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IDENTIFYING THE MOST COMMON ERRORS
IN SAUDI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' WRITING:
DOES THE PROMPT MATTER?

by

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B.A. Taibah University, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures
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at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the most common writing errors made by undergraduate Saudi students with special focus on the five most common errors. The study also examined whether the type of prompt has an effect on the frequency of these errors. 58 English major students participated in this study, and each student wrote two timed essays. The first one was persuasive and the second one was compare and contrast. In order to analyze the data, the researcher used an error inventory developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012) based on Ferris (2002), which categorized ten types of errors. However, five other errors were added to this category later, which resulted in a combination of fifteen types of errors.

The findings revealed that missing/unnecessary word was the most frequent type of error (17.86%), followed by spelling errors (15.66%), wrong choice (14.00%), article (7.68%), wrong noun form (6.68%). In addition, the results showed that the type of prompt had no effect on the number of errors. However, it had an influence on the frequency and types of errors, which was manifested in the differences between the last two categories of the five most common errors found in prompts A and B.

This humble work is dedicated to
my beloved parents, Mohamad Barzanji and Najat Khomri,
whose memory, compassion, and love I will never forget,
my husband, Ahmad Altuhami,
my son, Ayman Altuhami,
and
my friend, Rebecca Sandy

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the problem

Writing as a skill has a substantial role in both L1 and in L2 teaching. Having good writing skills has become one of the most important requirements in the professional and academic world. As a result, the demand for experienced and professional writing teachers has dramatically increased, in particular for L2 writing teachers, which in turn has compelled many researchers to examine and investigate the L2 writing process including its genres, conventions, types, and rules. Writing in L2 is not a simple task; instead, it is a complex process that requires learning many subskills and strategies concerning the target language. Since writing is one of the productive skills, it usually takes more time and effort from students to master it. Thereby, it is no surprise when L2 learners view writing as frustrating and even intimidating. Brown (2010) states that not all children who have received L1 writing instruction in the developed countries are capable of composing clear and organized writings that convey their intended purposes. L2 learners have more difficulty when it comes to writing well-organized and error-free compositions.

Research in L2 writing is in great need of more studies in order to fill the gap of the existing literature regarding specific populations or issues that receive little attention, refute some myths and assumptions, strengthen existing theories, or provide more clarifications and evidence for L2 writing issues. Therefore, many studies have been conducted recently to investigate the main issues concerning the process of L2 composition. One of the most important topics to be discussed in this discipline is L2 students' writing errors. Analyzing and correcting L2 writing errors are two important areas in the L2 writing pedagogy.

Background and Need

Arab EFL learners in general and Saudi students in particular are facing a lot of difficulties when writing in English. Shukri (2014) stated that Arab EFL learners were stereotyped as having inadequate writing skills. In another article, Ezza (2010) mentioned that Arab EFL learners were usually perceived to be responsible for their poor writing skills. Moreover, Cummings (1991) added that, according to the Western perspectives, Arab EFL writers were considered to be knowledge tellers instead of language transformers (as cited in Shukri, 2014). In addition, according to Khuwaileh (1995a), the errors produced by Arab learners were considered to be seriously confusing to many native speakers (as cited in Khuwaileh & Al Shoumali, 2000). For instance, Allen (1970) stated that, in their writing, Arab EFL/ESL learners were likely to discuss one point several times from different angles, which had the potential to confuse the native English reader (as cited in Khuwaileh & Al Shoumali, 2000).

In the case of Saudi students, the origin of their writing difficulties relates to several factors. One is the nature of EFL context that has limited resources and opportunities for practicing the L2. Additionally, L1 interference, cultural resistance, lack of motivation, the type of curriculum, traditional methods of instruction which emphasize the teacher's role, and rote memorization are all considered main reasons for Saudi students' struggle with the writing skill in English (Shukri, 2014; Javid, Farooq, & Umer, 2013).

Al-Seghayer (2011) stated that Saudi students were ranked 39 out of 40 in a report published by the Cambridge Examination Center in 2009. This report was written to evaluate the proficiency level of ESOL students in 40 countries (as cited in Javid et al., 2013). Garmi (2010) also added that on the IELTS test report, Saudi students' results showed that the average score in

listening, speaking, and reading were low, yet the average score of the writing section was even lower (as cited in Javid et al., 2013).

Despite the difficulties that EFL Saudi students encounter in writing, there has not been much research on EFL writing in Saudi Arabia. Shukri (2014) and Javid et al. (2013) all admitted that there has been a scarcity in the EFL writing research in Saudi Arabia. In particular, as Javid et al. put it, in order to help Saudi students improve their writing, there has been a great need for error analysis research in which students' common errors were identified and addressed. This type of research will be particularly beneficial to overcome the difficulties Saudi student have while writing in English in addition to providing them with more time to practice.

Purpose of the study

Therefore, in order to fill this gap in research, this study attempted to investigate and identify the most common errors produced by the EFL Saudi students in their academic writing. It also investigated the relationship between the writing prompts and the number and frequency of these errors in the EFL Saudi students' academic writing.

Research questions

Two main research questions were addressed in this study. These questions are:

- 1- What are the five most common errors in the academic writing of the EFL Saudi university students?
- 2- Does the type of prompt influence the number and frequency of errors?

Design of the study

To identify the most frequent errors produced by Saudi university students in their academic writing and whether the type of writing prompt makes a difference, participants were asked to write two timed essays that were based on the TOEFL prompts. Each essay was written

in 30 minutes. The first prompt was persuasive and the second one was compare and contrast. A persuasive essay uses reason to show that one idea is more legitimate than other. A compare and contrast essay analyzes similarities and differences between things. The reason behind assigning the second prompt was to investigate whether the prompt type has an effect on the frequency of errors.

In order to classify and categorize the types of errors, the researcher used an error inventory developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012) based on Ferris (2002).

58 undergraduate students participated in this study. All of the students were in the second year majoring in English at the department of Languages and Translation at a large co-ed university located in the Western region of Saudi Arabia. The sample consisted of 67 female students from two sections (Ln4-Ln5), 27 in one section and 40 in the other section. The course was *Short Essay Writing* (Engl 215). Only 58 participated because nine students were absent on the day of the data collection.

Organization of the study

Chapter Two provides a literature review of writing research focused on error identification in writing as relates to Arabic speaking learners and specifically the Saudi students.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this study including the instrumentation, the setting, and the data collection procedures and analysis.

Chapter Four discusses the results of the study where the most common errors found in the essays were identified. It also discusses the frequency of these errors in relation to the types of the writing prompts.

Chapter Five concludes and summarizes the most important findings of the results. Additionally, it provides recommendations and suggestions in regards to the difficulties the

Saudi students face while writing in English, which in turn will open a new window to future research on this specific area.

Limitations

All the students who participated in this study were Saudi university students majoring in English. The data was collected from Saudi Arabia, and thus the findings can only be applied to Saudi or Arab students who share a similar setting and background. Conducting similar research on ESL Saudi students might yield different results due to several differences such as the setting, instructors, curriculum, the teaching methodology used by the instructors, and other cultural and linguistic factors.

The main scope of this study was to identify the most frequent L2 writing errors that appear at the sentence level; therefore, any other types of errors that go beyond this limit such as organizational, cohesive and cohesion errors were out of the study's scope. Moreover, this study examined the writing errors; thus, no inferences can be made about the errors in the other skills such as L2 speaking errors.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the most common errors in the academic writing of Saudi university students in addition to examining the influence of the types of prompts on the number and frequency of errors. This chapter will discuss the major points regarding the L2 writing, teaching writing in Saudi Arabia, error analysis, and topical knowledge areas. It will also present some of the related studies found in the current literature concerning the Saudi students.

Writing in L2

Writing and speaking are both considered productive skills in which they require the learners to produce language. L2 writing has always been used as a means to practice or to test the speaking skill; however, it has recently become an essential need for the learners who pursue academic and professional programs. There are only a few SLA theories that discuss the acquisition of the L2 writing skill (Horwitz, 2013). Schoonen, Gelderen, Glopper, Hulstijn, Simis, Snellings, and Stevenson (2008) mentioned that while writing in L1 requires several abilities such as linguistic and (meta) cognitive, L2 writing was even more complex and daunting since the required abilities may be limited or undeveloped. Moreover, even if the learner had well-developed or proficient L2 writing abilities, the accessibility to the required knowledge might be slower than in L1. Thus, some researchers such as Hopkins (1989) considered learning writing as the most difficult task for the non-native speakers (as cited in Javid et al.).

For instance, in order for the L2 learners to produce longer texts, they need to be mindful of several areas such as the organization, communicative intention, pragmalinguistic and

sociolinguistic perspectives, the audience addressed in their texts, and the function of texts (Cumming, 2001; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996 as cited in Schoonen et al., 2008). Further, they need to be aware of the metacognitive knowledge such as the required components and strategies to write a good text (Flower & Hayes, 1980 as cited in Schoonen et al., 2008). Due to this complexity, it has been difficult for the writing scholars to come up with a model that discusses the subskills used in writing (Abbott & Berninger, 1993; & Grabe & Kaplan, 1996 as cited in Schoonen et al., 2008).

Despite its importance in the SLA field, L2 writing has not received that much focus until recently. Due to the dominant role of the speaking skill in the 1960's that was supported by the audio lingual method, the role of writing in learning an L2 was limited and vastly ignored (Matsuda, 2003, pp. 15-16). Matsuda also mentioned that unlike speaking, L2 writing did not get the researchers' attention and become an issue until the last decade.

The early appearance of writing in L2 classes was in the form of controlled composition in which writers' compositions were exclusive to the sentence-level structure. Pincas (1982) mentioned that according to the behavioral theory, this method was believed to be ideal because it helped to prevent the learner's errors (as cited in Matsuda, 2003, pp. 19-20). Later, many attempts occurred in order to provide more freedom in the L2 composition such as guided composition and organizational structure (Matsuda, 2003). Matsuda added that the focus on texts shifted in the late 1970's to the notion of writing as a process that was developed by Vivian Zamel in 1976. Zamel believed that in addition to the textual features such as syntax and discourse structures, writing in L2 needed to be seen as a process. As a result of this notion, many teachers and researchers started to change their methodological orientation from focusing on the written text to focusing on the writing process itself. Therefore, many intervention

strategies were introduced to this field such as considering multiple drafts and emphasizing the role of feedback.

