



## The Effect of L1 Negative Transfer on EFL Saudi Students' Use of Grammar in Writing

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### Abstract:

The present study aimed at investigating the effect of the L1 negative transfer on the writing of EFL Saudi students. It examined the common grammatical errors that Saudi students made while writing in English and analyzed the sources of their errors. The samples consisted of English essays written by 74 freshmen female students enrolled at Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia. The samples were analyzed and the errors classified according to grammatical sub-categories including tenses, singular/plural markers, prepositions, articles and pronouns. This study found that 81% of the students' errors can be accounted for in terms of L1 transfer. Grammatical errors were the most frequent ones, recording 67% of the total rate of errors. More specifically, preposition (40%) and tense (32%) errors constituted the most frequent subcategories of the grammatical errors. It was concluded that learning basic linguistic differences between Saudi students' L1 and English language is a necessary condition for helping the learners to overcome the problem of first language interference in their writing.

**Keywords:** Negative Transfer, Interlingual Errors, Interferences.

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## تأثير النقل السلبي للغة الأولى على الاستخدام النحوي في الكتابة بالإنجليزية للطلاب السعوديين بوصفهم متعلمي لغة أجنبية

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### الملخص:

هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى معرفة تأثير النقل السلبي للغة الأولى على كتابة الطالبات السعوديات للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية. كما اختبرت الدراسة الطالبات السعوديات في الأخطاء النحوية الشائعة أثناء الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية، وحللت مصادر أخطائهن. وتم اختيار العينة من مقالات باللغة الإنجليزية كتبها 74 طالبة مستجدة في جامعة المجمعة في المملكة العربية السعودية. وقد تم تحليل العينة وتصنيف الأخطاء وفقاً للفئات النحوية الفرعية بما في ذلك الأزمنة، علامات الإفراد والجمع، حروف الجر، أدوات التعريف، والضمائر. وقد وجدت الدراسة أن 81% من الأخطاء يمكن تفسيرها بأنها نتيجة النقل من اللغة الأولى. وكانت الأخطاء النحوية هي الأكثر شيوعاً، إذ بلغت نسبتها 67% من إجمالي الأخطاء. وبشكل أكثر تحديداً، شكلت أخطاء حروف الجر (40%) وأخطاء الزمن (32%) بنسبة أكثر شيوعاً في الأخطاء النحوية. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن تعلم الفروق اللغوية الأساسية بين اللغة الأولى للطلاب (اللغة العربية) واللغة الإنجليزية هو شرط ضروري لمساعدة المتعلمين في التغلب على مشكلة تداخل اللغة الأولى في كتاباتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقل السلبي، الأخطاء البينية، تداخل اللغة، الأخطاء النحوية.

\* أستاذ اللغويات التطبيقية المساعد - قسم اللغة الإنجليزية - كلية التربية - جامعة المجمعة - المملكة العربية السعودية.

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© نُشر هذا البحث وفقاً لشروط الرخصة Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو إضافته إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أُجريت عليه.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Effect of L1 on EFL Learners' Writing

Writing is among the basic standards used to measure teaching effects, yet it is the field of language learning where students' improvement is very difficult to achieve and maintain. This difficulty might be caused by the phenomenon that the mother tongue usually shapes the foreign language (FL) learners' mode of thinking, and hence constitutes a main hindrance that interferes with their writing in the foreign language, an issue that has been widely discussed in linguistics and second language acquisition (Wang, 2015).

