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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Error Analysis in Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Types and Frequencies of Grammatical Errors of Simple Present and Past Tense in the Elicited Written Production Task of Arab EFL Undergraduate Learners[1]

Análisis de los errores en la adquisición de un segundo idioma (SLA), tipos y frecuencias de errores gramaticales del tiempo presente y pasado simple en la tarea de producción escrita de estudiantes universitarios árabes de inglés como segunda lengua

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Abstract

This investigation aimed to examine the types and frequencies of grammatical errors of present and past tense and agreement in the elicited written production task (EWPT) of Arab EFL learners. The sample of the study comprised 67 Arab EFL undergraduates selected through a simple random sampling method and subdivided into three proficiency levels. The data collection instrument was the EWPT, which consisted of two passages and a total of 46 test items. The EWPT was collected and the errors committed by the students were identified, classified, and analyzed in frequencies. Then, statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 21. The findings demonstrated two basic types of grammatical errors: error of misformation (EM) and error of omission (EO). Overall results revealed that incorrect use of inflectional morphemes was higher for the EM than for the EO of inflectional morphemes across the three groups of participants. The ungrammatical EM is characterized by the use of incorrect forms, including misusing phonologically similar words, incorrect suffixation, substitution, as well as overgeneralization of be verb forms. Based on these findings, some recommendations and pedagogical implications were proposed, which might assist EFL teachers in developing feasible teaching propositions and policies.

Keywords: EFL writing, error analysis, error of misformation, error of omission, grammatical errors, second language acquisition, tense and agreement

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Resumen

El objetivo de la presente investigación fue examinar los tipos y frecuencias de los errores gramaticales del tiempo presente y pasado y la concordancia en la tarea de producción escrita (EWPT) de los estudiantes árabes de inglés como lengua extranjera. La muestra del estudio comprendió 67 estudiantes árabes de EFL seleccionados a través de un método de muestreo aleatorio simple y subdivididos en tres niveles de competencia. El instrumento de recolección de datos usado fue el EWPT, que consta de dos pasajes y un total de 46 ítems de prueba. Se recolectó el EWPT y se identificaron, clasificaron y analizaron en frecuencias los errores cometidos por los estudiantes. Luego, se realizó un análisis estadístico con SPSS 21. Los hallazgos demostraron dos tipos básicos de errores gramaticales: error de deformación (EM) y error de omisión (EO). Los resultados generales revelaron que el uso incorrecto de los morfemas flexivos fue mayor para el EM que para el EO de los morfemas flexivos en los tres grupos de participantes. El EM agramatical se caracteriza por el uso de formas incorrectas, dada su similitud fonológica, el uso incorrecto de sufijación, la sustitución y la generalización excesiva de las formas de los verbos. Con base en estos hallazgos, se propusieron algunas recomendaciones e implicaciones pedagógicas que podrían ayudar a los profesores de EFL con algunas propuestas y políticas de enseñanza factibles.

Palabras clave: adquisición de una segunda lengua, análisis de errores, error de deformación, error de omisión, errores gramaticales, escritura EFL, tiempo y concordancia

Introduction

Error analysis research aids in identifying the underlying factors and sources of these anticipated errors made throughout the process of foreign/second language learning (F/SLL). This enhances our comprehension of language learning and also supports the implementation of appropriate teaching techniques and approaches to increase students' appreciation of the value of learning a foreign language effectively and successfully. The classification of the types of errors and examination of their causes is critical for researchers and learners, and it has a big impact on comprehending the level of the language learner.

Poor language proficiency, especially regarding accuracy, can hinder efficient communication in the target language. In addition, inappropriate use of tenses and verb forms can alter the meaning of words and grammatical constructions. A variety of factors can contribute to this inadequate usage, including interference from the first language, as well as individual and situational factors.

Interference occurs due to differences in linguistic systems between the source and the target languages. Ellis, 1997 argued that research in this area focuses on the systematic examination of how learners learn a second language, as well as the methods used to learn the language itself. Second language acquisition (SLA) also takes into account personal attributes as well as contextual and environmental factors, both of which have an impact on the learning process. These factors could be thought to be the main causes of erroneous formation in language learning skills.

Writing is a comprehensive skill like listening, speaking, and reading. However, it is a complex language skill that allows students to express their thoughts, knowledge, and feelings in a text that can be read and understood by a large number of people (Pamittan, 2019; Talosa & Maguddayao, 2018). It is the hardest skill to master since it requires deep thought while simultaneously producing words, phrases, and paragraphs. That is why the highest level of thought is writing. Speaking and writing involve language production and are therefore generally referred to as productive skills (Jeremy, 1991). Productive skills need actions to produce the language.

For this reason, the current research examines the most prevalent grammatical errors made by undergraduate Arab EFL students in their writing, particularly in relation to the frequency of errors found in a given sample. The primary goal of the current investigation is to identify writing errors in English present and past tense and agreement among Arab EFL undergraduate students. The following morphemes are being studied: the third

person singular agreement morpheme *–s* (3sg-*s*), the English past tense agreement morpheme *–ed,* the irregular past tense involving the feature of *ablaut* and the present and past tense *be* auxiliary and copula *be* verb forms; *is*, *am*, *are*, *was* and *were*.