Currently, the number of nonnative speakers in the U.S. schools and universities has been rapidly increasing, which consequently has increased the demand for ESL instruction. Reid (1993) stated that in order to pass the writing placement examination set by the universities in the English speaking countries, ESL students need to produce proficient and competent compositions. Accordingly, several composition courses were created specifically for the international students in the U.S. as well as abroad in order to meet the needs for this growing population. For example, programs such as ESP and EAP were created in order to teach the language in context. Thus, according to Johns & Dudley-Evans (1991) and Jordan (1997), new features were included in the writing classes such as the different aspects and genres of writing that correspond with the different usages and contexts of the language (as cited in Matsuda, 2003).

EFL writing in Saudi Arabia

According to Rahman (2011), English is taught as a compulsory subject in Saudi Arabia, starting in sixth grade. Although English was considered a minor subject in the past, it has become one of the most important subjects recently. Furthermore, in some universities and schools, English has become the main language of instruction, especially for science and technology majors. In fact, having a good proficiency in English has become one of the most essential requirements and qualifications to get a white-collar job in Saudi Arabia (Rahman, 2011). However, despite all the money that has been spent annually by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in order to improve English teaching and learning, Rahman (2011) claimed that even after six years of English instruction, Saudi undergraduate students failed to acquire English

proficiency. In another article, Grami (2010) supported Rahman's claim by stating that the results of the university entrance examinations showed that Saudi students exhibited low language proficiency in English (as cited in Javid et al., 2013). Moreover, Rahman added that even after graduation, Saudi students could barely produce satisfactory skills in English.

Consequently, acquiring the writing skill in English poses a lot of challenges for many Saudi learners. According to Aljarf (2007), teaching writing is deemed to be the most challenging task for language teachers and learners in Saudi Arabia (as cited in Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, and Gaudel, 2015). Despite these challenges, teaching writing has not received considerable attention. For example, in his study, Rahman (2011) developed a questionnaire in order to investigate the Saudi undergraduate learners' needs towards learning English with specific focus on their attitudes and motivations. Interestingly, he found that both teachers and students viewed writing as the least important skill. Furthermore, although the students showed low proficiency in all language skills, their results revealed that speaking and writing were the least proficient skills respectively.

Indeed, the writing problems that the Saudi students have in English can be attributed to many reasons. One of the major causes for these problems is the outdated approaches and resources (Ezza, 2010; Shukri, 2014; Noor, 2007; Javid et al., 2013). For example, Smith (2001) pointed out that English instruction in Saudi Arabia highly depended on rote learning (as cited in Shukri, 2014). As a result, Saudi learners were likely to be very dependent on the modelled written texts provided by their teachers, which in turn limited their freedom, creativity, and autonomy in writing. Shukri (2014) also added that the tremendous reliance on textbooks in classrooms prevented the EFL teachers from implementing creative writing tasks.

Ezza (2010) applied a content analysis of the writing resources used in three prestigious Arab universities including King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. He found that all the three universities used outdated approaches and resources in their writing courses that focused on the sentence as the basic unit of language instead of focusing on the text as a whole. Thus, he argued that the writing skill for the Arabic-speaking learners would not improve unless their schools started to use up-to-date approaches and textbooks.

Another main reason for these difficulties is L1 negative transfer. Since Arabic and English are vastly different, it is expected that the Arab students will experience interference from their L1. Khuwaileh (1995b) and Hussein and Mohammad (2012) found that Arab learners usually translated their ideas from Arabic to English, and thereby they produced many awkward errors (as cited in Shukri, 2014). In fact, the results of Khan's study (2011) on a sample of Saudi undergraduate students revealed that they did have writing problems that related to L1 negative transfer such as problems in the phoneme clusters, spelling, and grammar (as cited in Javid et al., 2013).

Additionally, many writing problems can be attributed to the cultural resistance and familiarity issues. Shukri (2014) pointed out that Saudi students were likely to be hesitant and reluctant to write on certain topics that were unfamiliar or simply considered taboo in their culture such as political and religious topics. Moreover, Shukri mentioned that Saudi students were not accustomed to the knowledge transforming approach in writing used by the Western writers. In contrast, Arab learners were accustomed to the knowledge telling approach in which they stated the knowledge they had about the topic without refining or transforming it (Cumming, 1989 as cited in Shukri, 2014). Thus, the writing prompts that require some critical and problem solving skills are probably challenging to some Saudi learners. Further, it is worth

to note that Saudi students might face serious writing problems such as repetition, copying and plagiarism, which result from the knowledge telling approach (Leki & Carso, 1997 as cited in Shukri, 2014).

Similar to the other EFL settings, plenty of the writing difficulties that the Saudi students face in their writing can actually be attributed to the lack of resources and practice. Javid et al. (2013) noted that the lack of exposure and practice was deemed to be one of the reasons that hindered the acquisition of the writing skill in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, they emphasized the importance of providing the learners with more opportunities to practice their skills in English. In addition, Shukri (2014) criticized the instructional approach used in Saudi Arabia, which relied heavily on the restricted textbooks and the structured format writing as the only resource of instruction. She stated that this approach prevented the students from producing creative writings.

In regards to the importance of motivation in SLA, some researchers have investigated the Saudi students' attitudes towards learning English. For example, Faruk (2014) reviewed the literature in relation to the studies conducted on the Saudi students' attitudes towards English between the 1990's and 2000's. He found that compared to the results of the 1990's, Saudi students had more positive attitudes in 2000's. In another article, Rahman (2011) found that instrumental motivation prevailed over integrative motivation regarding the Saudi students' attitudes to learn English. More specifically, students believed in the importance of English as a qualification to find a good job and as a tool of knowledge. In addition, Hagler (2014) analyzed the Saudi university students' attitudes towards the Western culture. Interestingly, he found that the majority of the students were integratively motivated towards the Western culture.

Based on the challenges found in the literature that the Saudi students have in learning English in general and learning the writing skill in particular, one can conclude that Saudi students are similar to the other EFL learners in which they face the same difficulties. Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) pointed out that L2 writing instructors needed to be aware of the differences between the ESL/EFL contexts. They explained some central issues that needed to be taken into account while teaching in an EFL context such as language and culture, L2 status and resources, approaches to writing, and external expectations.

Most importantly, instructors need to be cognizant about the EFL student's general characteristics. For instance, EFL learners are usually exposed to English only in the classroom; thus, they have less exposure to the L2 outside the classroom compared to the ESL learners. In addition, English is mostly taught as a compulsory subject, which accordingly results in demotivated students who feel forced to learn English. As a result, they show reluctance and apathy towards learning English (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2014).

L2 Error analysis

Definition

Before discussing what error analysis is, it is important to define what an error means. Brown (2014) defined an error as “a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, which reflects the competence of the learner.” (p. 249). He also differentiated between errors and mistakes. In contrast to errors, mistakes referred to the learners' performance such as a random guess or a slip of the tongue, which can be produced by native speakers as well.

In regards to error analysis (EA), Corder (1967) defined it as a procedure in which the researcher or the teacher collected samples of the learners' language in order to identify, describe, and classify the errors regarding their causes and nature (as cited in Heydari and

Bagheri, 2012). There are three reasons why EA is important in SLA: (1) it is considered a red flag of the learners' L2 knowledge; and (2) it can be used as a tool by the learners to discover the L2 rules; and (3) it assists the instructors and researchers to identify the L2 learning processes (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994 as cited in Hamid and Doan, 2014).

Frequency of errors

ESL/EFL learners' errors are different from the ones produced by the native-English-speaking learners (Weaver, 1996 as cited in Ferris, 2002). For example, ESL/EFL learners' errors have patterns and those patterns occur frequently. However, it should be noted that these patterns vary from one student to another depending on several factors such as L1, the proficiency level, the amount of time devoted to learn English, and students' traits, e.g., motivation, learning styles, time, and energy (Ferris, 2002). Therefore, although error analysis charts that include a list of the ESL/EFL common errors are helpful for teachers, Ferris (2002) warned from overgeneralizing the ESL/EFL students' errors by relying heavily on these lists.

Error inventory

In an attempt to prioritize error feedback, many teachers and researchers have started to focus particularly on the most frequent or common errors made by the ESL/EFL students (Ferris, 2002). In her book, Ferris (2002) suggested that teachers used their students' writing samples to prepare an error analysis sheet to provide appropriate feedback either for individual students or for the whole class. In her chart, Ferris focused on eight categories to identify the most frequent errors produced by ESL learners: subject-verb agreement, noun ending (plural or possessive), determiners/article error (missing, unnecessary, and wrong), verb tense, verb form, sentence fragment, run-on sentence, and comma splice. The error inventory used in this study was developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012) and was based on Ferris' errors chart. It included ten

categories: fragments, comma splices/run-on sentences, subject/verb agreement, tense, wrong word choice, word forms, noun forms, missing words/unnecessary words, articles, and prepositions.

Error Symbol	Error Type	Examples
frag.	Fragment Sentence	First of all, ^{subject + verb} Most families give children a lot of support, and that ^{is a} great thing. ^(missing verb) Through personal experience, ^{it} is easier to find solutions. ^(missing subject)
cs ro	Comma Splice/ Run-on Sentence	People have their own lives, ^{so} they should learn by their own mistakes. People have their own lives ^{so} they should learn by their own mistakes.
s/v	Subject-Verb Agreement	<u>Listening</u> to the advice of family and friends ^{is} are the best advice.
tense	Wrong Tense	He thought that ^{was} is a waste of time.
wc	Wrong Word Choice	CEOs have to ^{make} take their own decisions.
wf	Wrong Word Form	They want ^{to} learning about life.
nf	Wrong Noun Form	People should seek more advices . It is individuals' responsibility to choose things for their ^{lives} life.
mw uw	Missing Word / Unnecessary Word	They should not ask their friends but should ask ^{people} who has experience. The person can fix the mistake that they made it .
art.	Wrong or Missing Article	In the life, there are many opportunities. There is not a specific way to learn.
prep.	Wrong or Missing Preposition	^{At} In that time, it is important to decide. It is wise to learn mistakes ^{from} .

