grammatical category,308 of semantic/ lexical errors ,337 of mechanical errors and 93 of word order errors) . Figure 2 shows the number of interlingual errors and their distribution according to their categories. It is clear that the grammatical category is the dominant error category. Then in the second place comes the mechanical error category as it includes a problematic aspect of the target language which is spelling. In the third place comes the semantic / lexical errors and finally is the word order errors.

■ Grammatical errors	517
☐ semantic / lexical errors	308
■ mechanical errors	337
☐ word order errors	93

Figure 2: Interlingual Errors

6.4.1 Grammatical Errors

Figure 3 gives a detailed account of the different grammatical subcategories .It is obvious that the (223)tense errors form the most troublesome area for different reasons which will be illustrated later, articles errors (97), , pronouns errors(76), singular/ plural nouns errors(48) and preposition errors(73) .

Tense is the most prominent feature in the writings of Iraqi students .The students did many grammatical errors for different reasons: they could not write correct negative or interrogative sentences especially in the simple present and simple past tenses because there is no equivalent of auxiliaries (do, does and did) in Arabic (See examples 4,5 and 6).It has also been noticed that the students tended to use or add one of the different conjugated forms of the verb "to be"as a filler with simple present and simple past tense forms ,no verb (be) in present and past tenses(see examples 7, 8,9 and10),simple present tense in Arabic covers meaning of simple and progressive in English (see examples 11and12), these errors are of negative transfer because there is no mirror equivalent forms between L2 continuous, perfect and future and these in L1.

1-*he was live in a big house	2-*She was love him.
3-*She was work …..	4-*they was not speak frankly.
5-*is she come early.	6-* I was not go early.
7-* they slaves.	8-*The two girls faraway.
9-*He ill suddenly.	10-*they very weaks and poors.
11-*They talking highly.	12-*She speaking now.

Moreover, the participants depend in their writing mostly on using simple present and past tenses for all cases .This finding revealed that participants did not have compre-hensive knowledge on the use of different verb tenses (particularly continuous tenses and passive voice tenses) simply because there are no equivalent forms in L1. In Arabic , the passive form is

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* is used in front of every incorrect example

derived from the active form by means of internal vowel change(e.g /shariba/- /shuriba/: drink- drunk).

With singular /plural markers , there seemed to be a certain trend of erroneously omitting the plural morpheme 's' even when obvious plural quantifiers such as ' many ' and 'all' were present ; this seems to be a transfer from the spoken medium of L2 as Arabic speakers tend not to read or pronounce the plural 's' morpheme as it is shown in the following examples:

13-*The man discovered every things.	14-*all peoples heard the voices.
15-*the policeman collected all the evidence	16-* others stars were shining ….
17-*The blind boy has eleven brother and sister	18-*many childerns playing here and there
19-*I always ask him to help me in writing my homeworks	20-*the informations are spread…

Examples 17 and 19 , show that EFL learners resort to literal translation from Arabic to determine whether certain words in English are singular or plural. The two words' homework' and 'information' take the plural form in Arabic and are plural in number.

Preposition form an area of error that is exclusive to EFL learners. Using the appropriate preposition is one of the most difficult tasks of EFL learners that's because in English there are various prepositions which have the same function. Thus , the learners are not sure which preposition to use in a certain sentence. The following examples

21-* they were defense about the poor people.	22-*they were living from a small farm.

23-*to see his mother stood on the door wait him	24-* Nature feel us in happiness.
25-* When I finished from my lunch,..	26-* I called him in phone and…..
27-*She was thinking about a good way to solve her problem.	28-*I went for them .

Articles are also misused by students. They are quite confusing   because , abstract nouns may refer   to ideas , attributes, or qualities are used in English without the article ' the' to refer to that idea whereas in Arabic such abstract words are preceded by indefinite article equivalent to 'the ' in English (Diab,1996:72).See the following examples:

29-*The money is very important	30-*The women are equal to the men
31-*The success is a final aim of every human being.	32-*The education is free for all peoples.

Definite articles are affixed to a noun or an adjective in L1 . In general , errors such as the omission or addition of those articles are used in a way that proves the direct transfer of L1 rules to L2 specifically in the cases where names of countries or cities were mentioned , such as in the following examples:

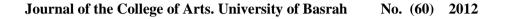|	
33-*My uncle travelled to the U.S.A before ten years.	34-*The young girl went by the car.
35-*In the spring, the weather	36-*I decided to depart at the 6

is very nice.	o' clock.
36-*In the Saturday, ……	37-*The two girls had uncle who is very harsh.

