

## The Effects of the Mother Tongue on Learning Writing Skills for EFL Students

**Dr. Nadia GHOUNANE**

**Dr. Moulay Tahar University, Saida, Algeria**

**Email: nadoushben@gmail.com**

### Abstract

The use of the mother tongue in learning English language in general is apparent among first and second years LMD students in Algerian universities thinking that it may facilitate their learning. Hence, this may have also an effect on their writing skills. This research paper aims at shedding light on the interference of the first language in developing the writing competence of first and second years' English students at Dr. Moulay Tahar University. It also endeavours to examine, describe and analyse the writing errors conducted in the written English production. To fulfill this aim, a sample of 50 students from first and second years was selected to conduct an error test; a questionnaire was distributed for 100 students in addition to an interview with teachers. The findings revealed that students have writing weaknesses due to their bad language proficiency. The results also demonstrated that learners do not understand language differences between their mother tongue and English language.

**Key words:** EFL learners, language proficiency, mother tongue, writing skills, writing errors

تأثيرات اللغة الام في تعلم المهارات الكتابية لطلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية

### المخلص

لقد اصبح استعمال اللغة الاصلية في تعلم اللغة الانجليزية واضحا بين طلاب السنة الاولى والثانية في الجامعات الجزائرية طانين ان هذا سيسهل لهم اكتساب اللغة الانجليزية، وهذا ما قد يؤثر على مهاراتهم الكتابية. ومن هذا المنطلق، تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية الى تسليط الضوء على ادخال اللغة الام في تطوير الكفاءة الكتابية لطلبة السنة الاولى و الثانية بجامعة الدكتور مولاي طاهر. كما تهدف الى دراسة، وصف وتحليل الاخطاء الكتابية في الانجليزية المكتوبة. لتحقيق هذه الاهداف، تم اختيار خمسون طالب من السنة الاولى و الثانية من خلال فحص كشف الخطأ. كما تم توزيع استبيان لمئة طالب بالإضافة الى مقابلة شفوية مع الاساتذة. وقد كشفت النتائج ان الطلبة يعانون من ضعف في الكفاءة الكتابية وهذا بسبب ضعف الكفاءة اللغوية. كما بينت النتائج ايضا ان المتعلمين لا يفهمون الاختلافات اللغوية بين لغتهم الاصلية و اللغة الانجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلاب اللغة الاجنبية، الكفاءة اللغوية، اللغة الاصلية، الكفاءات الكتابية، الاخطاء الكتابية

## Introduction

The use of the mother tongue in learning a foreign language has raised many debates between experts in language teaching and learning. As a matter of fact, expanded researches have been conducted to overcome this problem. They found that the central reason behind these hindrances is the existence of cultural differences between the target language and the students' mother tongue and this is the case of Algerian learners who employ English as a foreign language. In this sense, learning a foreign language is a challenging process since learners need to be interested in learning speaking and writing, i.e., developing their linguistic skills.

Ultimately, students find difficulties in writing in general and developing their writing production in English language in particular; henceforth, they tend to commit writing errors because they resort towards the use of their mother tongue. Indeed, committing errors is also apparent even between native speakers since learning writing skill is a hard task that requires much practice. In this vein, Smith (2005) highlights that English is a complex language that needs a considerable attention; therefore, this is what drives students to make errors whether at the writing level or orally.

Most of the committed errors occur at the level of vocabulary and grammar since learners have not a strong background. A good example is students' difficulties in the use of prepositions such as at, in, on, and, between and among...etc. Therefore, among the writing errors, that are common among students, are the inclusion of the mother tongue, although it is not the only reason (Ellis, 2008; Cook & Newson, 2007). Consequently, teachers need to raise their students' awareness of the hindrances they are facing especially when it has to do with cultural interference of the mother tongue in writing productions.

The present study under scrutiny endeavours to explore the errors conducted by first and second years' English students when they include their mother tongue in their writings. It sheds also light on how cultural differences affect the written texts in English language since learners are suffering from cultural differences that may affect the process of learning. In the light of this idea, Kaplan (1983) observes that "the non-native speaker brings with him/her the alternatives available in the L1 and applies those alternatives in the L2" (p. 150). Consequently, this creates a tension since the student tends to translate what he thinks in the first language into English, thinking that he has written good English. This problem is common between all foreign English learners; not only Arab students (Kaplan, 1983). This means that each language presents the cultural components of its

society. From the foregoing discussion, the following research questions are presented as follows:

1. What are the results of first language interference in English written production?
2. How can students avoid the use of their mother tongue in their writings?
3. Are there any strategies to improve the students' writing ability without depending on their mother tongue?

These research questions are hypothesized as follows:

1. The inclusion of the first language in improving the writing skill of the student may result on writing errors.
2. Students may avoid the inclusion of the mother tongue if they realise that there are cultural differences between the first language and English.
3. Students can avoid the effect of their mother tongue through testing errors that raise their awareness.

Henceforth, the focal point springs from the researcher's experience as a teacher of academic writing for several years, hoping that the findings reached from this humble research work will raise teachers' awareness towards developing strategies to overcome the reasons behind the inclusion of the first language and the different types of interference conducted by EFL learners.