Figure 1. Error Inventory Developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012)

Table 1. Error Inventory Form Developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012)

Error Type	Timed Writing 1		Timed Writing 2	
	#	%	#	%
frag.				
cs/ro				
s/v				
Tense				
Wc				
Wf				
Nf				
Mw/uw				
art.				
prep.				

Previous studies on written errors made by Saudi learners of English

Based on the current literature, it is evident that EFL Saudi students are struggling with learning English in general and learning the writing skill in particular. The disadvantages of the EFL setting were found to be the main reason for these difficulties. However, L2 writing research in Saudi Arabia is still limited and in need of more studies in order to examine the Saudi learners' obstacles while learning English and what assistance they need to overcome these difficulties. Fortunately, by reviewing the literature, one can notice that there is a recent interest towards investigating the writing problems and errors the Saudi students make in English.

For example, Javid et al. (2013) investigated the writing problems the Saudi students have in their academic writing with a focus on the gender-based differences. The participants consisted of 184 male and female undergraduate students majoring in English at Taif University. The researchers developed a Likert-scale questionnaire consisted of 40 items. In order to analyze the data, the researchers used descriptive analysis to identify the most and least preferred items on the questionnaire. Moreover, they used independent-samples t-test to examine if there were statistical significant differences in the males and females' responses. While the findings

indicated no significant differences between the males and females, it was found that the learners have serious problems in their academic writing that relate to three major areas including their usage of the lexical items, organization, and grammar. In particular, the researchers found that the weakest areas were prepositions, spelling, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, suffixes and prefixes.

Likewise, Nazim and Ahmad (2012) investigated the common writing problems of Saudi students studying in preparatory year at Najran University in order to provide some remedies and suggestions to develop their writing skills. The sample consisted of 15 teachers and 60 students. To collect the data, the researchers developed a questionnaire in order to examine the teachers' opinion about the students' writing problems including conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and other problems related to language use. In order to analyze the writing, the researchers gave the students some writing tasks. Generally, the results of the questionnaire as well as the writing samples indicated that the students had major problems in conventions, punctuations, capitalizations, spelling, and language use.

Noor (2007) conducted a study on 48 Saudi students studying English at Taibah University to investigate the relationship between the low proficiency level in the L1 and the L2. The students were asked to write a comparative essay in Arabic and then translate it to English. Additionally, they were asked to write directly in English. They were given one hour to write the essays and the data collection went through three different phases. The results of this study lend support to Doushaq's (1986) and Khwaileh and Shomali's (2000) results in Jordan since Noor also found that there was a relationship between the proficiency level in the two languages. Another purpose of this study was to examine the number of errors produced in the translation writing and the direct writing. The researcher found that the number of errors in the translation

writing was larger than in the direct writing. Moreover, he investigated the frequency of errors regarding three categories including awkward forms, lexical choice, and transition errors. The findings revealed that the most frequent type of error was awkward forms while the least type was transition errors.

In fact, it looks like spelling errors are the most investigated topic among the other types of errors in Saudi Arabia. Three studies were conducted mainly to analyze the spelling errors produced by the Saudi learners of English. Khan and Ito (2012) investigated the most common spelling errors made by 36 Saudi learners studying in preparatory year at Najran University. Students were given a paragraph-writing test in order to collect the data. As well, the errors were classified into phonological and orthographic categories and each category was divided into subcategories: addition, deletion, substitution, and reversal. The findings indicated that deletion was the most frequent error followed by substitution and then reversal. Yet, addition was the least frequent error.

Furthermore, Khan (2013) examined the spelling errors made by 20 Saudi students studying at Khulais campus, which is a branch of King Abdulaziz University. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the spelling errors resulting from embedded vowels problem and then provide the appropriate remedies. The participants were given a dictation test and then they were given remedial tutorials for two weeks. At the end, they were given a post-test to assess the effect of the intervention tutorial on their spelling. The results revealed that the number of spelling errors regarding the use of vowels was more than consonants, which provides support to several studies that confirmed the existence of vowel blindness phenomena in the writing and reading of the Arabic-speaking learners of English (Koda, 1988-1990; Ryan and Meara, 1991; Hayes-Harb, 2006; & Saigh and Schmitt, 2012). Khan attributed this problem to L1 negative

transfer because unlike English, Arabic has only three short and long vowels and short vowels were omitted in the written texts.

Moreover, in a recent study, Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel (2015) analyzed the spelling errors of 122 Saudi beginner learners studying in an intensive language program at the University of Ha'il. The participants were asked to write a descriptive essay. To identify the errors, the researchers used Cook's taxonomy of spelling errors, which was divided into four categories: omission, substitution, insertion, and transposition. The results showed that omission errors were the most frequent, which supports the results of Khan and Itoo's (2012) study. In particular, learners failed to spell the vowels correctly. The researchers also found that the L1 interference and the L2 influence were both main contributors to these errors.

Further, several studies were conducted to investigate other types of writing errors such as syntactical, punctuation, capitalization, cohesion, and deictic expression. Alamin and Ahmad (2012) investigated the syntactical and punctuation errors of the technical writing of Saudi undergraduate students studying general science at Taif University. The data of this study consisted of assignments, quizzes, and exams written by 100 students. The errors were identified according to syntactic and punctuation categories. The syntactic categories included nine categories: omission of indefinite articles, choosing the technical verbs, adjectives and adverbs, using the simple present and the present continuous tenses, plurality, the passive genitive, questions forms, passive and active voice, and compound nouns. No attention was paid to the most or least frequent errors; however, the researchers found that students had difficulty with all the categories mentioned above. As for the punctuations errors, the results revealed that errors in using comma and semicolon were the most common errors. In addition, it was found that the

usage of period and capitalization were other common types of errors. The researchers ascribed most of the errors to the intralingual interference.

Siddiqui (2015) conducted mixed method research to examine the capitalization errors. The data consisted of a corpus of classroom assignments, quizzes, and final examinations written by 20 Saudi female undergraduate students studying in preparatory year and majoring in Nursing at Bisha University. The researcher also interviewed 10 students. In order to classify the errors, the researcher used 10 major rules of capitalization. Eight rules were adapted from Azar (2003) and the other two were added by the researcher, which were malformation and the use of Arabic proper and common nouns. The results showed that capitalization errors constituted a large number of the students' errors. The researcher found 983 errors across the 10 categories. The most common errors were found to be malformation errors, which was supported by another research conducted by Smith (2002). Indeed, this type of error was found to be a specific problem in learning capitalization for Arab learners of English.

Moreover, Hamdan (2015) conducted a study to investigate the syntactic and semantic functions of deictic expressions written by Saudi university students majoring in English. The participants consisted of 18 students taking a semantic course at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. The students were asked to write a paragraph of 150 words describing a place they know and a person who attends this place. The researcher used mean scores, standard deviation, t-test, and covariance to analyze the data. He found that the students were able to use the deictic expressions in the syntactic functions more than the semantic functions. In particular, the usage of the personal pronouns constituted the highest percentage (77.78), followed by the use of demonstrative pronouns and adverbs of time (66.67), then the use of verbs of

psychological shifting and tenses (55.56), and the use of adverbs of place (44.44). Yet, the lowest percentage was found to be the use of reported speech (11.11).

The last topic of investigation to be discussed in this section regarding the writing errors in the Saudi context is related to cohesive ties errors. Wahby (2014) examined the effect of using cohesive ties in the written text by 60 Saudi prep-year students studying at Taibah University. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of using cohesive ties on the quality and score of the students' writings. Two instruments were used in this study. The participants were asked to write an essay of 350 words on an assigned argumentative topic. Then, they took a cohesive knowledge test that included 10 questions about reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctions. To evaluate the general quality of the essays, the researcher used an adapted version of a holistic writing rubric developed by the Testing Unit, ELC, and DAS. Then, he adapted analytical writing rubric from "Placement Rubric Guide" published on an assessment website. The data were analyzed according to the mean and frequency of four categories including reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctions. The results indicated that there was a strong relationship between the students' awareness of the use of cohesive ties and their writings' scores. Additionally, the findings revealed that the most common errors in the use of conjunctions was the over-use of additives. The second common error was the misuse of adversatives and confusing them with additives. The least common error was found in the use of temporal and causative conjunctions. Indeed, the results of this study lend support to the results of Arabi and Ali's (2014) study conducted in Sudan. Regarding the reference error, it was found that the most common type of error was using references without an explicit referent. Further, the researcher found that the use of ellipsis and substitution was very limited.

To conclude, L2 writing research in Saudi Arabia is still limited. Most of the studies conducted in this area asserted that Saudi learners of English are struggling with writing. However, to look at the big picture, it is worth noticing the contribution of these studies to the other studies in the Arab world. In fact, most of these studies such as Noor's (2007), Wahby's (2014), Khan's (2013) Khan and Itoo's (2012), and Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel's (2015) studies yielded similar results to some of the studies conducted on other Arabic students from Jordan, Sudan, and Oman.

The most common types of prompts in ESL writing textbooks

The analysis of the following 12 ESL writing textbooks (Blanchard, & Root, 2003; Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, Solomon, 2014; Folse, Solomon, & Clabeaux, 2015; Walsh, 2012; Beaumont, 2012; Folse, Mahnke, Solomon, & Williams, 2003; Caplan, & Bixby, 2014; Zemach, & Staford-Yilmaz, 2008; Oshima, & Hogue, 2014; Meyers, 2014) reveals the most common types of writing prompts. In this study two of the most common types of prompts were used, which are persuasive and comparison.

Table 2. The Most Common Types of Writing Prompts

Type	Frequency	Example of prompt
Compare and contrast (comparison)	10	"Many different kinds of people become successful leaders in their fields, choose two well-known business leaders and compare and contrast their types of intelligence."(Walsh, 2012, p. 78).
Cause and effect	10	"Write about the causes or effects of depression." (Beaumont, 2012, p. 131).
Argument (persuasive)	9	"Do you think technology improves learning?" (Caplan, & Bixby, 2014, p. 100).
Reaction/Response	5	"In the folk tale "The Sack," what is the message for the reader? Do you agree or disagree with the message? State your point of view and support it with reasons and examples." (Caplan, & Bixby, 2014, p. 55).