In the context of English language learning by Arab students, Shabbir and Bughio (2009) confirmed that English and Arabic languages are different in many areas, including their letters, vowels, pronunciation and capitalization systems, articles, and modes of writing (p.75). The effect of lack of awareness of these differences on the English writing of Arab learners is highlighted by Abdul Kareem (2013) who stated that those learners encounter many problems in this area, among which is L1 interference with the target language. Hussein and Mohammad (2011) highlighted the same problem in relation to the students in Qatari University. Rajab, Darus & Aladdin (2016) take the argument further by stating that most EFL Arab students tend to reproduce some of the characteristics and forms of the mother tongue in FL writing, a problem which is also referred back to the unfamiliarity with the differences between Arabic and English features. This lack of awareness of language differences may lead to different types of errors, among which are grammatical errors and odd structures in FL written production (Rajab, Darus & Aladdin, 2016). Therefore, analyzing errors in the writings of EFL learners could be useful to the teachers, since it will make them aware of both the kinds and the sources of errors made by the students, which, in turn, will help them apply more effective teaching techniques to enhance the writing competence of English language learners. Moreover, teachers can provide learners with valuable guidelines which help them avoid making any more errors (Al-Hassan, 2013 & Alotaibi, 2014).



This study examined the grammatical errors that by Saudi EFL university students frequently make while writing in English, and to explore the error sources at the word and the sentence levels in relation to sub-categories as tense form, singular/plural markers, prepositions, articles and pronouns.

## 1.2 Study Questions

This paper sought to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1- What types of grammatical errors are common in the writings of Saudi EFL university students?
- 2- How far can L1 negative transfer account for the grammatical errors observed in the writings of EFL Saudi students?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Approaches to L1 Influences on EFL Learning

Some linguistic schools highlighted the positive effect of the mother tongue on learning EFL. Among those are the behaviourist school represented by Cooter & Reutzel (2004) who believed that the learning is based on the imitating and repeating a structure to which the learner was previously exposed and which helps him to reproduce a new one. Associative learning also linked the process of acquiring L2 with associations, similarities, and differences that assist learners to define phenomena in relation to L1 items rather than separately (Schmidt, 2012). This approach changed the view upon errors, by ceasing to consider them as markers of the difficulties faced by learners', but as "a learner's active attempts at systematic development via intake" (Ellis, 1997, p. 187). In the same line of thought, Yadav (2014) stated that L1 has to be seen as a means that is intentionally or unintentionally used by the learners to arrange the received data, the mater which leads to producing correct structures.

This view was opposed by the communicative approach which emphasized the concept that all new FLs have to be learnt only via the new languages, suggesting complete rejection of L1, which is viewed as a hindrance in the way of learning foreign languages (Cristina, 2020). Furthermore, the cognitive approach believed that by relying heavily on their mother tongue,



the learners will face certainly more difficulties in learning a FL; moreover, L1 interference will enlarge the number of errors made by the FL learners (Cristina, 2020).

## 2.2 Definition of Error types

Cunning (1987) defined errors as regular deviations from what is learned as the norms of a language (p. 87). To avoid the confusion between "error" and "mistake", James (1998) argued that while the error "cannot be self-corrected", it is possible to self-correct a mistake if the deviation in language is identified to the learner (p. 83). Corder (1973:277) differentiated between four basic categories of errors; namely, omission, incorrect or unnecessary addition, the choice of an incorrect element, and mis-ordering of items. Under each category, sub-categories of language i.e., morphology, phonology, lexicon, grammar, and discourse, are classified.

According to Brown (2000), the two basic sources of errors are the interlingual and intralingual. Selinker (1972) referred to interlingual errors as the knowledge of L2, which is both systematic and autonomous of the L1 and the target language of foreign learners. Intralingual or transfer error, on the other hand, are caused by the learners' lack of L2 basic information or their attentional ability to activate the proper L2 routine (Kavaliauskiene, 2009). Moreover, transfer could be positive or negative. The transfer is described as positive if it is justified, which is the case when the two languages are similar in their structure; but, if the transfer is unjustified because the two languages are structurally different, this would be considered a case of 'interference' or 'negative transfer' (Wilkins, 1972, p.199). The interlingual errors are committed at varied levels of transfer, e.g., transferring the mother tongue phonological, morphological, grammatical and lexical elements into the FL. On the other hand, intralingual errors are committed when learners attempt to construct ideas about FL based on their inadequate knowledge of this language (Erdogan, 2005). There are different forms of interlingual errors, such as overgeneralization, simplification, communication- based and induced errors.

