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# SELECTED ERRORS MADE BY KURDISH LEARNERS OF ENGLISH



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SAGVAN MOHAMMED ALI AHMED

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION  
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FACULTY OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION  
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this little gift of two years outcome to my father, who would be happy to see my graduation and fulfilling one of his dreams, May God bless his soul.

I also dedicate this study to my lovely family, especially my dear mother, who has spent her life for the sake of us. To my dearest brother and my source of inspiration, Nechirvan, for his unlimited and unforgettable support. To my beloved brothers Shivan and Mevan and the lovely sisters Berivan, Layla and Viyan, without you, I would never accomplish this heavy duty in Malaysia.  
Love you all...







## ABSTRACT

The writing problems of the Kurdish students of the English department were worth studying and investigating. This study examined some selected writing problems, such as misuse of tenses, misuse of singular/plural forms, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, spelling and logical connectors. Data collection was based on written essays of '31' students of both female and male gender. The students made numerous errors relating these types of errors, which referred to their weak command of the English language. The investigated grammatical errors, which the students faced were, namely, spelling 801 errors (39.77%), misuse of tenses 548 errors (27.48 %), articles 261 errors (13.89 %), subject-verb agreement 157 errors (8.79 %), preposition 122 errors (5.22 %), misuse of singular/plural forms 87 errors (4.31 %) and logical connectors recorded 12 errors (0.53 %) of total 1988 errors. The causes of these errors were interlingual and intralingual, which were presented and explained depending on data collection and analysis. The selected errors in this study did not cover all the writing problems of the Kurdish students, therefore some other types of errors such as capital letters, word order, word choice and misuse of words were suggested to be studied for future researches.





## ABSTRAK

Masalah penulisan di kalangan pelajar Jabatan Bahasa Inggeris Kurdishtan amat bermanfaat untuk dikaji dan diselidik. Kajian ini memfokuskan kepada beberapa masalah penulisan, antaranya penyalahgunaan kata kerja yang menunjukkan waktu, penyalahgunaan kata tunjuk bilangan, struktur ayat, penjodoh bilangan, kata kedudukan, ejaan dan kata hubung. Data diperolehi daripada penulisan esei 31 pelajar lelaki dan perempuan. Didapati para pelajar tersebut membuat beberapa kesalahan seperti yang telah disebutkan, merujuk kepada kelemahan penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris mereka. Di antara kesalahan yang direkodkan adalah 801 kesalahan ejaan (39.77%), penjodoh bilangan 261 kesalahan (13.89%), 157 kesalahan struktur ayat (8.79%), 122 kesalahan kata kedudukan (5.22%), 87 kesalahan kata tunjuk bilangan (4.31%) dan kesalahan kata hubung sebanyak 12 (0.53%) yang berjumlah 1988 kesalahan. Didapati sebab kesalahan-kesalahan tersebut adalah merujuk kepada masalah antara bahasa dan intra-bahasa yang diterangkan berdasarkan kepada pengumpulan data dan analisis. Kesalahan-kesalahan yang direkodkan dalam kajian ini tidak merujuk kepada keseluruhan masalah pelajar Kurdish, oleh itu sebahagian kesalahan seperti penggunaan huruf besar, susunan perkataan, pemilihan kata dan penyalahgunaan perkataan adalah dicadangkan untuk dikaji dalam kajian akan datang.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



#### 1.1 Introduction

Nowadays, the English language is taught in many areas in the world and it is the dominant and international language of politics, science, and technology. It is also used in so many other fields in this era of globalization. It will be difficult to communicate with people of other countries, without speaking in this universal language. The English language is the native language of many countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand.





Over 350 million people speak English as their first language, including 55 million in the UK and more than 200 million in the USA. It is an official language in over 50 countries around the world. The total number of people who can speak English, including those who speak it as a second language, is well over a billion (Speak English, 2012).

People, in which English is their foreign language, mainly use their mother tongue, according to their environment and culture. They communicate with each other in their first language for social relations. They hardly use the English language or acknowledge its rules. They use the English language at some levels and most of them are not fluent in this language.