By examining these errors, the research aims to provide a better understanding of why they occur. This involves categorizing them and discussing their usage in different contexts to offer English-language learners a useful explanation of their origins. Therefore, this research considers the following questions:

1. What types of errors do Arab EFL undergraduate students make in using the present and past tenses and agreement in the EWPT?
2. Are there any significant differences among the three proficiency groups in terms of the error of omission (EO) of the present and past tense and agreement morphemes?
3. Are there any significant differences among the three proficiency groups in terms of the error of misformation (EM) of the present and past tense and agreement morphemes?
4. What are the sources of errors which Arab EFL undergraduate students made in using the present and past tenses and agreement in the EWPT?
5. What teaching strategies should instructors implement to help EFL students avoid tense and agreement errors?

Literature Review

The term "error" refers to a language deviation from precision or correctness (Ellis, 1997). It is crucial to distinguish between errors and mistakes since Corder (1967) associates the former with a lack of knowledge. Ellis argues that students make a mistake if they occasionally provide the correct form and occasionally apply the erroneous one; they stem from the learner's inability to apply what they have learned (Ellis, 1997). However, it indicates an error if students consistently employ the erroneous form. This definition indicates that 'mistake' is a fault that a learner can correct, while an 'error' is a fault that a learner cannot correct (Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2022; Rana *et al*., 2019).

In the learning process, students may not notice they are making errors since they prefer to overlook grammar. In fact, they struggle with using tenses correctly at times. These errors, particularly regarding the use of the present and past tense, as well as agreement, must be thoroughly examined (Al-Khasawneh, 2014; Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Muftah, 2016a and b; Muftah & Rafik-Galea, 2013; Seitova, 2016).

Errors may occur as a result of human limitations in acquiring the target language (Norrish, 1983). They can be found in many aspects of language, including grammar, which students must master to incorporate linguistic elements in grammatical sentences while complying with the instructions (Patoc & Lasaten, 2019). Although tenses are an essential aspect of English grammar and required in writing, students still struggle with understanding how to utilize them in writing a sentence correctly.

Students make errors repeatedly without realizing they are doing so (Catabay, 2019). According to Richards (1985), errors result from inadequate knowledge of the target language system. As stated by Brown (2000), errors can be identified, examined, and categorized to reveal details about the learner's operating system. This has led to a surge of research on errors, known as error analysis. Gass and Slinker (1994) propose four steps for conducting an error analysis: identifying, classifying and quantifying the errors, and analyzing the source of error. On the other hand, Dulay *et al*. in James (1998) classified errors into four types, including (a) error of omission, (b) error of addition, (c) error of misformation, and (d) error of misordering. Performing error analyses is effective as it aids students in reducing errors and improving their English proficiency (Muftah, 2016b).

Gass and Selinker (2001) have claimed that errors can act as alert indicators that a learner is not yet proficient in the target language. As a result, teachers must be keenly aware of these errors to provide students with useful feedback (Ferris, 2011). It results inevitable for students to make errors when attempting to enhance their writing skills (Muftah,

2023). Several studies have been conducted to identify the types of errors and the most frequent errors that appeared in the writing of EFL students (Do, 2023; Fatmawati & Harahap, 2023; Lionny & Kusumadewi, 2022; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2022). The findings indicated that tense and agreement errors are the most common errors. Moreover, they showed that there are numerous types of errors, from which errors of omission and misformation are the most frequent types.

A corpus of 72 essays written by Malaysian students revealed that they had trouble using English grammar rules (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). Lestari (2020) examined how the simple present tense is employed and which errors are made by the research participants when composing descriptive writings. The results indicated that students made 33 errors out of 70 sentences and had the most difficulty with misformation. This is consistent with Klimova's (2013) research on Czech students, which identified subject-verb agreement, tenses, word order, and articles as common areas of difficulty in English writing. Meanwhile, Yang (2019) looked at the negative language transfer of Chinese college students' English writing errors and found that there was a negative transfer of phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse elements from Chinese to English.

In turn, Salehi and Bahrami (2018) carried out a study on the written work of Persian students. The study revealed that the students made the greatest errors in the use of words, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, word order, active and passive voice, tense, and subject-verb agreement. According to Hamed's (2018) findings, substance errors accounted for the most errors (331), followed by grammatical errors (150), syntactical errors (54), and lexical errors (29). The results also showed that the most typical linguistic errors found in the students' written compositions were related to spelling, capitalization, tenses, punctuation, articles, diversified words, subject-verb agreement, and prepositions. In the same vein, Nurlaily's (2022) findings revealed that there are six main types of grammatical errors in writing, including subject-verb agreement, noun, pronoun, verb, article, and prepositional errors. The majority of these investigations have shown that students' errors are interpreted as overgeneralizations of the target language. They can also be attributed to a variety of factors, including a lack of understanding of rule restriction, insufficient rule application, and interference from negative transfer from the native language (Muftah, 2016a & b; Muftah & Rafik-Galea, 2013).

However, Hussain and Abdullah 's (2019) qualitative study classified common errors into four types: grammar, lexis, semantics, and mechanics. Furthermore, Leila and Saliha (2021) conducted research to identify, define, and clarify the types and sources of errors made by 17 female and 11 male students. The results indicated that the students made numerous errors, including tenses, subject-verb agreement, and French interference. Their findings also provided teachers with important guidance for planning and selecting the best policies and resources for teaching paragraph writing. Similarly, Sundari *et al*., (2021) attempted to identify the different types of sentence structure errors that are made in English paragraphs written by undergraduate English students, as well as the causes of these errors. The findings revealed that students faced difficulties regarding the four types of errors. Moreover, the results also showed that the sources of sentence structure errors included mother tongue interference, overgeneralization of English rules and norms, and the teacher's instructional style and teaching strategy.