### 2.3 Error Analysis Models

Brown (1980) described error analysis in terms of observing, analyzing, and categorizing learner's deviations from systems (as cited in Hasyim, 2002, p.43). Corder (1971), in his error analysis model illustrated below, classified differences between utterances of learners and their reconstructed version.

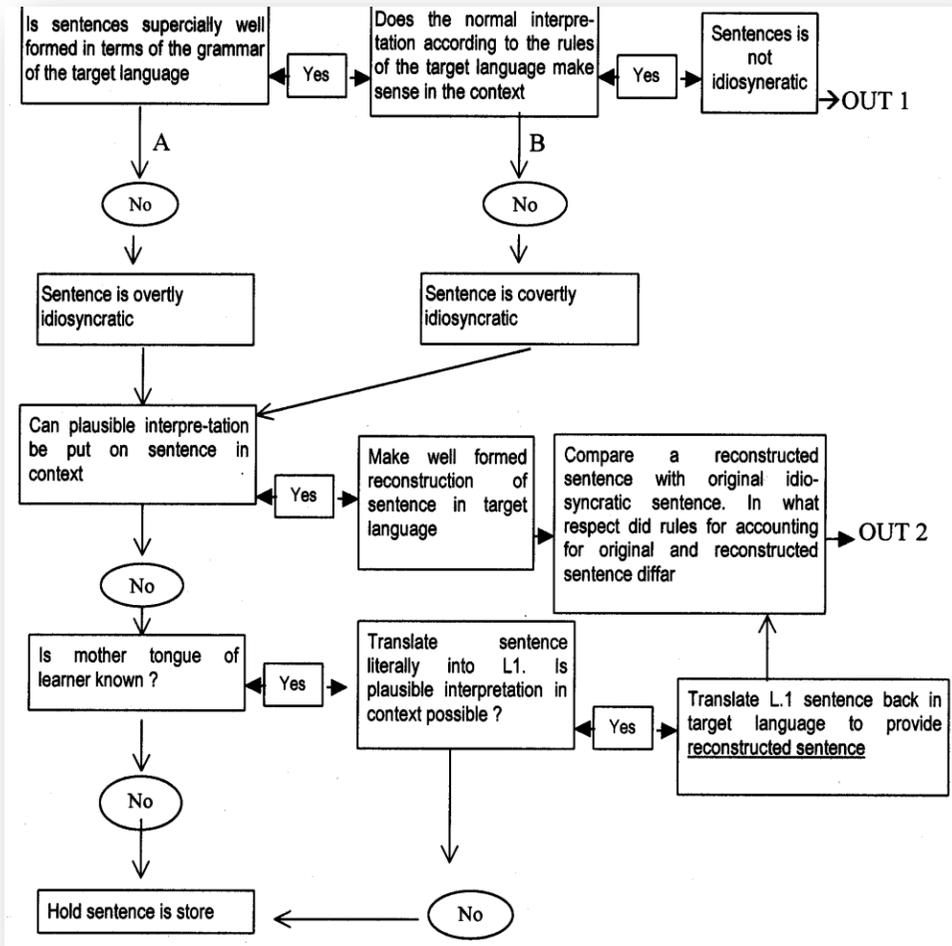


Figure 1. Corder's Model (1971)

(Adapted from Brown, 2000, p.221 and Hasyim, 2002, p.43)



## 2.4 Related Studies

Otoshi (2005) established a taxonomy of grammatical errors based on analysis of five linguistic error categories, related to verbs, nouns, articles, incorrect word choices, and incorrect sentence structures; the latter of which was found to be the most challenging for the Japanese learners EFL, in comparison to errors in verb, which proved to be the least challenging. Nazemi and Najafi (2012) also investigated the common error types made by Iranian graduate students specialized in English at various levels. Findings indicated that 10 most frequently committed kinds of errors amongst the three participating groups were related to punctuation marks, lexical choices, spelling, use of articles, verb formation, plural forms, prepositions, tenses, subject-verb agreement, and clause formations. Similarly, Sattari (2012) found out that errors related to grammar in the English compositions written by Persian learners at the elementary level were mostly caused by the influence of their mother tongue.