Type	Frequency	Example of prompt
Problem/ Solution	5	Athletes used to win competitions on the basis of skill, training, and teamwork, but now some athletes are taking drugs that improve their performance. Even though most of these performance-enhancing drugs can cause serious health problems and are illegal, athletes continue to use them. What do you think should be done about the problem of athletes' drug use?"(Walsh, 2012, p. 126).
Classification	4	"Classify types of television programs." (Folse, Solomon, & Clabeaux, 2015, p. 189).
Descriptive	4	"Describe a person you know. What is this person like? What are some of his or her characteristics? Make sure that the description would allow your reader to identify the person in a crowd." (Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, Solomon, 2014, P. 179).
Narrative	3	"Narrate a story about a disagreement you had with a friend (or family member) and how the disagreement was resolved." (Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, Solomon, 2014, P. 63).
Process	3	"Write an analytical essay that describes the stages of acculturation that a person goes through when moving from his or her country to another country." (Folse, Mahnke, Solomon, & Williams, 2003, p. 83).
Opinion	2	"You are concerned parents. The principal of your child's school asked you to write an article about children and television for the school newsletter. What is your opinion? Is TV good or bad for children?" (Blanchard, & Root, 2003, p. 86).
Explanation	2	"Some people that we meet and some events in our lives have an important effect on us. What people and events have influenced or changed you?" (Zemach, & Staford-Yilmaz, 2008, p. 13).
Expository	1	"Discuss your earlier experiences with writing. When and where did you do it? What kind of papers did you write, what

Type	Frequency	Example of prompt
		was their length, and how much did you revise them.” (Meyers, 2014, p. 18).
Extended definition	1	“Write an essay that examines and illustrates an extended definition of a term from the box (communication, courage, education, partnership, friendship, wisdom), or a term that your teacher suggests. Be sure to support your definition with examples and explanations.” (Meyers, 2014, p. 106).

The relationship between the writing prompts and L2 writing

Writing prompts are usually included on standardized tests to measure the writing ability of the examinees in which test takers are required to write an impromptu essay on an assigned topic under time constraints (Spaan, 1993). The problem is that the assigned prompts are sometimes too specific or general for some examinees or they might include culturally biased topics. Ruth and Murphy (1984) stated that the background knowledge of the writers affects the interpretation of the prompts, and thereby they suggested that the assessment of the writing skill has to include multiple responses (as cited in Spaan, 1993). In addition, based on Ruth and Murphy’s statement, Spaan pointed out that “no prompt can be free of bias with regard to content or subject matter.” Moreover, they claimed that providing options for the writing prompts would not be the optimal solution for an accurate assessment since it might pose confusion to the students.

There are three main areas in investigating the writing prompts: discourse mode, rhetorical specification, wording and structure of the writing prompt (Wu, 2013). Smith, Hull, Land, Moore, Ball, and Dunham (1985) investigated the effects of three different types of prompts including open-structure response, single-text response, and three-text response. They found that the structure of the prompt had an effect on the fluency, quality, and the total number

of errors in the essays written by students at various levels of proficiency (as cited in Wu, 2013). Moreover, Spaan (1993) stated that the different types of prompts require different cognitive demands on the writers' behalf, and therefore this leads to different types of responses and scores.

Most importantly, researchers have found differences in the writers' responses to the different types of prompts. For example, in a study conducted by Quellmalz, Capell, and Chou (1982) to analyze the writing of native English-speaking high school students regarding two types of prompts (expository and narrative), they found different results. The overall impression, focus, and organization were higher in the expository essays; however, support and mechanics were higher in the narrative essays (as cited in Spaan, 1993). In addition, Witte (1987) compared argumentative and expository writing of native English students. The researcher found that argumentative prompts "provided more specific background information, suggested discourse schema and usable ideational content, and offered a clear choice." In contrast, expository was "unfocused" and "open-ended", and thus it required more "organizational" and "decision-making" skills (as cited in Spaan, 1993).

Therefore, writing prompts usually pose difficulties to the L2 writers especially if the topic is unfamiliar to them. Therefore, assigning the appropriate writing prompt is deemed a challenging task for many ESL/EFL instructors and test writers. For this reason, many researchers have started to question the validity of the writing prompts found on the standardized tests for English proficiency. These tests are considered high-stakes tests because they have crucial consequences on the academic careers of ESL/EFL students who intend to pursue their higher education in English speaking countries. Messick (1989) stated that test scores were usually interpreted according to their social value (as cited in He and Shi, 2008). Given the

importance of this topic, several researchers have devoted their research to investigate some critical issues in this area such as the effect of topical knowledge on the quality of ESL writing and the ESL/EFL students' perceptions about the writing prompts on the standardized tests.

Similar to the literature discussed so far, research in this area is limited. One of the few studies in this area is the study conducted by He and Shi (2012) that investigated the relationship between the topical knowledge and the ESL writing. The purpose of the study was to examine if there was an effect of topical knowledge on the students' ESL writing performance on a standardized English proficiency test administered in Western Canada by post-secondary institutions. The sample consisted of 50 students from China, Taiwan, and South Korea with different levels studying at a Canadian college. The participants were asked to write two timed-impromptu essays. The first essay required general knowledge about university studies and the second one required specific knowledge about federal politics. The researchers used a six-point analytic rating scale to grade the essays. The scale consisted of three major components: content, organization, and language. The findings revealed that students scored better on the general topic than on the specific topic across the different levels. In particular, the students produced poor writings on the different areas of essays including content, development of ideas, organization, language use, coherence and cohesion, and the use of academic words. The researchers interviewed the students after the tests and found that they were challenged by the second prompt.

Likewise, Tedick (1990) investigated the effect of the students' knowledge of the subject matter on their ESL writing. The participants consisted of 105 graduate students at three ESL levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced). They were asked to write about two topics including one general and another specific, which required them to use their knowledge of their

subject's field. The 210 essays were scored holistically by eight experienced raters covering three aspects: overall quality, fluency, and syntactic complexity. The findings showed that the students did better on the specific topic, which indicated that the students' familiarity with the subject matter helped in composing more syntactically complex essays with fewer errors especially at the advanced level. Although no significant differences were found regarding the error-free T-units, the researcher found that the students wrote fewer error-free T-units on the field-specific essays. Also, they wrote significantly longer T-units on the specific topic.

Furthermore, He and Shi (2008) conducted another study to investigate the perceptions and experiences of ESL students regarding the writing sections on standardized English proficiency tests in Canada such as TWE (Test of Written English) and LPI (English Language Proficiency Index). The participants consisted of 16 Chinese learners studying at a university in Western Canada. In order to collect the data, the researchers interviewed the students. The researchers found that the students were unhappy with the assigned essays' prompts, which they considered culturally biased.

Wu (2013) investigated the effects of the essay prompts on the students' writing performance by analyzing 40 essays written by native and non-native students at different proficiency levels. All the essays were written for a university reading-to-write test. The focus of the study was to examine if this type of writing has an effect on the writing abilities of the two groups by analyzing two areas: the use of lexical items and propositional material from the assigned prompt and reading. The researcher used a computer program to analyze the word-processed essays of the two groups. The results indicated that the two groups selected lexical items and propositional materials differently. The performance of the higher-rated native group was found to be superior to the other groups regarding their ability to identify the topical

information and to extract the details from the text. The higher and lower rated non-native groups were not able to readjust their selection of the text material as the higher-native group did. Yet, they were able to locate subordinate propositions from the text. The lower-rated native group did not concentrate on the source text and used their own opinion and explanation to respond to the topic.

In order to investigate if the writing prompts on three standardized tests namely, TOEFL, IELTS, and TEM4 (a Chinese language test) have certain patterns, Liu and Stapleton (2015) examined these prompts regarding two features: rhetorical function and object enquiry. The data was collected from a corpus of authentic writing prompts taking from official websites and publications. 40 prompts from each test were randomly selected. Then, the essays were coded by two raters using a classification scheme developed by Moore and Morton (2005). The scheme was divided into four categories: genre, information source, rhetorical function, and object of inquiry. The focus of this study was to analyze the last two categories. The findings showed that the three tests used narrow and restricted themes and functions. For example, the majority of prompts required responses that were evaluative or hortative while the percentages of the other rhetorical functions such as explanation, comparison, recommendation, description, and prediction were low. As for the topics, the majority of them were centered on three sociocultural themes: education, technology, and current social issues.

Moreover, Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli (1982) investigated the effects of familiar and unfamiliar cultural context on the ESL writing. The participants consisted of 20 students at intermediate level studying at a Southwestern university. Half of them were Spanish-speaking students and the other half spoke different L1s including Arabic, Hebrew, Navajo, Lugbura, Persian, Greek, Kamba, and Hindi. The participants were provided with two paragraphs. The

first one was about a Spanish book, *Don Quixote*, and the second one was about Japanese's *Noh* Theater. The participants were asked to read the two paragraphs and then they were required to write about everything that they remembered about the two themes. The researchers used ANOVA to determine the relationship between the two groups (Spanish, non-Spanish) and the two themes regarding the fluency, grammar, and complexity of the writing. The results showed that compared to the non-Spanish learners, the Spanish learners wrote more complex and fluent essays with fewer errors on the Spanish theme than on the Japanese theme. Therefore, topic familiarity had an effect on the quality of the ESL writing.

Likewise, Freimuth (2014) conducted a case study to investigate the effect of culturally unfamiliar IELTS writing prompts on student band score in the United Arab Emirates. The participants consisted of 9 instructors and 19 students. The students came from two levels: students who got 4 to 5 band score on the IELTS and students who got 5 to 5.5. The researcher chose 7 prompts as potentially unfamiliar or culturally sensitive to the students. Then, she introduced the prompts to the instructors in a focus group to discuss their opinions about the prompts. In addition, the prompts were introduced to the students in a survey by adding three more familiar prompts. The instructors considered only four of the prompts to be problematic to the students while the students' perceptions about the unfamiliarity of the prompts were 50% different. Moreover, the students were required to choose one familiar topic from the list and write about it as homework. In the next class, they were required to write about a prompt from the list chosen by their instructor. This prompt was the one that most of the students found unfamiliar and very difficult. Then, the essays were scored holistically and the scores of the two types of prompts were compared. Unlike the results of Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli's study (1982), the findings of this study showed no significant differences between the scores of

familiar and unfamiliar topics, which indicated that familiarity variable had no effect on the writing performance.