Learners might easily make errors when writing since they are relying solely on their linguistic understanding to compose a text without the assistance of any other sources. According to Ferris (2002), studying errors can provide analysts with a clear image of how students construct their texts linguistically and track their progress as writers. It also displays evidence of students' language use and their current phase of language learning development. The significance of error analysis in the teaching and learning process cannot be overstated. Teachers can improve suitable instructional resources and effective plans to correct students' errors by understanding their causes (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Do, 2023). For students, research on errors can reveal the challenges and barriers they face in their writing (Seitova, 2016; Sompong, 2014).

Previous studies have highlighted the differences between Arabic and English phonology, orthography, punctuation, and grammar (Swan & Smith, 2001). Other research has looked at differences in a single linguistic branch, such as syntax (Noor, 1996). In the context of Arab EFL learners, a few studies have delved into the syntactic errors made by university students. Alahmadi (2014) researched the most frequent grammatical speaking errors among intermediate Saudi English-language learners. The study identified several errors, including unmarked forms of verbs, misuse of verb tenses, use of sentences without a verb, third-person pronouns, and misuse of regular and irregular verbs. Muftah and Rafik-Galea (2013) analyzed errors in present simple tense among adult Arab English-language learners. The findings suggested that learners had difficulty mastering present-tense inflectional morphemes due to L1 interference. In the same way, Muftah (2016) investigated the kinds of errors that adult Arab EFL students produced in their acquisition of English past-tense morphology. The results revealed that the most recurrent errors produced by the students are omission, overregularization, and overgeneration of *be* forms.

Likewise, the findings of Al-Hamzi *et al*. (2023) indicated that the most typical error found in Yemeni EFL learners' writing was the error of omission. This type of error was responsible for 118 out of a total of 201 cases. The findings also revealed that pronouns, prepositions, subject-verb agreements, verb-tenses, articles, and number markers were the most frequent errors. Expanding on this, Alzahrani (2020) examined the impact of interlingual and intralingual interference on errors in past and perfect tenses. Saudi EFL undergraduates with English majors participated in the study. The findings revealed a statistically significant difference between intralingual interference strategy and first language negative transfer as sources of errors in past and present perfect tenses. Similarly, Nuruzzaman *et al*. (2018) analyzed the writing errors of 90 Saudi undergraduates with majors other than English from three colleges who attended an English foundation course. Based on the findings, Saudi EFL students made four types of mistakes when writing English paragraphs: grammar, lexis, semantics, and mechanics. Moreover, grammar was identified as the most error-prone category.

While several studies have been conducted to investigate the types and categories of grammatical errors, only a few studies have examined the syntactic errors produced by Arab EFL university graduates. Moreover, the importance of investigating present and past tense and agreement inflectional morphemes in the context of Saudi EFL learners' EWPT has received insufficient attention. Thus, it is critical to investigate the types and sources of errors in using tense and agreement inflectional morphemes among Saudi EFL learners. The contribution of this study is to attempt to bridge that gap by investigating the types and frequencies of grammatical errors of present and past tense and agreement morphemes in the EWPT of undergraduate Saudi EFL learners. The main goal is to determine whether significant differences exist among the three proficiency groups (advanced, intermediate, and elementary groups) in terms of the errors of omission and misformation of these morphemes.

The results of the error analysis provide valuable factual information that can aid in developing appropriate teaching materials and strategies to help students avoid specific errors in the future. Additionally, this study also seeks to identify the dominant types of errors in using simple present and past tenses when writing in EFL. The results could benefit EFL students by presenting a list of typical grammatical errors that can increase their awareness of error avoidance and self-correction. The study concludes by discussing the pedagogical implications of the findings for improving the teaching and learning of EFL writing and its mechanisms for both students and teachers.

Research Methodology

Participants

An elicited written production task (EWPT), consisting of two passages and a total of 46 test items was given to 67 third-year Arab EFL undergraduate learners who were selected and classified into three groups according to their proficiency levels (advanced, intermediate, and elementary groups). The study was conducted in

the academic year 2021/2022 and involved English major undergraduates at a public university in Saudi Arabia. All participants shared similar characteristics, including their nationality, native language (Arabic), linguistic, educational, and social backgrounds. They have been learning English for 9 years at school where they were taught English as a foreign language before they enrolled in a four-year undergraduate degree program in English language and translation. The investigation took place during their regular English class, with a total of 25 males and 52 females (mean age = 22.44; range: 20–26) enrolled in the class. However, data from only 67 learners were included for the final analysis based on the following criteria: students who completed the EWPT in its entirety and students who had completed the English proficiency test.

To determine students' proficiency level, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was given by the classroom instructor. Students were subdivided into three proficiency groups: 20 higher proficiency students (C1 level), which included 7 males and 13 females with a mean age of 23.42; 22 intermediate proficiency students (B1 level), 8 males and 14 females with a mean age of 21.25; and 25 lower proficiency students (A2 level), 7 males and 18 females with a mean age of 22.65.