Wang (2015) was also interested in negative transfer of L1 on writing in English. His samples were collected from English writing tests given to 63- Second Year Jiujiang University students, whose major was Education of English language. The researcher found out that negative transfer was the main cause of the students' categories of writing errors. The researcher also found that the transfer errors consciously or unconsciously committed by students in their writing were the result of their L1 effect; since most students resorted to translating English words based on their meaning in Chinese. In a similar research, Abdul Ridha (2012) examined the effect of students' mother tongue on the errors made in 80 samples of English writing performed by EFL college students. She classified the errors types into lexical, grammatical, mechanical, and word-order. It was found that the most common types were the grammatical errors and the mechanical errors, which resulted from learners' reliance on mother tongue to express what they think.



Khatteer (2019) aimed at exploring the most common essay writing errors committed by Saudi learners at Majmaah University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and investigating their sources. She revealed that the most frequent types of errors were punctuation errors, spelling errors,

preposition errors, article errors, wrong verb tense, wrong word form respectively. She mentioned that writing in English as a foreign language is challenging for students. Also, she found that interlingual and intralingual transfer was the main source of the most common errors.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Objective

The study aimed at exploring the impact of L1 negative transfer on the EFL Saudi learners' writing. It aimed to examine the most common grammatical errors that are detected in Saudi students' writing in English and analyze the sources of these errors.

#### 3.2. Significance of Study

The study aspires to highlight the importance of making English language learners aware of the necessity of being well acquainted with English grammatical conventions to use them correctly in writing and also of being acquainted with the differences between their L1 and the FL (English) grammatical systems. The study will also guide teachers of English in Saudi universities in regard to major common grammatical errors made by English university learners due to the differences between Arabic and English grammatical rules. Accordingly, it reveals an essential influence impacting the English writing of Saudi University students.

#### 3.3 Participants

The sample of this study involved 74 students. The study participants are freshmen female students enrolled in the English department in Rumah, Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia, during first semester of the academic year 1443/1444 corresponding to 2021/2022.



Participants were asked to write in English on any of the three following topics: the ideal teacher (a descriptive paragraph), their childhood (a narrative paragraph), two cities that they visited (a comparative paragraph).

### 3.4 Procedures

The researcher adopted Abdul Ridha's classification (2012) of grammatical errors, which conducts analysis of errors at both the word level and the sentence level, including grammatical sub-categories as tense, singular/plural markers, prepositions, articles and pronouns. Seventy-four paragraphs were collected and analyzed to detect different interlingual errors. Seventy-four paragraphs were collected for the purpose of identifying and analyzing different interlingual errors. The researcher corrected the essays to find the grammatical errors according to Abdul Ridha's classification and to specify the interlingual errors depending on her knowledge in English grammar as a specialist in English linguistics. Finally, numbers of errors in each category were counted and percentages were calculated.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Research Question One, which relates to the types of grammatical errors frequently detected in EFL Saudi students' writings is answered based on the results mentioned in the following figure.

Figure 2 provides details of the various subcategories of grammatical errors. Preposition errors, which occurred with the rate of (40%), ranked first as they were the highest in rate of occurrence among other grammatical sub-categories. It constituted the most problematic area in the writings of the population of English students. Tense errors, which were detected with the rate of (32%), ranked second. Pronoun errors, which occurred with the rate of (17%), ranked third. Singular/ plural noun errors, recording a rate of (7%) ranked fourth among other grammatical sub-categories. Articles, recording a rate of (4%), ranked last.

