





*Interlingual Interference and Discourse Challenges in Iraqi EFL
Students' Undergraduate Research Papers: An Error and Cohesion
Analysis*

Asst Prof: Muna Dalaf Mohammed
Mustansiryah University, College of Basic Education
muna.dalaf@gmail.com



التداخل اللغوي والتحديات الخطابية في بحوث طلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين: تحليل للأخطاء
والتماسك النصي

ا.م منى دلف محمد
الجامعة المستنصرية / كلية التربية الأساسية



Abstract

The proposed study will examine linguistic interference and discourse issues in the fourth-year writing of English majors in the College of Basic Education of Mustansiriyah University, Iraq, in the academic year 2024-2025. The study considers 50 research papers, which are undergraduate research projects in various fields such as language, literature, teaching methodology, and translation in order to establish trends of errors and faults in textual cohesion. The importance of the study is related to the fact that it fills a large gap in the pedagogical aspect of the analysis in the Iraqi EFL environments, where students cannot create coherent, linguistically correct, and academic texts. The primary hypothesis presupposes that the linguistic interference of Arabic has a negative influence on grammatical and discourse structure. The research question is as follows: What is the effect of Arabic interference on the textual cohesion and discourse effectiveness of the Arabic EFL students on writing their academic papers? Based on a mixed-method study (quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative discourse analysis), the study outcomes indicate that the most prevalent types of errors include grammatical and lexical, followed by the use of cohesive devices and paragraph structure. The statistical test shows that 47 percent of the entire error is direct transfer of Arabic syntax. The results highlight the immediate necessity of discourse-based grammar teaching, cohesion training, and combined writing feedback training in Iraqi EFL higher education.

Key words: *Cohesion analysis; Discourse challenges; EFL writing; Error analysis; Interlingual interference; Textual cohesion.*

المستخلص

تناول الدراسة المقترحة ظاهرة التداخل اللغوي وقضايا الخطاب في كتابات طلبة المرحلة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية الأساسية/جامعة المستنصرية للعام الدراسي ٢٠٢٤-٢٠٢٥. وتعتمد الدراسة على تحليل ٥٠ بحثاً أكاديمياً، وهي بحوث تخرج جامعية في مجالات متعددة تشمل اللغة والأدب ومنهجية التدريس والترجمة، بهدف تحديد أنماط الأخطاء ومظاهر الخلل في التماسك النصي.

تكمن أهمية الدراسة في كونها تسد فجوة كبيرة في الجانب التربوي المتعلق بتحليل الكتابة الأكاديمية في بيئات تعليم الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية في العراق، حيث يعاني الطلبة من صعوبة إنتاج نصوص مترابطة وصحيحة لغوياً وأكاديمية. وتنتقل الفرضية الرئيسية من افتراض أن التداخل اللغوي الناتج عن العربية يؤثر سلباً في البنية النحوية والخطابية للنصوص المكتوبة. وتتمثل مشكلة البحث بالسؤال الآتي: ما أثر التداخل العربي في التماسك النصي وفعالية الخطاب لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية عند كتابتهم لبحوثهم الأكاديمية؟

وبالاعتماد على منهج مختلط (تحليل تكراري كمي وتحليل خطابي نوعي)، تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن أكثر الأخطاء شيوعاً هي النحوية والمعجمية، تليها أخطاء استخدام أدوات الربط وبنية الفقرة. كما يبين الاختبار الإحصائي أن ٤٧٪ من مجموع الأخطاء تعود إلى النقل المباشر لتراكيب العربية. وتسلب النتائج الضوء على الحاجة الملحة لاعتماد تدريس قائم على النحو الخطابي، وتدريب على التماسك النصي، وتقديم تغذية راجعة مشتركة في الكتابة داخل مؤسسات التعليم العالي العراقية. الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل التماسك النصي؛ التحديات الخطابية؛ الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ تحليل الأخطاء؛ التداخل اللغوي بين اللغات؛ التماسك النصي.