Many learners of the English language face problems, which affect their acquisition and learning of this language. Writing problems in English cover the widest area of the difficulties of acquiring this language, thus, it is important to focus intensively on this skill and search for the weak points during the writing process.

Writing in English as a foreign language is important, especially for academic studies, because it is the language of science and covers many areas in the education field. As part of language acquisition, the writing process is a fundamental principle. Many EFL students can express themselves in writing, but cannot speak fluently, and they avoid speaking in this language, since their pronunciation is not good. Sometimes, they feel shy to speak and they fear to talk to their lecturers, because they are supposed to produce phonologically and grammatically correct sentences.





However, they are able to write, but in the process of writing many errors occur which affect their language acquisition and weaken their writing skills.

## 1.2 Definitions

**Errors and Mistakes.** The terms error and mistake can be defined according to Corder (1967 in Ellis 1994:51) “*An error takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge. It represents a lack of competence. A mistake occurs when learners fail to perform their competence.*”

Ellis (1997:17) distinguishes both errors and mistakes and explains that

“*Errors reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Mistakes reflect occasional lapses in performance; they occur because in a particular instance, the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows.*”



### 1.3 Background to the problem

English is a foreign language in Iraq. There are many spoken languages like Assyrian and Turkoman, but the two formal languages are Arabic and Kurdish. A foreign language can be defined as any language used in a country other than one's own; a language that is studied mostly for cultural insight (Dictionary.com, 2012).

Garza (n.d.) states that in second language learning, language plays an institutional and social role in the community. It functions as a recognized means of communication among members who speak some other languages as their native tongue. In foreign language learning, language plays no major role in the community and is primarily learned in the classroom.



Learning the English language in Iraq started during the British occupation in the early thirties of the twentieth century. The English language was studied from grade '5' in primary schools to the university level. Nowadays, the English language is studied from the first grade at primary schools, with one subject called English Language. This learning process continues, and each grade has one course in English which deals with grammar, speaking and pronunciation. The syllabus of the scientific colleges and colleges of medicine is in English, since English is the language of science. In other colleges the English language is studied as a minor part of the curriculum. At the master's and doctoral degree levels, English is the major language. None of the students can apply for higher education studies without having proficiency in the English language, such as TOEFL or IELTS and some other formal tests.





After the invasion of Iraq by The United States of America in 2003, people became excited to learn the English language to communicate with the American soldiers, and also to work with them as translators. Since then, people are interested in learning the English language, because after the invasion, Iraqis have the right to travel to other countries and the students can go to different countries to continue their studies. But, English is not spoken and written in the government establishments, because it is a foreign language and not everybody can speak this language. Only some government departments use the English language, because they are in touch with foreigners and other diplomatic relations. Therefore, learning the English language is not controlled very well, and students who learn this language face many problems in acquiring it.



The English language examinations in Iraq are mainly in the written form. The examinations are divided into two forms, namely, oral and written. The written form can be considered as the first plan for any examination, while the oral examinations are usually planned. The English language examinations, which are in written forms, are planned to be easily controlled by the students. Thus, the student, especially of the primary schools, circle and tick the right answers of the questions. A small number of questions ask the students to write a short sentence, or to fill some dashes with a word, depending on the question order.

If a student is asked to answer a certain question orally, he or she may be able to answer without making a lot of mistakes. In addition, some students, when they answer an oral question, speak without knowing much about the exact meaning of what they are saying. They memorize and talk like an automatic talking machine. For







university students, most grades of the university depend on writing in general, since the pronunciation of the students is weak.

The projects and assignments, which the students are asked to do and prepare, need to be written in English. In addition, the final project of the graduation of the English department students has to be written and, of course, in the English language. Here, the students should be well prepared and do their best writing skills, since the grades are based on writing.