Instrumentation

Proficiency test. The OPT (Allan, 1992) was conducted at the beginning of the study to assess the overall English proficiency of students whose major was English language and translation. The OPT is a 60-item multiple-choice test that focuses primarily on lexis and syntax. The test consists of multiple-choice questions that assess verb agreement, gender, tense, and prepositions, among other grammar structures. Similarly, there are items on the test that assess vocabulary knowledge by requesting participants to choose the best alternative for filling in the blanks. It distinguishes between the following levels of proficiency: beginner (0–17), elementary (18–29), lower intermediate (30–39), upper-intermediate (40–47), advanced (48–54), and very advanced (55–60).

The elicited written production task (EWPT). A pilot study was conducted to test the validity of the instrument to be used in the main study. The test instrument itself consisted of (1) an independent measure of proficiency and (2) an elicited written production task (EWPT). Five adult native speakers of Arabic and five adult native speakers of English participated in the pilot study. Based on the participants' results the test reliability was acceptable at (r= .85).

The task was conducted in either a classroom or a lecture hall, depending on where the participants had their lessons because the basic requirement was to conduct the study in a classroom setting, regardless of the class size. This ensured that the outcome of the study was unaffected. The task items covered English present and past tense and agreement, *be* verb forms (both auxiliary and copula verb forms). The first passage tested the learners' ability to produce the present tense and agreement morphology and *be* verb forms. The morphemes studied were the 3sg-*s* and the *be* verb forms; *is*, *am* and *are* (auxiliary and copula). The second passage tested the learners' ability to produce the past tense and agreement morphology and *be* verb forms. The morphemes examined were the English past tense agreement morpheme *–ed*, the irregular past tense involving the feature of *ablaut* and *be* verb forms, *was* and *were* (auxiliary and copula). The participants were instructed to read the passages first, then choose the correct tense and morphemes to fill in the blanks. The test took about 60 minutes to complete. A correct answer received a score of 1 while an incorrect answer received a score of 0. Then, the results of the test were statistically analyzed.

Data Analysis Procedures

Firstly, the types of errors made by students in the EWPT were analyzed using criteria based on the following description:

1. Error of omission (EO): the element should be covert, but it is omitted.
2. Error of misformation (EM): one grammatical form was used in place of the other including substitution, wrong form and deletion of morphemes.

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Secondly, for the EWPT, the collected data were analyzed using the step of error analysis based on Gass and Slinker (1994) to classify the errors made by undergraduate Arab EFL learners:

1. Errors of identification: errors in using present and past tense agreement morphemes were identified and a list of all errors was made.
2. Errors of classification: all errors were classified into types of errors.
3. Errors of quantification: errors were counted to know the dominant errors in the use of present and past tense agreement morphemes made by the students by using the following formula:

$$: \frac{total\ of\ each\ item}{total\ of\ error} \times 100$$

4. Source of errors analysis: errors were corrected and then repaired into the correct sentences.

Finally, data were analyzed using statistical software, such as SPSS, to identify any significant differences between groups in the construction of present and past inflectional morphemes. This analysis included the use of one-way ANOVA, post-hoc Scheffe test, and paired two-sample t-tests.

Results and Discussion

Error of Omission (EO)

The ungrammatical error of omission (EO) included the number of omissions in obligatory contexts in which each morpheme was omitted. Obligatory contexts refer to settings in which the morpheme is typically required in standard English.

EO (Present and Past Tense Morphemes in Obligatory Contexts)

Table 1 shows that the past tense had more morpheme omission (26.77%) than the present tense (22.44%). This is related to the high omission rates (49.45%) of regular past tense verb forms.

Even at the ultimate attainment level, L2 learners were unable to construct regular past tense verb forms in a native-like manner.

i. Omission of the 3sg-*s*
- *Alice **love(s)** to read books (AG 13)
- *James **speak(s)** French very well (IG 8)
- *It **snow(s)** a lot in Winter in UK. (EG 12)

ii. Omission of the past tense –*ed*
- *Last night, while I was relaxing in the room, my best friend **call(ed)** (IG EG 20)
- *Amanda **admit(ed)** that it was all her fault (IG 22)

A one-way ANOVA indicated that differences among the groups in terms of the error of omission of the present tense inflectional morpheme were not significant ($F(2,64) = 2.327$, $P = .068$). In contrast, all groups showed a significant difference in the omission of the past tense inflectional morpheme ($F(2,64) = 7.265$, $P = .002$). Regarding the omission of both the present and the past tense inflectional morpheme, post-hoc Scheffe tests revealed no significant differences ($p > .05$) in the performance of the three groups.

Table 1. *Mean Percentages of EO in Obligatory Contexts*

Item type		Proficiency Group			(%)
		AG N=20	IG N=22	EG N=25	
EO (present tense)		9/67 (13.43%)	17/84 (20.24%)	31/103 (30.10%)	57/254 (22.44%)
EO (past tense)		5/67(7.46%)	25/84 (29.76%)	38/103 (36.89%)	68/254 (26.77%)
	regular	4/22 (18.18%)	16/33 (48.48%)	25/36 (69.44%)	45/91 (49.45%)
	irregular	1/45 (2.22%)	9/51(17.65%)	13/67 (19.40%)	23/163 (7.79%)
Total		14/134 (10.45%)	42/168 (25.00%)	69/206 (33.50%)	125/508(24.61%)

Note. EO= Error of omission; AG=advanced group; IG= intermediate group; EG=elementary group