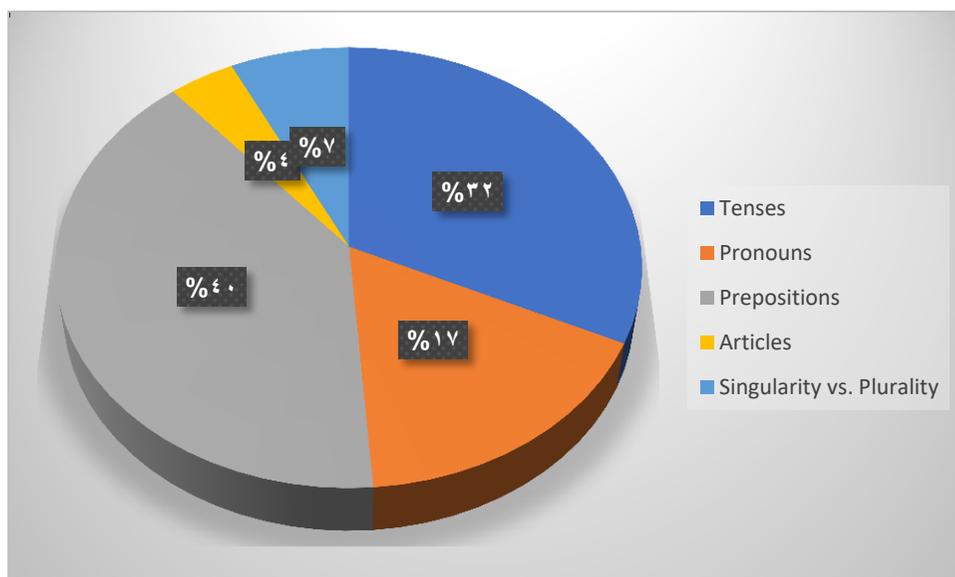


Figure 2. Grammatical Error-Subcategories

#### 4.1 Prepositions

Prepositions were found to be the utmost dominant error in the Saudi students' English writings. In this sense, it could be argued that prepositions constitute an exclusive area of error making among EFL learners. The choice of the appropriate preposition is among the most problematic areas facing EFL learners. This can be explained in the light of the fact that English depends on several prepositions that perform the same function. As a result, usage of the appropriate preposition in a certain sentence is usually problematic to decide. The researcher classified the prepositional errors resulting from language transfer based on Corder (1973)'s four main categories of errors, i.e., omission of a necessary element, unnecessary or incorrect addition of an element, selection of an incorrect element, and mis-ordering of some elements.

Substitution errors formed the vast majority of transfer errors made by Saudi EFL learners, with rate of 52%. This implies that the errors stemming from replacing one preposition with another are the highest in rate among all other types of errors. Moreover,



addition errors ranked second, scoring 30%. Misordering errors came third, constituting 18.4% of the overall number of errors. Omission errors fourth, scoring 4%. This showed that errors where the learners delay a required preposition are the least among all types. The overuse of substitution errors can be clarified by the fact that the learners faced difficulty in choosing the correct preposition much more than adding a necessary preposition or deleting unnecessary preposition. These findings support the result of Castro (2013) who examined the acquisition of English prepositions among Filipino college students, concluding that substitution errors were the majority among all other types of errors. Table 1 below provides some examples of the effect of L1 negative transfer on students' erroneous use of prepositions in writing.

1. I went to Makkah ___in___ the fifteenth of Ramadan.	In this sentence, the student incorrectly substituted the preposition 'in' for 'on' as a result of L1 negative transfer.
2. Problems _____ understandinge topic are.....	In this sentence, the student did not provide the preposition (of) as a result of L1 transfer. This is because in Arabic, there are no prepositions placed between the genitive and the noun following it.
3. It is raining. Let us go _to_ ___ home.	In this sentence, the student incorrectly added the preposition 'to', where it is not required. This error is traceable to L1 transfer.
4. They are living – from ----- a big house.	In this sentence, the student misused the preposition 'from', employing it instead of 'at' as a result of L1 negative transfer.