Errors in using the English language still exist in the writings of students who study English as a foreign language. They generally acquire this language in speaking; therefore, their production is poor and full of errors. For many students, speaking in English is the main goal for learning and studying this language, while writing is their minor goal. Some of the learners of the English language make errors, when they write an essay or any paragraph, and this may be affected by the interference of their native language. These students usually think in their first language and then they write in the English language, thus they make a lot of errors. Sometimes, they formulate sentences according to the rules of their first language, and they feel that they write grammatically correct sentences. But, when it comes to dealing with English native speakers, these errors look uncommon for the native speakers and they can distinguish the correct sentences from the wrong ones easily.



Garza (n.d.) in her study says that according to Lado (1957) individuals tend to transfer forms and meanings, the distribution of the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture.

Having a good command of the first language, the students become affected by the first language environment and culture. Most of these students think in their L1 and translate the sentences they think about into English and then produce these sentences. Here, some L1 proverbs and other colloquial speeches cannot be translated literally, thus uncountable errors occur.

Rod Ellis (1994) refers to the interference of the mother tongue of a second language learner as the main cause of error occurrence and states that “*The underlying assumption of CA was that errors occurred primarily as a result of interference when the learner transferred native language “habits” into the L2. Interference was believed to take place whenever the “habits” of the native languages differed from those of the target language*” (pp. 47, 48). While Corder (1967) explains that an error is a systematic deviation made by learners who have not yet mastered the rules of L2.

When English is a foreign language in Kurdistan of Iraq, and it is taught once a day and for one hour, it will be hard for the students, even at the university level, to make good sentences in English. In addition, the general idea of studying hard, for many students, is to score good marks, and having a good command of the English language is not important for them as the importance of good scoring.





Corder (1967) evaluates the importance of the errors in the learning process and states that “*Learner’s errors then, provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using. They are significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed. Second, they provide the researchers with evidence of how language is learned or acquired. Third, they are indispensable to the learner himself because he can regard the making of error as a device used in order to learn.*”

Motivation can have its effects in developing the writing skills of the students. At this point, the teacher can control this phenomenon by focusing on the writing of the students. The teacher has to motivate and encourage the students to write and develop this important skill. But, it is not only writing intensively that can stop them from making these errors. There should be more lessons on grammar rules to develop their command of the language. In addition, they should be given written texts such as novels, short stories and plays, in order to improve their writing and reading skills.

Students do not study the English language intensively, when this language is one of the minor parts of the curriculum and it is not studied a lot. Therefore, it cannot be learnt easily within a short period of time. While all the materials in the syllabus are in the first language and only one course is in the English language, and language of communication is the first language, the students will make errors in speaking and writing in English, since they do not deal with this language a lot.





Some of the similarities can be found in both Kurdish and the English language, while some differences may distinguish one language from another, according to the rules of each language. These characteristics affect the production of the sentences of the Kurdish students, when they write in the English language. Table 1.1 shows the similar and different rules in both, the Kurdish language and the English language.

Table 1.1

*Similarities and Differences in Kurdish and English Languages*

Terms	English	Kurdish
Simple Present	✓	✓
Simple Past	✓	✓
Simple Future	✓	✓
Perfect Action	✓	✗
Prepositions	✓	✓
Capitalization	✓	✗
Adjective Order	✓	✗
SVO	✓	✗
Singular/Plural Forms	✓	✓
Pronouns	✓	✓
Passive Voice	✓	✓
Numbers	✓	✓

*Not:* The symbol '✓' refers to the existence of a specific category in the language, while the symbol '✗' shows the contrast.





There are many similar categories which can be found in both Kurdish and the English language that help the students to make correct sentences. However, the differences really affect the writing skills of the students and increase the number of errors. The present, past, and future tenses are used in the Kurdish language with their own rules. The perfect action is found in the Kurdish language, but it is not the same as the English language perfect tense and it can be considered as a past form. The Kurdish language in Kurdistan of Iraq is written in Arabic letters, and it does not have capital letters. Therefore, the Kurdish language does not distinguish between proper and normal nouns. This sometimes, produces errors in the written passages of the Kurdish students. Most of the students are weak in capitalization rules, since they are not found in the Kurdish language.