Table 2. *Mean Percentages of EO of be verb Forms in Obligatory Contexts*

Item type	Proficiency Group			(%)
	AG N=20	IG N=22	EG N=25	
EO-present tense *be* auxiliary	4/67 (5.97%)	9/84 (10.71%)	36/103 (34.95%)	49/254 (19.29%)
EO-past tense *be* auxiliary	10/67 (14.93%)	21/84 (25.00%)	32/103 (31.07%)	63/254 (24.80%)
Total	14/134 (10.45%)	30/168 (17.86%)	68/206 (33.01%)	112/508(22.05%)
EO-present tense copula	2/67(2.99%)	12/84 (14.29%)	23/103 (22.33%)	37/254 (14.57%)
EO-past tense copula	0/67(0.00%)	0/84 (0.00%)	2/103 (1.94%)	2/254 (0.79%)
Total	2/134 (1.49%)	12/168 (7.14%)	25/206 (23.97%)	39/508(7.68%)

Note. EO= Error of omission; AG=advanced group; IG= intermediate group; EG=elementary group

EO (Present and Past tense be verb Forms in Obligatory Contexts)

Table 2 reports the mean percentages for the ungrammatical error of omission of present and past *be* verb forms (auxiliary and copula) in obligatory contexts for the three groups.

Results indicate that the past tense *be* auxiliary verb forms had a higher rate of morpheme omission (24.80%) than the present tense forms across all three groups, with the elementary group having the highest percentage of omission. However, paired two-sample *t*-tests reported that the difference in the omission levels of past and present tense *be* auxiliary items was not significant ($p>.05$) for the advanced group ($t(19)= -2.875$, $p= .164$) and across all groups collectively ($t(66)= -2.109$, $p= .255$). With respect to the copula verb forms, omission of morphemes was found only with the present tense forms (14.57%) and no omission was observed with the past tense copula verb forms (0%) except for the elementary group where only two instances of omission were identified (0.79%). T-test analysis exposed that the difference in the omission levels of copula *be* items was extremely significant ($p<.05$) throughout all groups ($t(66)=2.732$, $p= .001$) with only two instances of the past tense copula *be* forms being omitted. In general, statistics show that the three proficiency groups produced more EO of *be* forms for the *be* auxiliary (22.05%) than for the copula verb forms (7.68%). Regarding the ungrammatical EO of *be* auxiliary verbs ($F(2,64) = 3.351$, $p= .174$) and that of the copula verb forms ($F(2,64) = 1.876$, $p= .143$), a one-way ANOVA and post-hoc Scheffe tests revealed no statistically significant differences ($p>.05$) among the three groups.

Some instances of the ungrammatical omission of *be* verb morphemes are represented below:

i. Omission of present tense *be* auxiliary verb
*Everyone **~~is~~) visiting** the museum in the morning (AG 2)
*I (**~~am~~**) **writing** articles on different topics (EG 12)

ii Omission of past tense *be* auxiliary verb
*The student next to the window (**~~was~~**) **drawing** a picture of a river (IG 15)
*He (**~~was~~**) **waiting** at home all day when she sent him the message (EG 21)

iii Omission of present tense Copula verb
*She (**~~is~~**) a nice girl, but irritated (IG 5)
*The weather (**~~is~~**) horrible (EG 7)

The construction of *be* forms proved to be a challenge for the L2 learners, particularly for the elementary learners who appeared to have made the highest number of omissions of *be* verbs as presented in the instances above. However, improvement was observed among the intermediate and advanced learners who exhibited less omission compared to the elementary group learners. The L2 learners had inappropriately omitted copula *be* verb

forms, most likely due to the effect of the learners' L1 language (i.e., Arabic). Unlike English copula, the Arabic counterpart is not overt when the time reference is present tense, but it does appear when the time reference of such a sentence is past tense. This assertion was supported by the discovery of two instances of past tense copula omission in the L2 learners' performance.

As to the *be* auxiliary verb forms, the ungrammatical absence of the present tense *be* auxiliary verbs can also be described in relation to L1 transfer. In this case, the combination of the *be* auxiliary and the main verb in English corresponds to the simple present tense in the source language (i.e., Arabic). Another possible reason for this error is that the L2 learners have recognized the *be* auxiliary to be the same as the *be* copula because in English both are generated in the same structural position. As a result, they tended to omit the present tense *be* auxiliary forms. Nevertheless, why do Arab EFL learners overlook the past *be* auxiliary forms if they had treated the *be* auxiliary forms like that of the copula forms? This misconception is most likely due to the fact that, while L2 learners appear to have acquired the English verbal system and all associated features, they have yet to master the morphological realizations of these elements.

Error of Misformation (EM)

The ungrammatical EM occurs when learners use the incorrect format of the present and past verbal inflectional morphemes in obligatory contexts.

EM (Present and Past Tense Morphemes in Obligatory Contexts)

As demonstrated in Table 3, the wrong use of the present tense agreement morpheme (54.72%) was more significant compared to that of the past tense (38.19%).

One-way ANOVA results revealed that the difference among the groups was significant, ($F(2,64) = 19.542$, $p = .0001$) for EM of the present tense morpheme ($F(2,64) = 4.634$, $p = .001$) and the past tense morpheme. Post-hoc Scheffe tests demonstrated statistically significant differences among learners ($p < .05$), except for the advanced and intermediate groups in relation to the incorrect use of past tense. The *T*-test analysis indicated that there was no statistically significant difference ($p > .05$) between the scores for the incorrect use of present tense and past tense, except for the elementary group ($t(24) = 3.732$, $p = .017$).