The misusing of many pronouns can be attributed to the negative transfer of L1 .The reason behind such errors is that it is possible to use a verb with its embedded pronoun without having recourse to an isolated pronoun (independent)in Arabic .In L1, personal pronouns are often added to verbs as it is shown below:

38-*After three years of marriage ,have been facing pressure from their family.

Moreover, pronouns are problematic because there are no exact equivalent counterparts in L1or L2 , for instance ,the pronoun 'it' as a neutral pronoun is not available in L1. Thus 'he ' or 'she' is used by EFL learners for inanimate objects or concepts . Object pronouns as well cause some sort of confusion since the word or morpheme may represent both an object pronoun and a possessive adjective like in(his/him, her/her, their/ them, your/you).The following illustrate this aspect clearly:

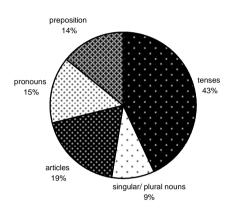|	
39-*the man when he saw the accident, he called the policemen.	40-*he had two girls from her
41-*he bought a car that he can go to work by it	42-*so that was very difficult for him to….

Figure 3 : Grammatical errors subcategories

6.4.2 Lexical/ Semantic Errors

On the level of this category ,the lexical errors counted were either a word or two words (e.g collocation)or whole phrases or sentences .Examples of lexical errors due to L1 transfer can be seen in the following examples:

43-* The children went to *special* schools. (private schools)	44-* He started to *learn* me how….(teach)
45-*they *theift* the house.(stole)	46-*My brother travelled *outside* the countery. (aboard)
47-*The right appear….	48-*they *remembered* me to go at once.(reminded)
49-*He didn't *bear* anything on his shoulders.(carry)	50-*she wished to play with girls *equal* to her.(similar)
51-*I cut a promise to help others people.	52-*In the Spring, the flower begin to open.(bloom)
53-*I say with my self….	54-*Nature feel us in happiness.
55-* The man pushed all his money to save his child life.	56-*He plural things quickly.(collects or gathers)

It is obvious that most of the errors are funny ones. They occur when learners translate directly from L1 to convey their ideas in English(using a noun instead of a verb , see example 56) . Another reason for making such errors due to the learners ' limited English vocabulary(see examples 43, 46, 49 51 and 52) . The negative transfer of the L1 due to the fact that Arabic is a 'root language' and the changes from one part of speech to another often involved morphological variations such as germination(doubling of consonants)(see examples 44 and 48).

The 'faux-aims' lexical subcategory had the least number of errors . The previous term means deceptive cognates in French (false friends). This happens in cases when a transfer from L1 or L2 ends up with the use of a word or an expression with an opposite or very remote meaning from the intended one . For instance, " *on the other hand*" is used in L1 as an additional and not of contrast as it is used in L2 as it is shown in the following example:

57-*Women have to do their jobs perfectly on one hand. On the other hand, they are responsible about homeworks.
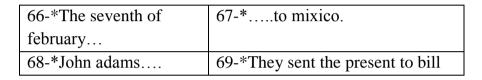
6.4.3 Mechanic Errors

Arabic has a phonetic based writing system and thus unlike L2 does not have allographs that are sound based but the allographs that exist in L1 are to do with a letter shape according to its position in a word: i.e . initial , medial or final position . Students tended to replace an allograph with another. The types of errors with phoneme/ grapheme correspondences or representations included problems with mainly vocalic phonemes and their graphemes but also with consonantal phonemes as well. L1 consists of 3 primary short vocalic phonemes with their respective long versions. these vowels are:/i,a,u/ and their long counterparts:/i:, a: , u:/. These vowels ,

nonetheless , have various regional and idiosyncratic allophonic variations (Chebchoub,2006 :32). The same problem may be diagnosed in using consonants particularly/ v, p, t ∫/. The misuse happens because the learners are unable to distinguish or perceive auditory differences between voiced or voiceless counterparts of these sounds which are distinct phonemes that appear in minimal pairs, thus spelling errors may occur in EFL learners' writings as it is illustrated in the following examples:

58-* My brother travelled outside the *countery*.	59-* in the *secaned* day, he….
60-*The head master in the *combany*….	61-*The *chuchment* ….
62-*He put his head on his *ped*.	63-*He gave many *prooves*
64-*The scene is very *peautiful*.	65-*Nixt time, ….