The order of adjectives in the English language is formed according to special rules. The adjective in the English language can be followed with another adjective and even more than one, and then a noun comes at the end of these adjectives. These adjectives are separated with commas.

Example:

- A big, beautiful, red car.

These rules and the order of the adjectives are not the same in the Kurdish language. The noun is followed with an adjective, or more than one adjective. Here, with more than one adjective, the commas are not used and instead the preposition ‘and’ is used repeatedly among them.





Example:

- A car big and beautiful and red.

The word order of the Kurdish language is not the same as the English one. The Kurdish structure of the sentence is subject followed with an object then a verb ‘SOV’, when the object is a direct one. Therefore, the different rules and forms of the L1 and the L2 lead the students, sometimes, to formulate mixed rules of both languages. The following example shows the Kurdish language rules and structures regarding ‘word order’.

Example:



- Ali apple ate. ‘Apple is the direct object ‘SOV’’

#### 1.4 Problem statement

Students can express themselves when they write in the English language, but when they feel that they do not have enough command of this language, they cannot produce good writings. Human knowledge has been written on many natural materials since ancient times. Everything was recorded, so as to keep what was known that time for other generations. Therefore, writing is important and helps the students to avoid committing errors and can make them good and proficient writers. Becoming a proficient writer is one of the major objectives of many students, especially for those





who want to become members of international business, administrative or academic communities (Tribble, 1997: 8). Aziz (2001: 375) states that writing is one of the three activities that are related to brainstorming activities, it is a way to activate students' background knowledge and increase their motivation to read.

Stapa & Izahar (2010) explain in a study that errors in language learning have always been the centre of attention, and knowledge of grammar has become one of the most actively discussed questions in language and literacy pedagogy.

Students of the Faculty of Humanities study the English language for four years. They study this language to graduate as teachers, and they are also allowed, after graduation, to work in many other fields, in which they can get benefit from their command of the English language.

In general, these students are supposed to be teachers, but not for primary schools. They teach the English language for secondary and high schools. Here, they have to show their abilities and skills, which have been developed and gained at college. Therefore, they are not supposed to be weak in teaching, since their job is to teach the students how to speak, write and also communicate in English. In addition, these weaknesses will be in progress from one generation to another.

Most of the English students depend on writing and they like to show their abilities in essays and short paragraphs. In addition, these students are Kurdish, and the Kurdish language pronunciation and the way of speaking is different from the English language. In the student's writings, who are not native speakers of the English





language, many errors occur. As a part of the syllabus, writing is the main skill to be fully mastered. None of the students can pass an examination of English when they have weak writing skills.

The weak writing productions of the students reflect their knowledge of the L2. Their weak abilities provide evidence that what they have learnt about the English language is considered, in some levels, as incomplete. If they have been exposed to this language for years, and they have been studying this language for three years at the university and still make writing errors, then these students do not have a good command of the English language rules. They prove that they do not study this language to be professional teachers.



Focusing on the writing skills in the English language helps the students to learn this language appropriately. As one of the main principles of language acquisition, the writing process can expose a student's knowledge, which is obtained in his or her learning of this foreign language. Speaking fluently in English does not mean that a student has covered every part of this language. Any uneducated person can speak in his or her mother tongue starting from three or four years old. But this person cannot write any word, because he or she has not experienced the language learning academically. Thus, it cannot be true that any person, speaking in any language, can be really good in that language. Here, writing can cover a great part of the language acquisition process, because it is a physical matter and can be recorded in the mind and be kept for a long period of time.







Generally, writing in English can show how much a student has learnt from this language. It can show to what extent the student is able to be put in an environment dealing with this foreign language. The errors, made by the students of the English language in their writings, can be gathered and classified. Thus, the weak part can be studied and determined how to be solved and put an end of committing such an error. In addition, the grammar rules of English should be studied intensively, so as to help the students avoid making such errors.