Norment (1997) also investigated the effect of culture-referenced essay prompts on the quality of high school African American students in four Philadelphia public schools. The participants consisted of 711 students in 11th and 12th grades. More than 95% of the students were African American. The students were required to take an urban university placement test. The writing prompts were included in the writing section of this test and were chosen by the researcher. Two types of prompts were chosen: culture-referenced and standard topics. The essays were scored holistically by six senior raters. The results revealed that two-thirds of the students chose to write on culture-referenced prompts. More specifically, the African American students who chose culture-referenced prompts wrote more focused, organized, and longer essays on these topics than on the standard topics.

In addition, Jennings, Fox, Graves, & Shohamy (1999) examined the effect of topic on the students' performance on the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) test. The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not the performance of the test-takers would be significantly different when given a choice of topic and when this choice was eliminated. The sample consisted of 254 ESL university applicants who were randomly selected. One group wrote with a given choice of topic and the other one wrote without a given choice. To analyze the ordinal level data, the researchers used Mann Whitney U, Chi-Square and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests. Although the scores of the choice group were higher than the scores of the other group, no statistically significant differences were found, which indicated that the choice variable had no obvious effect on the ESL writing.

Spaan (1993) also examined the effect of choice on the students' writing performance. She investigated the validity of collecting one writing sample collection while manipulating the prompt element. The data was collected by using four Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB) prompts with different rhetorical mode and subject matter. The participants consisted of 88 graduate and undergraduate non-native speakers of English from different populations studying in the United States. They took the English language proficiency exam between 1988 and 1989. The students were required to take the MELAB exam, which includes a writing part. The students were asked to write about two prompts. The essays were scored holistically and the results indicated that the prompt type did not make any difference on the students' writing performance. Moreover, the choice variable was found to be not detrimental.

Lavallée & McDonough (2015) investigated whether the type of prompt had an impact on the text quality and lexical features of the EAP students' essays, and if there was a correlation between the text quality and lexical features. In particular, the researchers examined five lexical features including percentage of AWL word use, content word frequency, word familiarity, imagability, and lexical diversity. The sample consisted of 94 students enrolled in an EAP writing class at a Canadian university in Montreal. The level of proficiency was almost the same for all the students because their TOEFL scores ranged between 75 and 89. The data was collected from the writing exam papers assigned in the students' classes. The students responded to two different prompts (cause and effect), and they had to use their notes, which were taken from reading texts they had received two weeks before the exam. To analyze the data, the researcher and two other raters used an integrated writing rubric used in the TOEFL.

The findings revealed that the cause essays had higher overall ratings and scores on lexical diversity and AWL words unlike the effect essays, which had higher scores of

imagability, frequency, and familiarity features. In addition, the results of the independent sample t-test were statistically significant, which meant that the type of prompt did have an effect on the writing quality. In contrast, no significant differences were found regarding the correlation between the text quality and the lexical features.

Given the fact that writing prompts are believed to have an influence on the quality of the ESL/EFL writing and that there is a lack of research in this area, it is hoped that this study fills this gap by adding some clarification and evidence for this specific issue.

Conclusion

By reviewing the literature on the L2 writing, one can notice how complex it is for the ESL/EFL students to write in their L2. In an attempt to help these students develop their writing, specific attention and effort have been geared towards analyzing the L2 writing process especially analyzing the students' errors. Despite the fact that most of the related studies done in the Arab world contend that Arab learners of English face many difficulties in learning writing, research in this area is still limited particularly in Saudi Arabia. The effect of the writing prompts on the ESL/EFL writing is also another important issue that has received little attention. Therefore, based on the current literature, this study may contribute to the existing body of research in relevant ways.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the study

This study attempted to investigate and identify the most common errors produced by the EFL Saudi students in their academic writing. It also investigated the relationship between the writing prompts and the number and frequency of these errors in the EFL Saudi students' academic writing.

Research questions

Two main research questions were addressed in this study:

- 1- What are the five most common errors in the academic writing of the EFL Saudi university students?
- 2- Does the type of prompt influence the number and frequency of errors?

Context and subjects

The research data was collected from a large co-ed university in the Western region of Saudi Arabia. The participants were Saudi second-year undergraduate students studying in the Department of Languages and Translation and majoring in English. Their plan of study includes three composition classes. The data was collected during their scheduled class time. The course name was *Short Essay Writing*. The class was divided into two sections (Ln4-Ln5) with a total number of 67 students, 27 in one section and 40 in the other section. Thus, the estimated number of students was 67 students. Since the class was divided into two sections, two instructors were involved in this study. Both work as lecturers in the Department of Languages and Translation. Only 58 students participated in this study since 9 of them were absent on the day of the data collection.

All the subjects participating in this study were females. Their ages range from 18 to 21. They have taken English for approximately six years about four hours a week in the middle and high schools and one year in the elementary school. All the students speak Arabic as their L1. English is spoken only at school or at certain places such as hospitals. The students have had little experience in English composition since writing skill is not emphasized in the middle and high schools especially timed writing. In addition, the students were not accustomed to the TOEFL writing prompts. However, they were familiar with the writing styles and genres such as descriptive, narrative, compare and contrast, argumentative, and persuasive.

Instrumentation

The first prompt used for data collection was persuasive and the second one was compare and contrast. The reason for their type selection was based on their frequency in ESL/EFL composition textbooks and subsequently in ESL/EFL composition classes, as illustrated in Table 3.

<p>Student's name: _____</p> <p>Directions: Read the prompt below. You have 30 minutes to write and review your essay.</p> <p>Prompt 1: What do you think about the following statement? Parents are the best teachers.</p> <p>Do you agree or disagree? Use specific reasons to support <u>your choice</u>.</p>
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Figure 2. Instrument 1

Student's name: _____

Directions: Read the prompt below. You have 30 minutes to write and review your essay.

Prompt 2: Some people prefer to spend time with one or two friends while others like to spend time with many friends. Compare the advantages of each choice. In your opinion, which one is better? Use specific reasons to support your choice.

Figure 3. Instrument 2

Procedure

To identify the most frequent errors produced by Saudi university students in their academic writing, participants were asked to write two timed essays based on the TOEFL prompts. Each essay was written in 30 minutes. The data was collected and analyzed during the spring semester of 2016. The data was collected on two different days since there were two groups and each group wrote the two assigned essays on one day. The first prompt was persuasive and the second one was compare and contrast. The reason behind assigning the second prompt was to investigate whether the type of prompt has an effect on the number and frequency of errors. Students were required to write their names so that the researcher can link the students with their essays and number them. Then, all the names were removed, and thus the data was de-identified.

The students' essays were collected by their instructors. The essays were kept in a sealed envelope. Then, the data was sent to an administrator who works at the same university. She was responsible for receipt and transmission of the data. After that, she sent the envelope to the researcher via mail.

Data analysis

In order to classify and categorize the types of errors, the researcher used an error inventory developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012) based on Ferris (2002). It includes ten categories: fragments, comma splices/run-on sentences, subject/verb agreement, tense, wrong word choice, word forms, noun forms, missing words/unnecessary words, articles, and prepositions. The focus was to identify the five most frequent errors found in the essays. The number of errors was counted in each category and then the five most common errors were identified. As for answering the second question of the study, the researcher used a paired sample t-test. The total number of errors for essay one and two of each participant was compared to find out if the type of prompt has an effect on the number of errors. Then, the error frequency was discussed from the perspective of the two types of prompts, identifying and discussing the five most common errors for the first prompt and the second prompt respectively.

Table 3. Error Inventory Form Developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012)

Error Type	Timed Writing 1		Timed Writing 2	
	#	%	#	%
Frag.				
Cs/ro				
S/v				
Tense				
Wc				
Wf				
Nf				
Mw/uw				
Art.				
Prep.				

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

Two questions were addressed in this study:

- 1- What are the five most common errors in the academic writing of the EFL Saudi university students?
- 2- Does the type of prompt influence the number and frequency of errors?

This chapter provided detailed answers for the two previous questions. First, the results of the first question were analyzed by utilizing examples, tables, and figures. The answer for this question was divided into three parts. Part one discussed the five most common errors based on Bushong and Mihai's (2012) inventory. Part two presented five other types of errors found in the essays. Part three identified the five most common errors of the combined errors. The second question was answered by providing the results of a paired sample t-test that showed the significance of the differences between the students' total number of errors in each essay. Then, the frequency of the five most common errors in essays A and B was discussed separately based on the results of the two groups. To ensure the inter-rater reliability of the reported data in this study, a second reader, who was a TESOL professional with extensive experience in writing assessment, was asked to read 50% of the essays. The essays read by the second rater were randomly selected. The second rater agreed with the first rater's results 100%.

Description of the sample

The participants of this study consisted of 58 undergraduate sophomore students majoring in English in the Department of Languages and Translation at a large co-ed university in Saudi Arabia. All students were females between 18 and 21 years of age. The students were not placed according to their level of English proficiency. Their department's plan of study

includes three composition courses. The data was collected by the students' instructors during one of their classes, which was *Short Essay Writing*. All of the participants shared the native language of Arabic. According to the educational system of Saudi Arabia, it is probable that most of the students had already received seven years of English instruction before attending the university. However, students who graduated from private elementary schools had received an additional five years. Moreover, it is important to state that while the students were familiar with the types of essays, they were not familiar with the TOEFL prompts nor the 30-minute timed writing.

Research question one

What are the five most common errors in the academic writing of the EFL Saudi university students?

This section reported the results obtained from the data regarding the most common writing errors made by the participants. The first part reported and discussed the total number of errors found in the ten categories based on the Bushong and Mihai (2012) ten types' inventory. Next, a combination of the ten types of errors along with five other types of errors found during the analysis process was discussed. In the third part, the five most common errors were identified and presented separately.