It is also noticed that students neglect one of the most important rule in writing that is they should write in a shape of paragraphs and they have to follow all the other instructions such as :the first line should be intended and each sentence should start with a capital letter.The latter phenomenon may be due to the fact that capitalization is a writing convention that should be implied in L2 but not found in L1.Some learners didn't capitalize the names of persons , months or cities(see examples 66, 67, 68 and 69). Moreover, the learners tend to overuse commas. This can be attributed to the fact that in L1 ,it is acceptable to write long sentences separated by commas. So , it is expected that the learners use '**and** ' to link between two , three, or even four sentences. Finally, spaces between words are also recognized as

one of the serious problems because it was very hard for the instructor to know from where some words
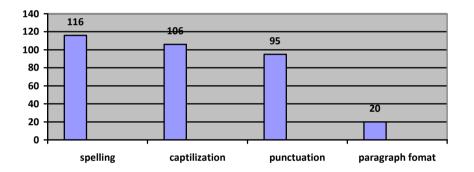 start and where they end.

66-*The seventh of february…	67-*…..to mixico.
68-*John adams….	69-*They sent the present to bill

Figure 4: Mechanic errors subcategories

6.4.4 Word Order Errors

Faulty word order is a common syntactic error that the learners commit as a result of L1 transfer. Three categories are included in the analysis: subject/ verb order, adjective/ noun order and possessive adjective/ noun order. Students often neglect the order which should be followed in English and came up with constructions that are applicable in Arabic (L1) such as (verb-subject – object)(see example 70 , 71and 72).In English , an adjective precede the noun it ,modifies whereas in Arabic the adjective follows the noun and corresponds with it in number and gender.Examples like 73 , 74and 75 are due to the transfer of this rule to L2. Possessive adjectives are added to nouns in L1 . Students who are unaware of this rule may follow the L1 rule and apply it to L2 .Thus such errors may occur, see examples 76 and 77.

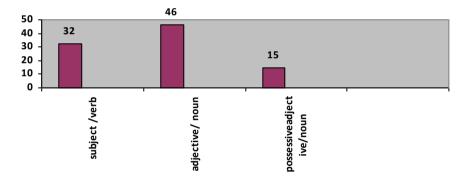| 70-*was the accident a disaster	71-* imagin he everything.
72-*causes he many problems	73-* I read many books difficult
74-* my nighbouir did a lot of things good	75 -* They should follow three steps very important
76-*She put the bag them certain places.	77-*she leave the room of her flowers.

Figure 5: Word order errors subcategories

7- Conclusion

This study attempts to identify , describe, categorize and diagnose the errors in English essay writing of the EFL Iraqi college students and it is found that most of the students' errors can be due to the L1 transfer .The current study came up with the following results. Most of the learners rely on their mother tongue in expressing their ideas. Although the rating processes showed that the participants ' essays included different types of errors, the grammatical errors and the mechani-cal errors were the most serious and frequent ones. This is shown by their high frequency and the results of the their percentage .

The overt influences of Arabic on the students' writing of English indicate that language teachers need to take careful stock of the transfer and interference of the students' mother

tongue in their production(spoken or written).   Also, EFL learners must accumulate knowledge about word usage: only in this way can they free themselves from the negative transferor influence of their mother tongue(Jing,2008:61).

There are some specific ways for language teachers to help students correct the errors. One way to highlight the influences of the mother tongues on the students' learning of English is to collect these errors and ask the students to analyze them and if they could to correct them .

Note

There are two types of Arabic, spoken and written. Spoken Arabic consists of dialects. Arabic is the descendant of the language of the Koran.. The orientation of writing is from right-to left, and the Arabic alphabet consists of 28 letters. The Arabic alphabet can be extended to ninety elements by writing additional shapes, marks, and vowels (Tayli & Al-Salamah, 1990). Most Arabic words are morphologically derived from a list of roots; it can be tri, quad, or pent-literal. Most of these roots are three constants. Arabic words are classified into three main parts of speech: nouns (adjectives, and adverbs), verbs, and particles. In formal writing, Arabic sentences are delimited by commas and periods as in English, for instance. Many English words come from Arabic: alcohol, algebra, check, magazine, and tariff.

Standard Arabic: is the formal language of literature and written expression.

Colloquial Arabic: is the ordinary familiar language used in everyday conversation among Arabic speakers.

When discussing MTI from Arabic it should not be forgotten that some errors are caused by interference from standard and others by interference from colloquial Arabic.

(Abi Samra, 2003:25)

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