**Table 1. Effect of L1 Negative Transfer on Prepositions**



## 4.2 Tenses

### 4.2.1 Omission of verb to Be

Saudi students committed many grammatical errors in the tense usage for different reasons. Most students, for example, omitted verb "to be" with the simple present and simple past tense. This is shown in the following examples in Table 2:

1. The suitable sport football.
2. They boys.
3. We proud of you.
4. She sick yesterday.

**Table 2. Effect of L1 Negative Transfer on Tenses**

Arabic simple present tense indicates both simple and progressive aspects, which caused the students to make the following grammatical errors of transfer due to the effect of L1:

1. He calling now.
2. We driving quickly.

**Table 3. L1 negative transfer (Tenses)**

### 4.2.2 Omission of verb 'to Do' in Negative and Interrogative Simple Tense Sentences

As noted above, the tense errors are caused by negative transfer since exact equivalents between L2 perfect, continuous, and future tense and the tenses in L1 do not exist.

Another problem relating to tense transfer was observed in the students' inability to form correct and complete negative or interrogative structures, particularly in relation to the simple present and the simple past tense, for no equivalent to modal auxiliaries (i.e., do, does



and did) exist in Arabic. This problem of omission of verb to do with its various forms in the negative and interrogative sentences is shown in the examples in Table 4 below:

1. He was not work hard.
2. Are you go there?
3. Teacher was not explain all the lessons.

**Table 4. L1 Negative Transfer of verb Do in Simple and Present Negative and Interrogative Sentences**

#### 4.2.3. *Misuse of Tense*

Furthermore, the students used simple present and simple past in all cases, which indicated that they could not differentiate between the verb tenses, especially the continuous and passive form of the tenses, since no exact equivalent forms are found in Arabic. An example of this error is, 'I born in Riyadh in 2000'.

#### 4.3 Pronouns

Pronouns transfer was also problematic in students' writing because there was no exact equivalent for some pronouns in Arabic. The obvious omission of some pronouns such as the subject 'I' also revealed L1 negative transfer effect. In Arabic, personal pronouns are often added to verbs without resorting to an independent pronoun as in 'Hope to find my bag'. In addition, the English pronoun 'it,' indicating neutral gender, has no equivalent in Arabic. Thus, the pronouns 'he' or 'she' were misused by Saudi students to refer inanimate objects or concepts, as, for example, in 'She has black fur'. Besides, unawareness of the role of object pronouns caused confusion to the students; for in English, the word or the morpheme can signify an object pronoun and a possessive adjective, i.e., (his/him, her/her, their/ them, your/you). Hence, it was possible that a student would make the following error in choosing the pronoun 'He can't answer the questions, the exam is difficult for *his*'.



#### 4.4 Singular /plural nouns

Saudi students omitted the plural morpheme-indicator 's'. Moreover, they transferred the concept literally from Arabic to indicate the singularity or plurality of some of the English words based on their mother language rules. This is shown in the examples in Table 5 below:

1. She put three book and pen on the table.
2. All peoples will die.
3. These informations are important.
4. Womens are very sensitive.