Part one

To analyze the data of this study, the researcher used an inventory developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012) based on Ferris (2002), which categorized ten types of errors: fragments (frag.), comma splices/run-on sentences (cs/ro), subject/verb agreement (s/v), tense (tense), wrong word choice (wc), word forms (wf), noun forms (nf), missing words/unnecessary words

(mw/uw), articles (art.), and prepositions (prep.). Table 4 provided examples of the ten types of errors found in the essays.

Table 4. Examples of the Ten Types of Errors Taken from the Participants' Essays

Error Type	Example
Frag.	"The pest teachers in my opinion." (Participant 42).
Cs/ro	"Some people prefer to spend time with one or two friends because think this people knuw him and knuw every think about him what she love, what she hate and a lot of think that make him confortuble." (Participant 12).
S/v	"I do beleavis that perants are the best teachers becauze children always related to their perents" (Participant 38).
Tense	"When we were born since we were a children we see our parents ours heros" (Participant 14).
Wc	" Owning a lot of friends are so good" (Participant 46).
Wf	" Spend time with one or two friends between them a differences and similarities" (Participant 39).
Nf	"We spend most of our lifes with our parents they teach us things every single day" (Participant 16).
Mw/uw	"I am agree with to the parents are the best teachers" (participant 55).
Art.	"In the conclione, few friend are better then more" (participant 47)
Prep.	"Anyway, I disagree, because for every person different personalty" (Participant 17).

The researcher followed the same procedure to analyze the data. Table 5 showed an example of one of the participant's Error Analysis Form, which included all the errors that the participant (9) made in the two essays. A copy of the two essays written by the student was included in Appendix B and C.

Table 5. Error Analysis Form for Participant 9

Error type	A	B	total
frag.	1		1
cs/ro		2	2
s/v		1	1
tense	1		1
wc	8	4	12
wf	1	1	2
nf	2	1	3
mw/uw	6	2	8
art.	4	2	6
prep.	4	1	5
punc.	1	1	2
cap.	2	2	4
pro.		1	1
wo			0
s	7	6	13
total	37	24	61

Table 6. Total Errors for Group (1-2) and Essay (A-B)

	frag.	cs/ro	s/v	tense	wc	wf	nf	mw/uw	art.	prep.	Total
total 1A	11	28	19	18	96	18	39	86	67	29	411
total 1B	13	37	14	6	90	34	40	123	31	21	409
total 2A	26	84	51	53	235	52	109	322	162	65	1159
total 2B	22	87	50	22	197	108	107	257	79	61	990
total	72	236	134	99	618	212	295	788	339	176	2969
%	2.43%	7.95%	4.51%	3.33%	20.82%	7.14%	9.94%	26.54%	11.42%	5.93%	
total errors	2969										

Table 6 showed the total number errors made by the two groups in the two types of prompts. It is clear from the results that missing/unnecessary word (26.54%) in addition to wrong choice (20.82%) were the most common types of errors found in the essays. However, tense errors (3.33%) and fragment (2.43%) were the least frequent types.

Table 7. The Five Most Common Errors Based on the Bushong and Mihai Inventory (2012)

	missing/unnecessary word	Wrong choice	article	Wrong noun form	Comma splice/run-on
total 1A	86	96	67	39	28
total 1B	123	90	31	40	37
total 2A	322	235	162	109	84
total 2B	257	197	79	107	87
total	788	618	339	295	236
%	26.54%	20.82%	11.42%	9.94%	7.95%
total errors	2969				

Table 7 presented the five most common errors based on Bushong and Mihai’s inventory (2012). As shown in the table, missing/unnecessary word was the most frequent error (26.54%), followed by wrong choice (20.82%), articles (11.42%), wrong noun form (9.94%), and comma splice/run-on sentences as the least frequent type (7.95%).

Part two

During the analysis of the essays, the researcher found other errors that did not fit in the inventory used in this study. The other errors found in the essays included five errors: spelling, capitalization, pronoun, punctuation, and wrong word order. Table 8 provided examples of these errors.

Table 8. Examples for the Other Errors Taken from the Analyzed Essays

Error Type	Example
Punctuation	“in the other hand (,) some people like to spend time with many friends.” (Participant 20)
Capitalization	“I think it is good to have close friends in the life no matter How many they are.” (Participant 16).
Pronoun	“parents are the only people how wants good life for thim children.” (Participant 13).
Wrong order	“Also, the children see father his or mother what he do, and do like them.” (Participant 39).
Spelling	“some people like quite life because this they prefer to talk with one or tow frend. ” (Participant 39).

As shown in table 9, spelling errors (47.85%) were the most common type of error regarding the other errors; however, wrong word order (3.12%) was the least common.

Table 9. Total Number of Other Errors

	punc.	cap.	Pro.	wo	s	total
total 1A	26	29	33	4	84	176
total 1B	21	27	20	5	104	177
total 2A	100	120	84	24	251	579
total 2B	104	99	45	12	252	512
total	251	275	182	45	691	1444
%	17.38%	19.04%	12.60%	3.12%	47.85%	

Figure 4 presented all the errors by combining the ten types of errors taken from Bushong and Mihai’s (2012) inventory with the other errors found in the essays. It also showed the ratio for all the types based on the total number of all errors. Even after adding the other five errors, missing/unnecessary word (17.86%) was still the most common type of errors. However, in second place, spelling errors (15.66%) constituted a large number, followed by wrong choice (14.00%), article (7.68%), wrong noun form (6.68%), capitalization (6.23%), punctuation (5.69%) comma splice/run on (5.35%), wrong form (4.84%), pronoun (4.12%), preposition

(3.99%), subject verb agreement (3.04%), tense (2.24%), fragment (1.63%), and wrong word order (1.02%).

	frag.	cs/ro	s/v	tense	wc	wf	nf	mw/uw	art.	prep.	punc.	cap.	Pro.	wo	s	total
total 1A	11	28	19	18	96	18	39	86	67	29	26	29	33	4	84	587
total 1B	13	37	14	6	90	34	40	123	31	21	21	27	20	5	104	586
total 2A	26	84	51	53	235	52	109	322	162	65	100	120	84	24	251	1738
total 2B	22	87	50	22	197	108	107	257	79	61	104	99	45	12	252	1502
total	72	236	134	99	618	212	295	788	339	176	251	275	182	45	691	4413
%	1.63%	5.35%	3.04%	2.24%	14.00%	4.80%	6.68%	17.86%	7.68%	3.99%	5.69%	6.23%	4.12%	1.02%	15.66%	
total error	4413															

Figure 4. All the Errors Combined in One Chart

Part three

This section focused on the five most frequent errors for all groups and essay types based on the results of figure 4. Table 10 presented the five most common errors based on the results of the combined errors. As shown in table 10, missing/unnecessary word was the most frequent error among the fifteen types of errors (17.86%), followed by spelling (15.66%), wrong choice (14.00%), articles (7.68%), and wrong noun form (6.68%).

Table 10. The Five Most Common Errors Based on the Results of Figure 4

	missing/unnecessary word	spelling	Wrong choice	article	Wrong noun form
total 1A	86	84	96	67	39
total 1B	123	104	90	31	40
total 2A	322	251	235	162	109
total 2B	257	252	197	79	107
total	788	691	618	339	295
%	17.86%	15.66%	14.00%	7.68%	6.68%
total errors	4413				

Moreover, to provide a more comprehensive picture regarding the number of errors, the mean, median, mode, and high-low numbers were identified by analyzing the students' total number of errors in essays A and B. The results for essay A indicated that the mean was 40.34, the mode was 36, the median was 36, and the highest number of errors was 106 and the lowest 6.

For essay B, the mean was 36.34, the mode was 44, the median was 33, and the highest number of errors was 69 and the lowest 6.

Research question two

Does the type of prompt influence the number and frequency of errors?

This section shed light on the effect of the types of prompts on the number and frequency of errors. The types of prompts used in this study were considered two of the most common types of prompts found in 12 ESL writing textbooks. Prompt A was persuasive in which students were required to write about their opinion regarding the given statement “Parents are the best teachers.” In this essay, students had to provide reasons why they agreed or disagreed with the statement and to explain why their opinion was the most legitimate. Prompt B was compare/contrast in which students were asked to compare between spending time with one or two friends and spending time with many friends and then state which type they preferred.

Number of errors

In order to analyze the data and to find out whether the type of prompt has an effect on the number of errors, a paired sample t-test was used. The total number of errors for each participant in prompts A and B was compared to discover if there was statistical significant differences between the total number of errors in each essay.

Table 11. Descriptive Statistics of the Two Types of Prompts

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
A	40.34	21.557	58
B	36.34	15.755	58

Table 11 provided descriptive statistics for the results of prompts A and B. It summarized the data by providing the overall spread of scores including the mean of the number

of errors, standard deviation, and the total number of participants. It can be noticed from the descriptive data that the mean of prompt A (40.34) was higher than prompt B (36.34).

Table 12. SPSS Output Reporting Paired Sample T-test Statistics

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
prompt Pillai's Trace	.053	3.202 ^b	1.000	57.000	.079
Wilks' Lambda	.947	3.202 ^b	1.000	57.000	.079
Hotelling's Trace	.056	3.202 ^b	1.000	57.000	.079
Roy's Largest Root	.056	3.202 ^b	1.000	57.000	.079

Table 12 presented the results of the paired sample t-test. While there were differences in the mean and standard deviation between prompts A and B according to the results of the descriptive statistics, no statistical significance was found. The *p*-value was (.079) > (.05), which meant that the data was not statistically significant to ascertain that the type of prompt had an effect on the number of errors. However, it should be noted here that although the number of the students participated in this study was relatively large, the observed power of the results was .421 and the effect size (eta squared) between the two essays was .053, as shown in table 13.

Table 13. SPSS Output Reporting Multivariate Test Results

Effect	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power ^c
Prompt Pillai's Trace	.053	3.202	.421
Wilks' Lambda	.053	3.202	.421
Hotelling's Trace	.053	3.202	.421
Roy's Largest Root	.053	3.202	.421

Frequency of errors

In this section, the five most common errors resulted from the combined results of the two groups in essays A and B were identified separately in two tables.