1. Introduction

Academic writing in Iraqi higher education is used as a major indicator of the linguistic and intellectual development of students. Nonetheless, even after years of studying English, some fourth-year EFL students cannot write graduation research papers that will reflect academic coherence and accuracy. Their first language Arabic influence generates some insurmountable grammatical and rhetoric difficulties that hamper the clarity and cohesion. These are some of the weaknesses which prevent students to be able to express academic arguments well and is indicative of a larger problem in EFL pedagogy in Iraq.

This paper aims at determining the way in which linguistic interference and discourse-level inadequacies are demonstrated in the academic writing of Iraqi EFL students. It highlights the necessity of pedagogical changes that will incorporate the concept of discourse awareness and cohesion-oriented teaching into the writing courses.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that the Iraqi EFL students gain much vocabulary and grammar, their research writing usually presents the tendencies of linguistic interference with Arabic. Errors in word order, articles, literal translation, redundancy and the use of cohesive devices are some of common problems. This has led to large numbers of students not writing logically related and well-organized papers, which are up to international academic standards. Such an ongoing fault point indicates a structural issue in the writing pedagogy and feedback practice in Iraqi universities.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study helps in the comprehension of the role of the first-language interference and deficiency in the discourse in terms of their co-direct influence on academic writing among Iraqi EFL students. It offers empirical evidence that can be used by language educators, curriculum developers, and writing teachers to generate more specific measures to improve the textual cohesion, coherence, and academic tone. The research is also important in its practical implications on enhancing supervision and feedback of undergraduate research projects.

1.4 Research Aims

- ❖ To determine the most common mistakes made by the linguistic interference in (50) research papers by the Iraqi EFL students.
- ❖ To test the hypotheses on textual cohesion and coherence in academic writing of students.
- ❖ To determine the association between Arabic syntactic transfer and discourse organization.

1.5 Research Questions

1. Which are the most frequent linguistic interference mistakes in the academic writing of EFL students in Iraq?
2. What is the impact of linguistic interference on the textual cohesion and organization of the discourse?
3. How are some interferences be reduced without telling a specific number of interferences?

1.6 Research Hypotheses

- There is a high level of linguistic interference engulfing the English academic writing amidst the Iraqi EFL students.
- Poor knowledge of textual cohesion is associated with weak discourse structuring in EFL academic writing.

- Training based on grammar and vocabulary only is not helpful in enhancing the academic writing competence of the students.

2. Literature Review.

2.1 linguistic interference

The linguistic interference problem is considered one of the most long-standing problems in EFL students. Past research has touched upon the impact of the Arabic linguistic structure on EFL students in their writing, specifically, the application of grammatical patterns and cohesive devices (Abbas, Yasin, and Ismail, 2016; Al-Shujairi and Tan, 2017). These studies give a conceptual framework as to how the first language structures can influence the second language academic writing without emphasizing on particular empirical results.

Linguistic interference is the term that is used to refer to the processes of the native language (L1) of the speaker affecting the acquisition or use of a second language (L2), which results in the occurrence of mistakes in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar or meaning. According to Corder (1981), it is the effect of similarities and differences between L1 and L2, and Odlin (1989) has distinguished positive transfer, which leads to learning, and negative transfer, which impedes learning.

Based on the study by (Aziz and Nuri, 2021) a paradigm of overreliance on additive connectors with the disregard of adversative connectors lowered the logical clarity. According to (Hameed & Challob, 2022), a poor lexical variety causes poor synonymy and cohesion.

Recent studies that involve feedback, including (Algburi & Razali, 2022), emphasize the importance of supervision (guided) to enhance discourse-related accuracy.

Together, these studies form the theoretical base of studying the interference and cohesion in the Iraqi EFL settings.

2.2 Interlingual Interference in EFL Writing

Interlingual interference has been known to be one of the greatest contributors of errors in second language acquisition. Corder (1974) divided errors into interlingual (based on L1) and intralingual (developmental based on L2) errors and pointed out the necessity to comprehend the cause of problems in learners. Researchers have reported a lot of transfer of syntactic patterns, including the verb-subject-object 3.3 Data Collection sequence, and lexical options guided by Arabic collocations, in Arabic-speaking contexts (Al-Shujairi and Tan, 2017).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

There was a mixed-method approach to errors analysis using quantitative methods and discourse evaluation using qualitative methods.

3.2 Setting and Participants

The research was done in the 2024-2025 academic year in Al-Mustansiriyah University, College of Basic Education.