**Table 5. Effect of L1 Negative Transfer on Singular/Plural Nouns**

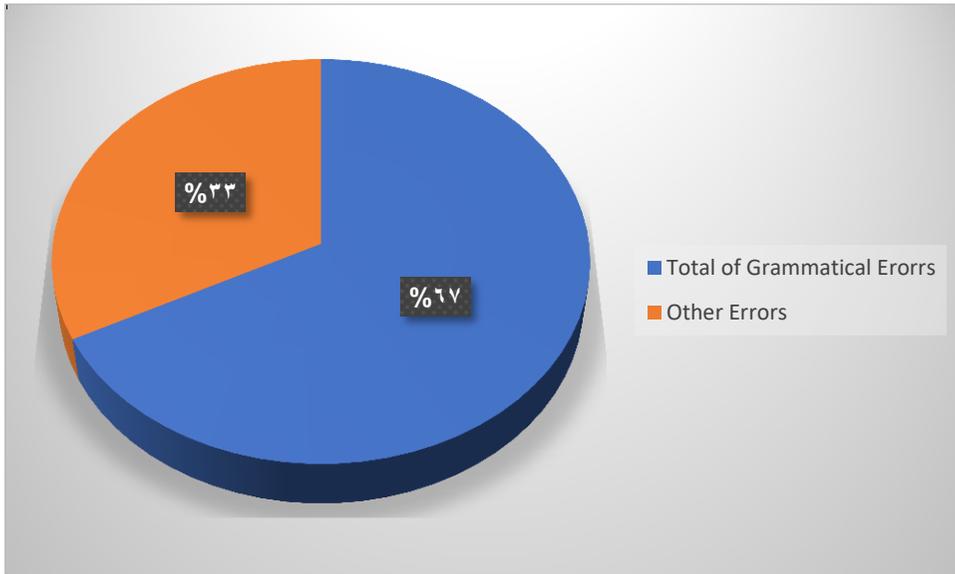
#### 4.5 Articles

Articles represent another sub-category that was misused by Saudi students who formed the sample of the study. The abstract nouns in English writing do not have to be preceded by the definite article 'the,' but Arabic abstract words are always headed by a definite article. Also, definite articles in L1 are either affixed to a noun or to an adjective. Moreover, the omission of the articles 'a, an' was shown in the students' writing since no equivalents exist in Arabic. The errors resulting from direct transfer of L1 rules to L2 in relation to articles is shown in the examples included in Table 6 below:

1. The men are stronger than women.
2. The happiness is the best feeling.
3. I will travel to the Kuwait in vacation.

**Table 6. Effect of L1 Negative Transfer on Articles**

The answer to second research question is illustrated in the following figure, which reveals results related to whether L1 negative transfer can account for grammatical errors in the EFL Saudi students' writings.



**Figure3. Interlingual Errors**

A total number of interlingual errors was found to be 740 (81.22%) out of 911 total errors in the Saudi students' writings. Categorization of interlingual errors revealed that 501 of the errors fall under the grammatical category. Figure. 3 shows that interlingual errors illustrates their distribution based on their categories. The figure shows that the category of grammatical errors, which recorded (67%) of the total amount of errors, was the most dominant among the error categories. These findings support those of Rajab, Darus & Aladdin (2016) who believed that the unfamiliarity with the different aspects of Arabic and English confused the EFL Arab students, leading them to turn to their mother tongue in order to mimic some of its aspects and forms and apply them in their FL writing. Thus, this unfamiliarity differences between the rules of the two languages may lead to various types of errors, especially grammatical errors in FL written production.



## 5. Conclusion:

The study identified and analyzed some types of grammatical errors in the EFL Saudi university students' writings in English. It was found that the most of the errors made by the students can be attributed to L1 negative transfer, since most participants relied on their mother tongue in expressing their ideas in writing the required English paragraphs. The most frequently detected errors in the students' writings were the grammatical errors. More specifically, prepositions and tenses errors constituted the most frequent subcategories of grammatical errors made by the study participants.

It could be concluded that the effect of Arabic (L1) on the students' writings in English should be considered by teachers as a main cause affecting their negative transfer of FL in their learning process. Thus, teachers should consider applying more suitable methods to develop their students' knowledge of English grammar, and help them understand linguistic differences between students' L1 and English to reduce interference from their first language. Moreover, students must practice writing more. According to Khatter (2019), the number of hours assigned to the teaching of writing should be increased. Also, Learner-centered curricula provided to the specific learners' needs should be reconsidered. Furthermore, Zaidi (2022) in his contrastive analysis of seven parts of speech in Arabic and English revealed that L1 transfer is inescapable for EFL students within the Saudi context. This is a result of the fact that is English and Arabic are typologically two different languages. Actually, they are not only dissimilar in sentence structures but also their grammatical rules and regulations are diametrically opposite. Thus, more care should be taken towards academic writing tasks for EF students.

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