Table 14. The Five Most Common Errors Found in Prompt A by Group (1-2)

Prompt A	mw/uw	S	wc	art.	cap.
total 1A	86	84	96	67	29
total 2A	322	251	235	162	120
total	408	335	331	229	149
Ratio	17.55%	14.41%	14.24%	9.85%	6.41%

Table 14 showed the five most common errors made by the two groups in the first essay. Moreover, it showed the ratio of each error type regarding the total number of errors. The results indicated that the most frequent error was missing/unnecessary word (17.55%), followed by spelling (14.41%), wrong choice (14.24%), articles (9.85%), and capitalization (6.41%).

Table 15. The Five Most Common Errors Found in Prompt B by Group (1-2)

Prompt B	mw/uw	S	wc	nf	wf
total 1B	123	104	90	40	34
total 2B	257	252	197	107	108
total	380	356	287	147	142
Ratio	18.20%	17.05%	13.75%	7.04%	6.80%

Table 15 showed a combined result of the two groups for the five most common errors found in the second essay. It also illustrated their ratio based on the total number of errors. The results of this table indicated that similar to the previous results, missing/unnecessary word (18.20%) and spelling errors (17.05%) constituted the highest number of errors in the second essay respectively. Likewise, wrong choice errors (13.75%) were still the third most frequent errors. However, wrong noun form (7.04%) in the second essay became the fourth type of errors instead of article errors found in the first essay, and wrong form errors (6.80%) became the fifth type of errors instead of capitalization errors.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the most frequent writing errors made by Saudi university students. It also examined if the type of prompt has an effect on the number and frequency of the analyzed errors. 58 undergraduate Saudi students participated in this study. The data was collected in Saudi Arabia during the spring of 2016. The instrument used in this study was developed by Bushong and Mihai (2012) based on Ferris (2002) that categorized ten types of errors; however, five errors were added to this inventory in order to have more comprehensive results.

The study addressed two main questions:

- 1- What are the five most common errors in the academic writing of the EFL Saudi university students?
- 2- Does the type of prompt influence the number and frequency of errors?

Discussion

Question one: What are the five most common errors in the academic writing of the EFL Saudi university students?

The focus of this discussion was geared towards the five most common errors generated from the combined errors' chart. The findings revealed that missing/unnecessary word errors were the most frequent errors among the fifteen types of errors (17.86%), followed by spelling (15.66%), wrong choice (14.00%), articles (7.68%), and wrong noun form (6.68%).

Missing/unnecessary word constituted the highest number of errors (17.86%). Some examples taken from the students' writing are provided below:

- 1- Parents give all thing in life ___ happenies and hop an all thing is peutiful.
- 2- The people prefer to spend time with one or two ___ because some this people ___ shy and don't like a noesy people ___ think when you sae your secret not a lot of people now.
- 3- Yes, I agree ___ parents are the best teachers.
- 4- But the reason that mak the friend special is becous they are a hard to forget ~~persons~~.

The above examples show some of the students' errors in regards to adding or missing some words in their sentences. Some students missed several words not only one word, as shown in the examples. Several reasons might explain the high frequency of this type of error in contrast to the other types. Students were not familiar with the 30-minute time constraint, so they did not have time to re-read their writing. Other reasons might be related to the students' level of proficiency and exposure to English. While some of the errors were likely interlingual, there is a low chance that this type of error resulted from the students' first language interference since most of the errors are not justifiable in the Arabic language.

Due to the fact that the Arabic orthography system is vastly different than the English system, it is no wonder that spelling errors constituted the second highest number of errors among the fifteen types of errors (15.66%). In particular, Arabic writers struggle with English vowels, a phenomenon known as vowel blindness (Khan & Itoo, 2012; Khan, 2013; Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel, 2015; Koda, 1988-1990; Ryan and Meara, 1991; Hayes-Harb, 2006; & Saigh and Schmitt, 2012). This struggle stems from two reasons. First, it might originate from the intrinsic system of orthography in English that includes many irregularities and rules that don't exist in other languages such as silent letters (e.g. castle), double letters (e.g. butter), and suffixes that have the same pronunciation (e.g. -ence and -ance) (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997).

Second, it may be caused by the fact that short vowels are usually omitted in the Arabic written text.

Moreover, unlike English that has many vowels, Arabic has only three short and long vowels, which makes it difficult for Arabic learners to recognize the subtle differences between the vowels. Thus, while Arabic learners might be confused by some consonant letters in English such as *b* and *p*, most of their spelling errors are indeed vowel errors. While analyzing the data, the researcher found that most of the spelling errors were mostly vowel errors. It is also important to note that the participants were not consistent with their spelling errors; for example, they spelled one word correctly but then in the same sentence wrote it incorrectly. Some examples taken from the essays are provided below.

- | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1- hounste (honest). | 6- frind (friend). | 11- thim (them). |
| 2- benfit (benefit). | 7- atack (attack). | 12- think (thing). |
| 3- peautiful (beautiful). | 8- beacuse (because). | 13- wehen (when). |
| 4- quit (quiet). | 9- enjue (enjoy). | 14- persen (person). |
| 5- reson (reason). | 10- numper (number). | 15- now (know). |

Wrong word choice was the third most frequent error among the fifteen types of errors (14.00%). It was no surprise that this type of error was so frequent since it is quite challenging for second language writers to choose the word that is more appropriate in some contexts. This type of error is usually caused by many factors including first language transfer, second language system, exposure to English, and language proficiency. Furthermore, it is related to the proper use of collocations, which is different in every language. Thus, Arabic students are expected to make many collocation errors while writing in English since the two languages are not

historically related (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997). Some examples of errors made in this category are below:

- 1- If I **have** something **mistake** my parent teaches me the best ways for me.
- 2- In my point I **favorite** the two friends I think that some people **say same** my point.
- 3- They **give** you meaningful unforgettable lessons.
- 4- Some people think school **learn** everything to children, school **learn** children how to write, how to read, But it is not **learn** children how to eat, how to love, how to use bathrooms, or how to behavior with people, school can **learn** specific thing, but parent are more than school.

Interestingly, article errors were the fourth most common errors on the list (7.68%).

Articles are one of the hardest rules to master in English; in fact, even the advanced English language learners make article errors. According to Folse (2008), the reason why some English learners struggle to acquire the article system is that many languages do not have articles such as Chinese and Japanese although other languages such as German and Spanish do have articles but they use them differently. In the case of Arabic learners, the Arabic language has only one article, which is the definite article *the*. Therefore, Arabic learners are apt to overuse the article *the*, which leads to many errors. Most of the errors made by the students in this study were related to the wrong usage of the definite article *the* while referring to generic plural nouns. Other errors were using the indefinite article *a* with plural nouns and using *the* with abstract nouns and ideas. Some examples of the errors are provided below:

- 1- They make **the** life interesting and beautiful.
- 2- For example, in **the** home the teachers are parents, in **the** school there are many teacher mathe teacher and English teacher.

- 3- Parents work to give me **a** money and don't need something but don't have money.
- 4- I think **the** parents they can use any statement and you should listen to them.

Wrong noun form was the fifth most frequent type of error (6.68%). The participants made many errors in plural and singular nouns. First, they were not consistent with their usages of plural and singular nouns. For example, some of them started their sentences by using a singular noun and ended it by using plural or vice versa. Second, they used singular nouns to refer to whole groups. This error could be related to the time pressure because the students did not have enough time to review their writing or it might be related to their unawareness of the rules. Some examples are provided below:

- 1- They teach me How I dealing with people, how to be nice with thim and to respect them I don't remember one **teachers** learn me that, so yes I agree with this statement.
- 2- I have many **firend** in my life.
- 3- Parents are the important thing in this life, without them we cannot do anything in our life because they help us to improve and be **a good person**.
- 4- In the end every one must be have a **friends**.

Question two: Does the type of prompt influence the number and frequency of errors?

Number of errors

Although the results of the previous sections showed some differences between the errors in the first and the second prompts in addition to the differences between the mean and standard deviation, which was reported in the descriptive statistics, the results of the paired sample t-test indicated no significant differences. The *p*-value (.079) showed that the difference between the results of the total number of errors in each essay for each student although higher in prompt A,

was not statistically significant to suggest that the type of prompt had an effect on the number of errors. In addition, the effect size was small ($\eta^2 = .053$).

However, it would be interesting to find out why the number of errors in the first essay (40.34) was higher from the second essay (36.34) as shown in the descriptive statistics. This difference can be ascribed to various reasons. First, it could be that the students found the persuasive essay to be more difficult than compare and contrast essay. According to Shukri (2014), Saudi students are not used to the transforming approach of writing; thereby, the writing prompts that require more critical and problem solving skills would be more challenging. Unlike compare and contrast essay, persuasive essay requires more critical skills in which writers have to persuade the readers and present cogent examples and explanations. Indeed, compare and contrast essay is considered relatively easier because students do not have to persuade or prove their opinion. They only have to present the two sides and which one they prefer. Second, it could be related to the anxiety factor because students made more errors in the first essay than in the second one. Third, the length of the students' essays might be the reason behind that because students might have written more in the first essay; consequently, they made more errors.

Frequency of errors

The combined results for the two groups in prompts A and B were analyzed and presented separately to identify the five most common errors. The first three types were similar in the two presented tables in which missing/unnecessary word was the first common error, followed by spelling, and wrong choice. However, the differences between the results of prompts A and B appeared in the last two categories. In prompt A, articles and capitalization errors constituted the fourth and fifth common types of errors respectively. However, in prompt B, the fourth and the fifth types were wrong noun form and wrong form.

These differences might be interpreted by the differences of the prompts' types. In particular, the students tended to repeat or use some of the words from the prompts such as "parents are the best teachers" and "one or two friends." For instance, in the first essay, the students had to talk about parents as the best teachers. They made many article mistakes while refereeing or talking about parents in general. Particularly, they tended to use the definite article *the* every time they talked about parents such as (**the** parents are the best teachers). However, the researcher has no explanation for the reason why capitalization errors were more frequent in the first essay than in the second essay.

In the second essay, the high frequency of the wrong noun form and the wrong form errors can be interpreted by the type of the prompts as well. For example, the students in the second essay had to compare between spending time with one or two friends and spending time with many friends; thereby, they made many errors regarding the usage of singular and plural nouns such as (when you spend time with many friends, you can learn a lot and know a lot of new information unlike one or two **friend**). In addition, the participants made many errors regarding the usage of gerund and infinitive forms, which in turn increased the wrong form errors such as (like **spend** time with one friend **spend** time with many friends is fun).