In this study the main problems the students face in learning the English language, and the factors, which cause these problems were investigated. The errors, which the English language learners make had been analysed and the obstacles these students encountered could help the researcher come to an overall view of the best ways and strategies to develop the writing skills and decrease the repetition of these writing errors.

### 1.5 Purpose of the study

The intention of this study was to investigate the writing errors made by students for whom English was not their native language. The respondents of this study were '31' students of the English language department who study this foreign language so as to be proficient and graduate as English language teachers. These students had many writing problems, but the selected errors, which investigated in this study, were affective and they weakened the students' fluency and their command of the English language. Furthermore, these serious problems also affect the writing skills of the





Kurdish students English language learners. The researcher designed this study to be a mixture of a qualitative and quantitative method, but mostly with qualitative instructions and features in order to discuss and explain the nature of committing the selected errors and the reasons of committing such errors.

These errors affect the learning process of this language, so it should not be left without searching for the weak points. The students will benefit from the results of this study and the theories that they should go with, so as to avoid committing writing errors in learning the English language. This study will be a resource for further studies and some other researchers will benefit from this study as well.

The errors which were selected for investigation in this study were:



1. Misuse of tenses.
2. Misuse of singular/plural forms.
3. Subject-verb agreement.
4. Articles.
5. Prepositions.
6. Spelling.
7. Logical Connectors.





## 1.6 Research questions

The research questions focused on the grammatical errors made by the students of the English language department at University of Duhok in Kurdistan of Iraq. The questions, which guided the researcher in designing the research, were:

- 1- What is the nature of each selected error made by the Kurdish learners of the English language?
- 2- What are the causes of the errors made by these students?
- 3- How do these errors affect the writing skills of these students?



According to Selinker (1972) interlanguage is a temporary grammar which is systematic and composed of rules. Interlanguage is the third language of a learner created by his/her own knowledge in the acquisition of the second language. The rules which are made by the learner are unique and they are not the same as his/her mother language rules and also cannot be found in the rules of the target language. This language has its own grammar and lexicon and many other rules.

The students when learning the English language create a language between their mother tongue and the English language. The rules of the grammar which they produce are not found in the L1 and L2, thus they feel that they are correct and their production is considered right. The teacher can have an idea or knowledge about the





utterances of his/her own students. The teacher can predict what a student means in his/her spoken or written form. But, this created grammar or interlanguage does not always have the same rules and structures. Ellis (1997: 33) says that " *the learner's grammar is transitional. Learners change their grammar from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules, and restructuring the whole system.* " Therefore, when the students feel that their L2 knowledge becomes complex, they reformulate the rules in order to escape from this complexity.

This theory was used to explain why the Kurdish students make interlingual errors. In learning the English language, Kurdish students made many interlingual errors, which generally affected their fluency and proficiency. Searching for such interlingual errors could help other researchers to have an idea of the forms of these errors and the nature of making them. Furthermore, it will help them understand why such errors occurred and the reason behind making these errors.

The interlingual interference was not the only cause of the error production; here the intralingual transfer has its own effect on the production part of the second language. Richards (1971b) explains that the intralingual transfer "*reflects the general characteristics of rule learning such as a faulty generalisation, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply*". Therefore, the intralingual transfer generally involves the overgeneralization of rules in the second language production. The students overgeneralize the rules from one single part of the second language utterance and apply them to other parts and consider them correct. Generally, this kind of overgeneralization is the reason of the irregular rules of the English language. Some rules, like the past form of a verb, differ from one to another,





and sometimes the prepositions and their use confuse the students and make them use incorrect ones.

The researcher invested this theory to find out how these errors were committed and how they affected the writing skills of the Kurdish students. Because students cannot control all the English language rules, they made different types of writing errors. These errors were grammatical, mechanical and lexical. Most intralingual errors were overgeneralization ones. The Kurdish students overgeneralised the English language rules, such as plural forms and verb forms, as the following examples.

Examples:



- They taked the car.
- Mouses are dirty.