The overt realizations of the past and present tense inflectional morphemes appeared to be an issue for the learners, particularly for those in the elementary group who had the greatest percentage of wrong use of these morphemes (81.55% and 55.34%, respectively). The overt realizations of morphemes appeared to be slightly challenging even at a significantly higher proficiency level (e.g. the intermediate group). This seems to be due to the fact that English has a distinct tense system from Arabic. The errors reported were divided into several subcategories:

Table 3. *Mean Percentages of EM in Obligatory Contexts*

Item type		Proficiency Group			(%)
		AG N=20	IG N=22	EG N=25	
EM (present tense)		13/67 (19.40%)	42/84 (50.00%)	84/103 (81.55%)	139/254 (54.72%)
EM (past tense)		18/67(26.87%)	22/84 (26.19%)	57/103 (55.34%)	97/254 (38.19%)
	[+ablaut]	4/22 (18.18%)	6/33 (18.18%)	15/36 (41.67%)	25/91 (27.47%)
	[-ablaut]	14/45 (31.11%)	16/51(31.37%)	42/67 (62.69%)	72/163 (44.17%)
Total		31/134 (23.13%)	64/168 (38.10%)	141/206 (68.45%)	236/508(46.46%)

Note. EM= Error of misformation; AG=advanced group; IG= intermediate group; EG=elementary group

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a) Errors in the use of the 3sg-s

i.	Phonological similarity	*Every minute I pronounce a new term, the baby **trys** to echo it (AG 8) *She **stydys** English in the USA (EG 12)

The inaccuracy identified in this classification was the adoption of erroneous orthographical forms, resulting from producing phonologically identical verbs with the correct tense but different spelling. The aforementioned cases illustrate that although L2 students have learned the underlying grammatical structure, they are nevertheless unable to spell it explicitly due to incomplete learning of orthography. With no exception, the L2 learners have generalized the use of the morphemes, namely *-s* and *-es* to all present tense verbs with the third person singular subjects.

ii.	Suffixation of *–ing* (V+ing)	*It usually **raining** every day in summer (EG 22)
iii.	Substitution (present progressive)	* He **always eats** what I cook and **is complaining** that it is too spicy (IG 11)

The inaccuracies in (a.ii) and (a.iii) above are the result of a direct translation from Arabic. Therefore, tense errors in this context can be explained in the context of L1 influence. Another possibility is that, whereas the L2 learners appeared to have learned English verbal functional categories and their associated features, they had not yet grasped the overt realization of tense morphemes.

iv.	Substitution (past progressive)	*Ali **was playing** football very well (EG 24)
v.	Suffixation of the past tense *-ed*	* He **always eats** what I cook and **complained** that it is too spicy (EG 18)

Likewise, the inaccuracy in (a.iv) suggests that the English verb system was not well mastered. The error in (a.v) also showed that L2 learners misused other suffixations that they had already mastered in their IL grammar.

b) Errors in the use of the past tense *–ed*

i.	Phonological similarity	*As I was watching a romantic movie, the phone **ringed** once again (EG 7) *As she was ironing her clothes, the phone **rung** (IG 19)

The erroneous example (b.i) indicated that L2 learners tend to overgeneralize the use of the *-ed* to all past tense verbs, including irregular verbs that require the *ablaut* process. The improper over-regularization of *-ed* can be attributed to issues at the orthographical forms rather than at the featural level due to insufficient learning of the overt realization of tense morphemes. On the other hand, the inaccuracy in the second sentence can be attributed to the L1 influence. Another possibility is that, while the L2 learners were aware of the past tense forms, they struggled with the spelling/orthographical forms due to problems with the overt realizations of the verbal morphology rather than inadequacy in structural representationse.

ii.	Suffixation of *-ing* (V+ing)	*Last night, while I was writing my essay, Anna **coming** (IG 21)
iii.	Suffixation of 3sg-*s*	*As I was preparing fish dishes for lunch, the phone **rings** once again (EG 13)

The production of the above incorrect sentences (b.ii and b.iii) seems to indicate that the English tense system is still a work in progress for L2 students. It could be attributed to the overemphasis on teaching the simple present tense agreement morpheme *–s*, which is taught early in the learning process. As a result, the students have used other suffixations that they had previously learned excessively.

iv.	Substitution (past progressive)	*While I was doing my assignments, my father **was cooking** the dinner (IG 9)
v.	Substitution (present progressive)	*Last night, while I was waiting for my flight, my uncle **am calling** (EG 1)

The sentences in (b.iv and b.v) show examples of L2 learners failing to use the correct tense forms. This inaccuracy appears to be attributable to a lack of proper knowledge of the English verbal system. Arabic has the corresponding simple tenses and requires, like English, the simple past tense in these occurrences that took place in the past.

vi.	Substitution (past perfect)	*As I was looking for the remote in the living room, I **had found** some spare change (EG 5)

The sentence (b.vi) showcases a literal translation from Arabic. Thus, the L2 learners' inaccuracies can be attributed to L1 transfer. Learners' incorrect

representation of the surface morphology could be another reason for this error.

vii.	Overgeneration of *be* form	*When my friend **expressed** that he was not satisfied with the class I **was explain** that my math doctor was quite good (AG 12) *I was jogging down the road when unexpectedly I **was heard** a loud bang coming from behind me (IG 3) * I was in the supermarket when I **was recognized** that I didn't have my wallet (EG 16)

Regarding the use of the past tense, L2 learners do over-generate *be* forms in their IL. This is because in Arabic, *be* verb forms are required in the past tense. As a result, it is more plausible to interpret this error in relation to the influence of the L1.