The selection of the research papers by the EFL students of the fourth year was made in four departments: Linguistics Literature, Teaching Methods, and Translation.

3.3 Data Collection

Fourth year students Written works were studied in the context of the 4th-year writing tasks. During the academic year, each student handed in one paper for a total of [50] papers. All papers were gathered in class and students knew that they participated in a research study. Written informed consent was received to analyze the anonymized texts of these individuals. These were

use as the corpus for error analysis in grammar, vocabulary, cohesion and discourse structure.

3.3 Data Analysis

Grammatical and lexical interference, as well as cohesion of the text were evaluated in all papers. The errors were put under four broad categories:

- Mistakes in grammar (verb tense, article, preposition)
- Word choice, calques Lexical interference.
- Cohesive devices (connectors, reference)
- Discourse structure (logic, paragraphing)

3.4 Procedures

Anonymization and coding of papers (P1-P50) were done.

The errors were divided in accordance with the taxonomies of Corder (1974) and Halliday and Hasan (1976)

The frequencies were obtained in Excel, and qualitative excerpts were obtained to illustrate the discourse.

3.5 Data Analysis Tools

The percentages of the error frequency and correlation of the type of error with the level of cohesion were calculated with the help of the SPSS (v.26). a statistical software commonly used to analyze and summarize data.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

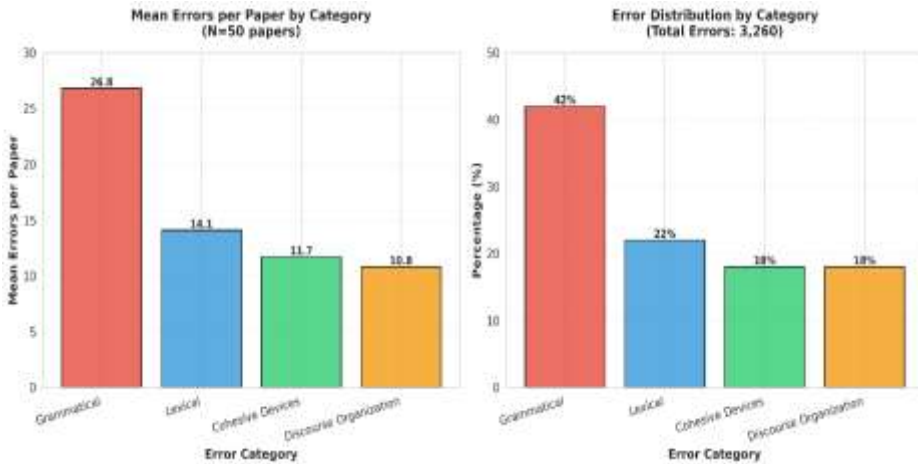
The research was approved by Mustansiriyah University Research Ethics Committee. All participants gave their written informed consent, and pseudonyms were applied to protect the anonymity of respondents and identifying information were deleted from research reports. The participants were also explained that they could drop out of the study at any stage without any adverse effects.

4.Results

4.1 Error distribution by category

Error Type	Mean per Paper	Percentage
Grammatical	26.8	42%
Lexical	14.1	22%
Cohesive Devices	11.7	18%
Discourse Organization	10.8	18%
Total Errors (N=50)	3,260	100%

Figure 1. Error distribution by category



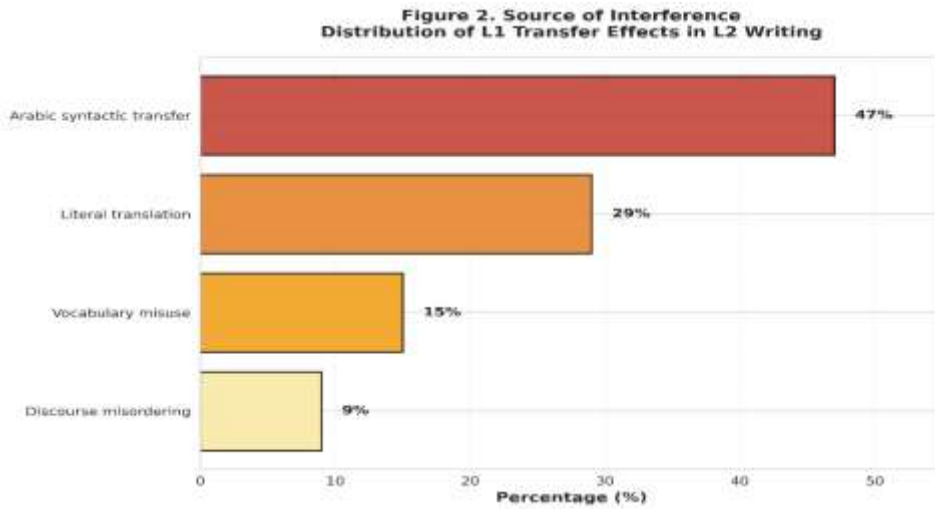
(Bar chart showing grammatical errors dominating, followed by lexical and cohesive issues.)