Most of the studies mentioned in the literature examined the effect of topical knowledge on the quality of the ESL writing. Some of the major issues investigated in this area includes the effect of culturally familiar and unfamiliar topics on the ESL writing, the effect of general and specific topics, and the effect of subject matter's topics compared to general topics that do not relate to the student's field of study (Winfield & Barnes-Felfeli, 1982; He & Shi, 2008-2012; Tedick, 1990; & Freimuth, 2014). Another common issue of investigation relates to the effect of providing choice of topics on the ESL writing (Jennings et. al, 1990; & Spaan, 1993). None of

these studies examined the effect of the types of prompts on the frequency of errors such as compare/contrast and persuasive prompts. Therefore, it would be unfair to compare the results of this study to the other results. However, the results of the existed literature on this topic are still contradictory and inconclusive.

Further, the results of this study contradicted with the results of Lavallée & McDonough (2015) who found that the type of prompt had an effect on the text quality and lexical features. In contrast, the current study found that the type of prompt had no impact on the number of errors.

Implications for students and teachers

The findings of this study revealed that the five most common errors made by the students were missing/unnecessary word (17.86%), followed by spelling errors (15.66%), wrong choice (14.00%), article (7.68%), wrong noun form (6.68%). These errors are examples of the errors made by the students who participated in this study, but another sample of students might make completely different errors. Therefore, Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993), Lalande (1982), and Ferris (1995a-1995c) suggested that teachers need to create their own error logs and charts in order to help their students achieve long-term progress in their overall writing accuracy (as cited in Ferris, 2011). By doing so, teachers and students will focus more on the major patterns of errors instead on focusing on errors that are not frequent. Further, teachers can direct their feedback to target these specific errors. Because some errors are idiosyncratic, it would be beneficial to train students to use individual error charts to track their progress and frequent errors.

Furthermore, by focusing on the five most common errors listed in this study, students will be able to master some grammatical rules related to these errors such as article, singular and

plural, spelling rules. However, some types of errors will be easier to explain and correct while others are vague and difficult to explain such as the first frequent error in this study. This type of error is random and requires several grammatical rules to be covered. It is also highly affected by syntax. To decrease this type of error, students need to have a better knowledge of their sentence components and structure.

Over the years, spelling errors have been extensively researched in Saudi Arabia (Khan & Itoo, 2012; Khan, 2013; Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel, 2015; & Saigh and Schmitt, 2012). The results of this study lend support to the other researchers who found that Saudi students face difficulties with English spelling and particularly with vowels. Therefore, teachers need to be cognizant of the vowel blindness phenomena when dealing with spelling errors in addition to the irregularity of the English orthographic system. Raising the students' awareness to the differences between the Arabic and English orthography might be helpful in this case.

Wrong choice errors are very common not only for Saudi or Arabic learners but also for other populations such as Korean learners (Ha, 2013). Even the advanced learners face difficulties to express their ideas in English and to avoid translating from their L1. First, teachers and students need to be mindful about the importance of collocations, which are defined by Yule (2010) as "words that tend to occur with other words". To help students be more accurate in their word choice, teachers need to implement new teaching methods using Corpus linguistics, a database that collects actual texts either spoken or written in one place (Yule, 2010). Moreover, Mahmoud (2005) investigated the collocation errors made by Arab learners in Oman and found that they made a large number of collocation errors; therefore, he suggested exchanging the glossaries of bilingual words in the Omani school textbooks into word combinations. Also, he suggested using textbooks that include exercises that focus on word combinations. Since the

school textbooks in Saudi Arabia are specifically written for Saudi students, it would be ideal if the authors could implement exercises that entail the use of collocations in their textbooks. It is recommended that professors and curriculum designers at the university level use books that focus on collocations to familiarize their students with the English collocations.

In regards to the article errors, it is very common for Arabic learners not only Saudi students to make many article errors especially overusing the definite article *the*. Although this type of error has not received special attention from the Saudi researchers, it has been a major area of investigation for many researchers such as Crompton (2011), Kharma (1981), Bataineh (2005), and Willcott (1978). Since language interference is a major reason for the high frequency of this type of error not only for Arabic speakers but also for other L2 learners such as Chinese, Russian, and Spanish (Chrabaszcz & Jiang, 2014; Urdaneta & Lorenzo, 2011; Wenjuan, 2015), it would be quite important for teachers to explain the differences between the article rules in Arabic and English. Teachers need to allocate sufficient time for practicing and using articles and never underestimate the importance of doing that since this point of grammar is so problematic for many Arabic learners.

Wrong noun form errors constituted a large number of the students' errors especially in the second prompt where students had to make some comparisons regarding the number of friends with who they preferred to spend their time. Therefore, singular and plural rules have to be explained in details for the students in addition to providing them with enough time and exercises to practice the rules. Another important issue is that students need to be aware of the differences between the rules in their L1 and in English (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). For example, some non-count English words such as research, homework, information, and advice are countable in Arabic. Also, some words such as chicken and meat are countable in some

contexts and uncountable in others. Because these rules are mostly covered in the textbooks for the beginner students, teachers may think there is no need to waste their time by teaching these rules. However, in reality, as the results of this study showed, it is very common for intermediate and even advanced students to make plural and singular errors. Thus, the rules of count and non-count nouns need to be explained even to the advanced students.

In fact, teachers' feedback is a very effective approach to help students write more accurately and proficiently. Unfortunately, the importance of providing feedback is underestimated in Saudi Arabia, especially at the universities where class sizes are so large that it is extremely difficult for professors to provide adequate feedback. For this reason, using error logs and charts would be especially beneficial for teachers to cover and explain the most frequent patterns of errors. For example, while analyzing the students' essays, teachers can keep error logs for the most common errors found in their students' writing. Then, it will be easier for them to address these errors with the whole class instead of covering rules or areas that are not problematic for the students. Another effective approach is for students to keep their own error logs based on their teachers' feedback in order to track their progress in their writing. Detecting the errors would be useless if no action was taken to go over these errors and explain them. With the help of their teachers and the time allocated to practice, students will become more autonomous in detecting and fixing their errors.

The results of this study showed that the type of prompt had no effect on the number of errors. However, based on the descriptive statistics and the analysis of the five most common errors, it was found that some types of errors were more frequent in one prompt rather than the other, which means that it is possible that a different type of prompt such as descriptive or cause and effect yields different types of errors. Thus, it would be important for teachers and educators

to pay attention to this issue. It can be concluded here that although the type of prompt had no effect on the number of errors, it had an effect on the types of errors.

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

No statistical differences were found in this study concerning the effect of the types of prompts since the observed power was low. Using a larger sample in a future study might yield different results. In addition, this study used only two types of prompts for comparison; therefore, the number and types of errors were limited to those two types. A future study would reveal different results if different types or number of prompts were used. Further, it would be interesting to investigate if the topic familiarity in Saudi Arabia has an effect on the frequency of errors.

While analyzing the data, the researcher found other errors that did not fit in the inventory developed by Bushong and Mihai (2002). Also, some categories such as the missing/unnecessary word category were somewhat general and needed more specification. Thus, further research that uses more error categories might yield more detailed and conclusive results concerning the types of errors. Moreover, it would be beneficial to examine the sources of the most common errors in a future study.

The sample used in this study consisted of students from different levels of proficiency; thereby, it would be valuable for a future study to use one or two levels of proficiency and compare between them. It would be interesting to find out if the proficiency level has an effect on the types of the most common errors.

Conclusions

The two questions addressed in this study were:

1- What are the five most common errors in the academic writing of the EFL Saudi university students?

2- Does the type of prompt influence the number and frequency of errors?

The findings revealed that missing/unnecessary word constituted the highest number of errors (17.86%), followed by spelling errors (15.66%), wrong choice (14.00%), article (7.68%), wrong noun form (6.68%). In addition, the type of prompt had no effect on the number of errors since the results of the paired sample t-test showed no significant differences. Yet, the results of the five most common errors in prompts A and B demonstrated some differences in the last two categories, which meant that the type of prompt made a difference on the frequency and types of errors.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Amal M. Barzanji and Co-PI: Florin Mihai**

Date: **November 06, 2015**

Dear Researcher:

On 11/06/2015, the IRB approved the following human participant research until 11/05/2016 inclusive:

Type of Review: UCF Initial Review Submission Form
Project Title: Analyzing the Academic Writing of Arabic-Speaking Students:
Does the Prompt Matter?
Investigator: Amal M Barzanji
IRB Number: SBE-15-11705
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30 days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

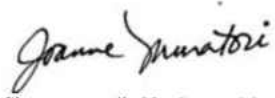
If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 11/05/2016, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, including signed consent forms if applicable, must be retained and secured per protocol for a minimum of five years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained and secured per protocol. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Muratori". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot above the letter 'i'.

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 11/06/2015 03:24:47 PM EST

IRB Manager

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE ESSAY A

Student's name:

Directions: Read the prompt below. You have 30 minutes to write and review your essay.

Prompt 1: What do you think about the following statement? Parents are the best teachers.

Do you agree or disagree? Use specific reasons to support your choice.

First, thanks for god to my biggest gift (my Parents). of course the Parents are the good and best teachers because they start to teach their kids since they birth until ~~dead~~. They teach every think in the life. they stay with us in the good and bad cases. they laugh when we happy. They cry when we sad. They support us and take us to the right line. They help us in our problem. They and the happenest think in our life. They are spend their life just to teach us the good things. we all have to thank them and be a good picture for their raising. and I'm sure all the people agree with me.

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE ESSAY B

Student's name:

Directions: Read the prompt below. You have 30 minutes to write and review your essay.

Prompt 2: Some people prefer to spend time with one or two friends while others like to spend time with many friends. Compare the advantages of each choice. In your opinion, which one is better? Use specific reasons to support your choice.

spend time with one or two Friends is the better for me because when I have one or two friends that mean I have more privacy and more quiet in our life. maybe other people prefer to spend time with many friend to have more fun and more gathering with them. at the end it's up to the person and the friends and the society. Put in the two choices we must spend time with good and kind people to have more better relationship. And we have to be honest with each other.

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