These examples are from the researcher so as to show how these overgeneralization errors occur. Such errors could be shown in many writings of the participants of this study. Therefore, the researcher aimed to find out how the Kurdish students make these errors and what are the nature and the forms of such errors.





According to Schütz (2007), the monitor hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of the latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. The 'monitor' plays as a planning, editing and correcting function when three specific conditions are met: that is, the second language learner has sufficient time at his/her disposal, he/she focuses on form or thinks about correctness, and he/she knows the rule.

Krashen (1981) states that the use of the monitor is affected by the amount of time that the second language learner has at his/her disposal to think about the utterance he/she is about to produce, the focus on form, and his/her knowledge of second language rules.



Klein (1986: 28) explains Krashen's monitor theory and states that "The monitor theory can become effective in a communication situation only if (a) there is enough time to operate it, (b) the speaker is concerned with the correctness of his speech production, and (c) the speaker knows the correct rule." The students think of what they are going to produce, in the spoken or written form. Here the errors, which may occur, can be reduced if the students monitor their sentences and they can avoid committing these errors repeatedly. The student, while producing an utterance in the English language, can think about the rules of this language and control the production of this utterance.





The Kurdish language rules lead students to depend on these rules and count them as correct. These rules affect the English language acquisition and can, many times, replace the English rules. Many students think in their mother tongue and create sentences in English, but without using the English language grammar rules. When the students write a paragraph, they translate the first language sentence into English and maintain the rules of the first language. In changing the first language to the English language, the students' first language controls the production of the utterances in the English language.

These students mainly depend on the rules of their mother tongue and think that these rules are the same when they write a paragraph in the English language. The Kurdish language rules are not the same as the rules of the English language.

Therefore, the students in their writings think in the Kurdish language and they just translate the sentences into English.

It is difficult for the students to know all the rules of the foreign language, because even the best students do not learn every rule which is being taught. They cannot remember every rule they have learned, and cannot always correctly apply the rules they remember. Furthermore, every rule of a language is not always included in a text nor taught by the teachers.



## 1.8 Significance of the study

The study in this area of error analysis is still essential in the Kurdistan Region. This study focused on the writing problems of the Kurdish students of the English language department at the Faculty of Humanities of University of Duhok. These students had writing weaknesses and the errors they made were serious.

Many English language teachers will be interested in this study and many students will benefit from it as well. Since a lot of researches are not available in Kurdistan of Iraq, the teachers may have an idea of the errors made by the students and the causes of these errors. Depending on the theories of the previous studies, which focus on this particular error analysis area, the teachers will have an overall view of the main causes of making EFL students to commit such errors. This may help them to teach the students in a suitable academic way that helps the students do better in their writings and commit fewer errors. Many students like to have an idea about what other students do in their writings and how they make errors. Students can be of the university, who study the English language to improve their proficiency. It is difficult to find previous researches, which present the writing problems of the Kurdish learners of English in University of Duhok, especially the online ones.







## 1.9 Limitation of the study

The present study was limited to the third year Kurdish students of the English language department of the Faculty of Humanities. These students are attending the evening classes at University of Duhok in Kurdistan of Iraq. A class of '31' students was chosen and data were collected depending on the written essays of these students. The female students were '17', while the male students were '14'. This class of students had studied the English literature and they had also studied and presented many novels and plays for two semesters. This class of third year students was chosen among first, second and fourth year classes, because these students study essay writing for two semesters and the aim was to seek for the writing problems they had.



## 1.10 Summary

This chapter presented the background of the problem and some selected writing problems of the Kurdish students. As it was mentioned before, the aim of this study was investigating the selected writing problems such as spelling, misuse of tenses, articles, subject-verb agreement, preposition, misuse of singular/plural forms and logical connectors. The Kurdish students, who are students of the English language department at Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok in Kurdistan of Iraq, make these errors in their writings. In addition, the intention of this chapter was to show how serious these problems were. The presented theories in this chapter helped the researcher to design a framework of the different effects on the learning and the production of the English language.