The statistics indicate that grammatical errors are the most common, namely, the absence of the article and the use of incorrect tense. In direct translations of Arabic to English (e.g.

"discuss about" or "according to me), lexical interference frequently occurred.

4. 2. Source of interference

Arabic syntactic transfer:	47%
Literal translation:	29%
Vocabulary misuse:	15%
Discourse mis ordering	9%



The qualitative analysis revealed excess application of such connectors as :(and, also, and, seldom applied connectors such as however or therefore), which resulted in the monotonous flow. The paragraphs were not sequenced and transitioned logically.

5. Discussion

The current research goal was to examine how far the linguistic interference and discourse issues can influence academic writing of Iraqi EFL students. The review of 50 research studies indicated that there was a definite tendency of L1 interference, specifically by Arabic syntactic and rhetorical patterns. This discussion will interpret the findings in terms of the research questions and

hypotheses and give pedagogical implications to academic writing teaching in Iraqi universities.

5.1 Grammatical Interference and implications.

The greatest percent of all identified problems was composed of grammatical errors (42%). These were the omission of articles (a/an/the), incorrect use of the verb tense, and prepositional mistakes, which are consistent with the previous results by (Al-Shujairi and Tan, 2017). The sheer frequency of these mistakes suggests that there is still the influence of the Arabic grammar, which does not imply the use of articles and has another tense-aspect system.

Pedagogically, the findings prove Hypothesis 1, which implies that the Arabic structures of language still mediate in English writing among students. These implications are important: the teaching of grammar needs to leave the realm of memorization of the rules to the realm of contrastive analysis that involves the explicit comparison of Arabic and English grammatical patterns.

5.2 Lexical Interference and Difficulties in Word Choice.

Lexical interference (22%) was in the form of direct translation, calques, and inappropriate collocation (e.g., discussion about, make a research). Such application indicates a shift of Arabic patterns of thinking into English expression. Certainly, the same was reported by (Hameed and Challob, 2022), who observed the lack of lexical variety and misuse of synonyms.

Such findings show that the level of lexical competence is not developed despite the advanced level of students. Teaching vocabulary in EFL classrooms in Iraq can be associated with teaching vocabulary at general understanding as opposed to

academic vocabulary usage, which results in the stylistic inconsistency and lack of lexical accuracy in writing research.

5.3 .Weak Cohesion and Additive Connector Overreliance.

The total errors were 18% by cohesive devices. Additive connectors (and, also, moreover) were excessively used by students, whereas adversative and causal connectors (however, therefore, consequently) were not often used. The observation can be echoed by (Aziz and Nuri, 2021), who also found similar trends in Kurdish Iraqi students.

Additive links are overused, which implies that students are not aware of logical relations between ideas- the necessary element of textual cohesion. This confirms Hypothesis 2, which holds that inadequate academic coherence is brought about by limited discourse knowledge and not grammatical weaknesses.

5.4 Organization of Discourse and Paragraph Development.

Discourse level errors (18 percent) indicated that there was a large number of papers which did not have clear paragraphs, topic sentences, or logical flow of the argument. Students were more inclined to write in a linear and additive style as opposed to writing hierarchically. This trend resembles the rhetoric traditions of Arabic language, where it is more preferable to be redundant and elaborate rather than concise.