EM (Present and Past tense be verb Forms in Obligatory Contexts)

Table 4 represents the mean percentages of the three groups' ungrammatical EM of present and past *be* verb forms.

Mean Percentages of EM of be verb Forms in Obligatory Contexts

Overall, the data above indicated that the three proficiency groups produced a higher number of EM of *be* forms for the *be* auxiliary (60.24%) than for the copula verb forms (36.02%). A one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences ($F(2,64) = 4.582$, $p = .063$) in terms of the ungrammatical EM of the *be* auxiliary verbs across all groups. In contrast, a statistically significant difference ($F(2,64) = 13.713$, $p = .003$) was detected among learners concerning the incorrect use of copula *be* verb forms. Likewise, post-hoc Scheffe tests indicated that the differences in the production of the ungrammatical use of *be* auxiliary verb forms across all three groups were not significant ($p > .05$). The tests also showed that there were no statistical differences between the advanced and intermediate groups with regard to the improper use of copula verb forms. Instead, there were significant differences between the advanced and elementary groups as well as between the intermediate and elementary groups with regard to the same grammatical property.

In addition, paired two-sample *t*-tests reported that the difference between the erroneous use of the past and present tenses *be* auxiliary items was significant ($p < .05$) for the advanced group ($t(19) = 1.354$, $p = .005$) and among all proficiency groups ($t(66) = 5.862$, $p = .000$). Conversely, the incorrect use of past and present tense copula *be* items demonstrated no significant difference for the advanced group ($t(19) = 2.402$, $p = .092$), even though the difference in the incorrect use of past and present tense copula *be* items was statistically significant ($p < .05$) across all groups collectively ($t(66) = 4.871$, $p = .002$).

Some instances of the EM of *be* verb forms (both *be* auxiliary and copula) are listed below:

Table 4. *Mean Percentages of EM of be verb Forms in Obligatory Contexts*

Item type	Proficiency Group			(%)
	AG N=20	IG N=22	EG N=25	
EM-present tense *be* auxiliary	29/67 (43.28%)	52/84 (61.90%)	95/103 (92.23%)	176/254 (69.29%)
EM-past tense *be* auxiliary	16/67 (23.88%)	34/84 (40.48%)	80/103 (77.67%)	130/254 (51.18%)
Total	45/134 (33.58%)	86/168 (51.19%)	175/206 (84.95%)	306/508(60.24%)
EM-present tense copula	13/67(19.40%)	41/84 (48.81%)	66/103 (64.08%)	120/254 (47.24%)
EM-past tense copula	7/67(10.45%)	15/84 (17.86%)	41/103 (39.81%)	63/254 (24.80%)
Total	20/134 (14.93%)	56/168 (33.33%)	107/206 (51.94%)	183/508(36.02%)

Note. EM= Error of misformation; AG=advanced group; IG= intermediate group; EG=elementary group

a) Errors in the use of the present tense *be* auxiliary verbs

i.	Wrong *be* auxiliary form (inappropriate number)	*I am tired and my hands **is trembling** (EG 18)
ii.	Suffixation of the 3sg-s	*I am tired and my hands **trembles** (IG 14)
iii.	Substitution (Past tense *be* auxiliary)	*I am tired and my hands **were trembling** (AG 12)
iv.	Substitution (Past tense)	*I am tired and my hands **trembled** (EG 6)
v.	Substitution (Past perfect)	*I am tired and my hands **had trembled** (IG 22)

In the first type of error identified (i), the L2 learners had inaccurately employed the *be* auxiliary with the incorrect number. In the second error type (ii), they have wrongly added the 3sg-s. This error can be explained due to the influence of the source language, where the present and the present progressive form in English resemble the present tense in the learners' L1 (Arabic). All the other forms of errors (iii-v) can be attributed to the incomplete knowledge of the English verbal system.

b) Errors in the use of the past tense *be* auxiliary verbs

i.	Wrong *be* auxiliary form (inappropriate number)	*The employer next to me **were sending** an email message (EG 5)
ii.	Suffixation of the past tense–*ed*	*While we **discussed**, I noticed the nurse yell, "Mr., are you requesting an appointment?" (EG 3)
iii.	Suffixation of the 3sg-s	*Mr. James said he **calls** me on his cell phone from his office (IG 9)
iv.	Substitution (present tense *be* auxiliary)	*The farmer **is cutting** the grass the other day when the snake appeared (EG 17)
v.	Substitution (present perfect tense)	*While I have jogged, it started raining (EG 9)
vi.	-*ing* deletion	*The student next to him **was paint** a picture of a peacock (IG 3)

The L2 learners in the preceding examples (numbers i-vi) have failed to retain the correct verb form, resulting in a shift in tense. The massive variance in the tense systems between English and Arabic is causes a shift in the tense within the same sentence of the same piece of discourse. Arab EFL learners have learned the English tense system haphazardly at the sentence level, never understanding how the components interact in larger chunks of a discourse. As a result, it is plausible that these learners have yet to comprehend the rules of English tense sequencing. Because of its complexity in comparison to L1 (Arabic), acquiring the English verbal system takes a long time for L2 learners.