The problems occurring in the paragraph's placement are matrixed and reflected by a genre problem that reflects the incompetence of students' academic literacy. Indeed, those students who have been taught in a grammar- and vocabulary-based approach faced difficulties for producing well-organized and cohesive texts. In addition to that, academic writing is also

the focus of genre conventions and rhetorical moves as well as logical order, which does not seem to be attended to in EFL teaching context in Iraqi schools.

5.5 Interpretation of Figures

As Figure 1 (Error Distribution) shows graphically, the grammatical errors prevail in the writing of the Iraqi EFL students, followed by lexical and cohesion related problems. This supremacy highlights the extent of depth in which surface-based structures of language impact on written work.

As Figure 2 (Sources of Linguistic Interference) shows, 47 percent of the errors are based on the Arabic syntactic transfer-which makes the fact that L1 interference affects significantly textual cohesion to a significant proportion the main research question. These lower percentages of literal translation (29%), vocabulary misuse (15%), and discourse misordering (9%) demonstrate a pecking order of the types of interference which can be instructed by educators.

5.6 Correlation with Research Questions.

The research questions used to guide the study directly respond to the research questions:

Most typical errors: The grammatical and lexical errors are the most common and occur mostly due to the Arabic syntax and translation practices.

Impact on cohesion: The interference of L1 disturbs cohesion resulting in redundant, discontinuous paragraphs.

Pedagogical: Interference effects can be alleviated by such pedagogical solutions as discourse-based grammar teaching, integrated feedback, explicit training of cohesion.

5.7 Pedagogical and Theoretical Implications.

The findings build on the Contrastive Rhetoric theory (Kaplan, 1966) by proving that rhetorical traditions of Arabic do influence the written language of EFL learners. On the pedagogical level, it requires:

1. Arabic and English rhetoric contrastive awareness training.
2. Cohesion in Academic writing courses: integrating Hallidayan principles of cohesion into academic writing.
3. Commenting on structure and logic, and not just grammar.
4. Promotion of corpus-based writing skills which introduces them to real academic model.

5.8 Summary of Discussion

In general, the research confirms all three hypotheses and offers strong evidence that the quality of Iraqi EFL academic writing is the joint effect of linguistic interference, and poor discourse knowledge. This confirms the need to transform the writing pedagogy in order to close the gap between sentence-level accuracy and text-level coherence.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations.

This paper shows that Arabic linguistic interference has a huge implication on the capacity of the Iraqi EFL students to write effective academic texts that are cohesive and coherent. Explicit instructions, constant feedback, and technological assistance may significantly enhance the quality of writing. The curriculum change needs to be aimed at cursory rhetoric awareness, organized peer review, and AI-assisted writing systems.

This paper finds that the linguistic interference of Arabic has a significant influence both on grammatical, lexical, and discourse features of English academic writing of Iraqi EFL learners. The

prevalence of grammatical and lexical mistakes, the excessive use of additive connectors shows that the Arabic syntactic and rhetorical patterns are highly relied on. These results confirm that the grammar-based instructional framework cannot effectively improve overall writing achievement in students. Rather, the process of building coherent and cohesive academic writing needs to be switched to a more discourse-focused pedagogy, within which the focus should be made on the contrastive analysis, the training of cohesion, and the understanding of the rhetorical structure.

In order to enhance the writing competence of the students, the instructors are supposed to incorporate discourse-level instruction where explicit comparisons of the Arabic and English rhetorical systems are given, detailed feedbacks of cohesion and paragraph organization are offered, and the use of various cohesive devices is encouraged. Modern technologies in writing, such as AI-based editing tools, can also be incorporated to improve the accuracy of linguistic and discourse coherence. The study highlights the need to incorporate the entire writing curriculums in Iraqi institutions of higher learning in a way that complements grammatical correctness and discourse competence.

7. Future Research

This work can be extended in the future by increasing the number of students involved from a variety of Iraqi universities to obtain wider results. It would be interesting as well to analyze the writings of other non-native English-speaking learners and see which errors are frequent, and which are perhaps specific to the L1. Computer programs or writing software material would allow researchers to examine more definitively cohesion and grammar.

Furthermore, further research could test new types of instruction such as computer-based grammar courses or cohesion classes to determine what impact, if any, these approaches would have on students' academic writing development. Interviews with students and teaching staff might also offer more insight into how linguistic interference impacts learning and what

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