c) Errors in the use of the present tense copula verbs

i.	Wrong *be* copula form (inappropriate number)	*Everything **are** okay, and there is no one here to think and care for me (AG 2)
ii.	Substitution (Past tense copula)	*I **was** tired and my hands are trembling (IG 10)
iii.	Substitution (Non-finite copula form)	*She **be** a very beautiful girl, but arrogant (EG 8)
iv.	Suffixation of –*ing* (be+ing)	* Everything **being** okay, and there is no one here to think and care for me (AG 10)
v.	Substitution with other real verbs	* She **has** a very beautiful girl, but arrogant (EG 4)

d) Errors in the use of the past tense copula verbs

i.	Wrong *be* copula form (inappropriate number)	*… but she thought that the doctor **were** in the surgery room while she **was talking** to the patient (EG 16)
ii.	Substitution (present tense copula) (wrong S-V agreement)	*I stated that my math teacher **are** quite good and …(EG 10)
iii.	Substitution (Non-finite copula)	*I stated that my math teacher **be** quite good and …(IG 15)
iv.	Suffixation of –*ing* (be+ing)	*It **being** father, but this time he wasn't driving to work (IG 19)
v.	Substitution with other real verbs/tense	* I stated that my math teacher **have** quite good and … (EG 19) *It **is being** father, but this time he wasn't driving to work (EG 23)

For L2 learners, the production of *be* copula form morphemes proved to be somehow challenging. The majority of the above occurrences appear to indicate that L2 learners were indeterminate in their production of present and past copula verb forms and that they still have not fully acquired the English copula *be* tense system.

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Comparison of the EO and EM for All Item Types in the EWPT

As to the comparison between the EO of present and past verbal inflectional morphemes and the EM, the *t*-test results indicate a highly significant difference ($p<.05$) in the performance between the ungrammatical omission and the wrong use of present and past verbs for the advanced group ($t(19)=-2.312$, $p=.002$) and across all groups collectively ($t(66)=-14.826$, $p=.000$). A significant difference was also detected in the performance between the ungrammatical EO of the *be* verb forms and the EM of the *be* verb forms for the advanced group ($t(19)=-9.218$, $p=.000$) and across all groups collectively ($t(66)=-12.534$, $p=.000$). Overall results also showed that the incorrect use of inflectional morphemes was greater for the EM than for EO of inflectional morphemes across the three groups of participants.

In general, the outcomes revealed that Arab EFL undergraduate learners, particularly advanced learners at the highest level of attainment, had little trouble using the past and present tense inflectional morphemes correctly. Their accuracy scores for ungrammatical omission and erroneous usage of present and past tense items were lower than those for *be* auxiliary and copula items. For adult Arab EFL learners who did not attain native or near native-like competency in these items, the correct use of *be* auxiliary and copula items appears to be problematic. These findings will be useful in guiding future research.

Conclusion

The result of this study demonstrated two basic classifications of grammatical errors: error of misformation (EM) and error of omission (EO). Overall results revealed that incorrect use of inflectional morphemes was higher for the EM than for the EO of inflectional morphemes across the three groups of participants. In general, the data elicited for the EWPT seem to provide evidence that Arab EFL learners have produced fewer errors in the present and past tense verb items. The irregular verb morphology appears to be more challenging and has yet to be produced to a native or near-native level. The results indicated that the *learners* achieved higher scores in constructing past tense *be* auxiliary and copula *be* verb items, including those with the *was* and *were* forms. However, they demonstrated inaccuracy in constructing present *be* auxiliary and copula *be* verb items, including those with *am*, *is and are* forms due to different L1/L2 feature specifications. This discrepancy may have affected their ability to produce these features in English.

Limitations, implications, and recommendations

This study has some limitations that should be taken into account. Firstly, data were obtained from only one university due to time constraints. As a result, approaching a larger sample size and focusing on different grammatical aspects and contexts would yield more generalizable and comparable results. Secondly, data were gathered solely through quantitative measurements. Incorporating qualitative data such as interviews with instructors into future studies would provide a deeper awareness of the potential origins of errors.

English instructors should establish an effective teaching strategy to determine students' knowledgeability and motivate them to learn tenses, particularly the irregular past tense, present *be* auxiliary, and copula *be* verb forms, in order to minimize their error output. Teachers could foster their students' autonomy in writing skills and assist them in gaining new perspectives on what and how to write by exposing them to authentic English resources, such as magazines, newspapers, and online articles (Muftah, 2023). By dedicating more time and effort to EFL writing skills, students could be instructed to write with proper grammar, mechanics, and structure. Therefore, teachers of English could update their teaching strategies by selecting topics based on the interests and concerns of their students and having them participate in real-life writing activities like self- and peer-editing or reading and redrafting their classmates' composition. Follow-up written constructive feedback from teachers is also crucial for raising students' awareness of how to cope with their sustained and frequent written errors.

In order to become more comfortable and familiar with using tenses, students should gain a better understanding of tenses and be more active in using them in real-life situations and contexts or practicing them in their daily conversations. For researchers, conducting experiments to specifically target markers of finiteness rather than thematic verbs, such as modals and auxiliaries, perhaps in conjunction with aspect and mood/modality, and realizing how finiteness interacts with these two relatively understudied properties could provide valuable insights. Future research on this topic should look into the different types of errors that can be made depending on the style and type of writing, as different types of writing can affect the production of errors.

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