## A Theoretical Background of the Study

Foreign language learners always find difficulties in learning English due to the cultural differences between the first language and English. According to Nunan (2001, p. 306) foreign language learners find difficulties in learning English because it is absent in their daily communication. In this vein, they depend on language transfer from their mother tongue to English. This transfer can lead into negative results which include errors in word meanings and forms. According to Allen & Corder (1974), language transfer can be positive and negative. In their view, it may help in acquiring new learning tasks whether in writing or speaking. It can be also negative since it leads to language errors. In the light of this tight, Yule (2006) maintains that "transferring a L1 feature which is really different from the L2 (e.g. putting the adjective after the noun) results in negative transfer and it may make the L2 expression difficult to understand" (p. 168). In the same wave of thought, Richards (1992) observes that the application of the rules of the first language brings errors in the second language. For example, the student writes "I have twenty years old" instead of "I am twenty years old" taken from Arabic "انا عندي عشرون سنة". This can happen if the learner lacks the native-level command of the second language especially when he

attempts to translate as it is apparent in the previous example. Hence, transferring errors from the first language to English lead into an intercultural phenomenon due to the inclusion of one language into another.

Learners can also transfer phonological rules from their first language. In fact, they consider their mother tongue as a bridge to understand phonological rules of the target language. A good example is the acquisition of French intonation to English and the misuse of the stress due to their knowledge of Arabic language.

Another important point that should be added here is that the writing production is also influenced by the interference of the second language French; for instance, the addition of final "e" to some words such as 'classe' or the addition of final "que" for words ending in "ic" like in 'technique'. Grammatical transfer from the first language is also apparent in their writings such as in "considered as important for language learning" instead of "considered important for language learning" taken from Arabic meaning "ذات اهمية لتعلم اللغة".

Most importantly, one should note that students' lack of language skills drive them to apply rules taken from their first language to their writings. Another reason that pushes them to language transfer is the difficulty of the target language grammar, phonetics and phonology. Although the Algerian educational system has introduced the Competency Based Approach in order to improve the learning and teaching of English, students find themselves following Grammar Translation method which imposes the use of the mother tongue in learning English.

### **Difference Types of First Language Interference**

Even though Arabic is totally different from English language in terms of vocabulary and grammar, EFL learners are still interfering their mother tongue in their English writing production. Thus far, they find themselves transferring grammatical rules and language structure from Arabic into English. Most importantly, the interference does not stop at the level of transferring grammatical rules, but they tend to include their cultural background although Arabic and English cultures are completely distinct.

### **Grammatical & Cultural Interference**

As it has already been stated English and Arabic are different in terms of grammatical rules; however, students resort to their first language structure to cover up their grammatical deficiency. Correspondingly, one can say that Arabic language has its

unique grammar and syntax including nouns and adjectives. Of course, their use is different from English nouns and adjectives. Additionally, learners face difficulties in using personal pronouns; for instance, they say "I thank him for his help" "أشكره على مساعدته". Foreign language learners face also difficulties in employing prepositions; for this reason, they resort to some prepositions that have the same meaning in Arabic; for example, "I am in university" "أنا في الجامعة". Besides, there are abstract words in English that do not take the article "the", whereas in Arabic it is not the case such as in "she is acquiring knowledge" "تكتسب المعرفة". The same error happens with the use of adjectives because the latter follow nouns in plural forms in Arabic language, so that learners find themselves committing another error based on their knowledge of the first language.

Obviously, the interference of the first language culture is also apparent in the writings of many students since they used to think in Arabic and their cultural heritage imposes on them to resort to it when they feel that they cannot transmit the message due to their poor cultural background in English, although teachers try to guide their students to avoid using the cultural components of their first language in their English writings.

Another problem hindering students is the imposition of some English teachers on them to think and write in English and at the same their poor background due to the lack of writing and reading in the target language. Thenceforth, they continue taking from their first language. Besides, writing itself is a challenging task not only in the target language but also in the mother tongue. This task needs much practice that most learners ignore its importance; therefore, the blame is placed on teachers of writing, claiming that they lack approaches to teach academic writing in general.

## Errors VS Mistakes

Errors differ from mistakes in terms that the former is conducted when the students do not have a native command of the target language, whereas the latter is the result of the slips of the tongue or the pen. Of course, these terms are mentioned by teachers and experts in language writing and are related to language interference. According to Brown (1994), mistakes take place when learners learn certain rules and fail to apply them, whereas an error means "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner" (p. 6). In other terms, errors take place due to the poor background of the learners in all levels, i.e., they do not differentiate between what is correct or incorrect in language use. In his part, Jie (2008) highlights that "a mistake occurs as the result of processing limitations rather than lack of competence, while error is the breaches of rules of codes" (p. 37).

## Error Analysis

In analyzing errors found in the students' writings after the interference of the first language in English, there have been tremendous efforts to analyse how foreign language learners commit errors. In his part, Corder (1974) provides ways in analyzing errors. He suggests that teachers should study these errors with their learners and help them in recognizing their mistakes and how they can be avoided (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Obviously, error analysis can be regarded as a type of linguistic tests or analysis that gives more importance to the analysis of the errors made by learners. As a father of the error analysis test, Corder (1974) claims that errors are important for learners to improve their writing skill. Similarly, Richards (1974) observes that errors provide teachers with materials to develop new writing techniques. He adds that "At the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort" (p. 15).

## Methodology

The present research work relies on both quantitative and qualitative instruments including a questionnaire, an interview and a test error. For the last option, the researcher selected written texts of 50 students. 30 students are from first year (G2 & G4) and the remaining is selected from the second year (G1, G3 & G4). Hence, data were collected and organized following error analysis approach to categorise the errors at the level of grammar, syntax and semantics...etc. in this sense, the researcher followed Corder's step analysis which had been used during the 1970s.

Moreover, the questionnaire was distributed for 100 learners to check their awareness and knowledge about the errors they commit in their writings and to see whether they recognize that there are certain cultural differences between their language and English that they should recognise in their writings, while the interview was conducted with four teachers who have a good experience in teaching writing.

## Findings and Implications

### Results of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire is divided into three sections, but the researcher had taken only the most important questions that address the research questions.

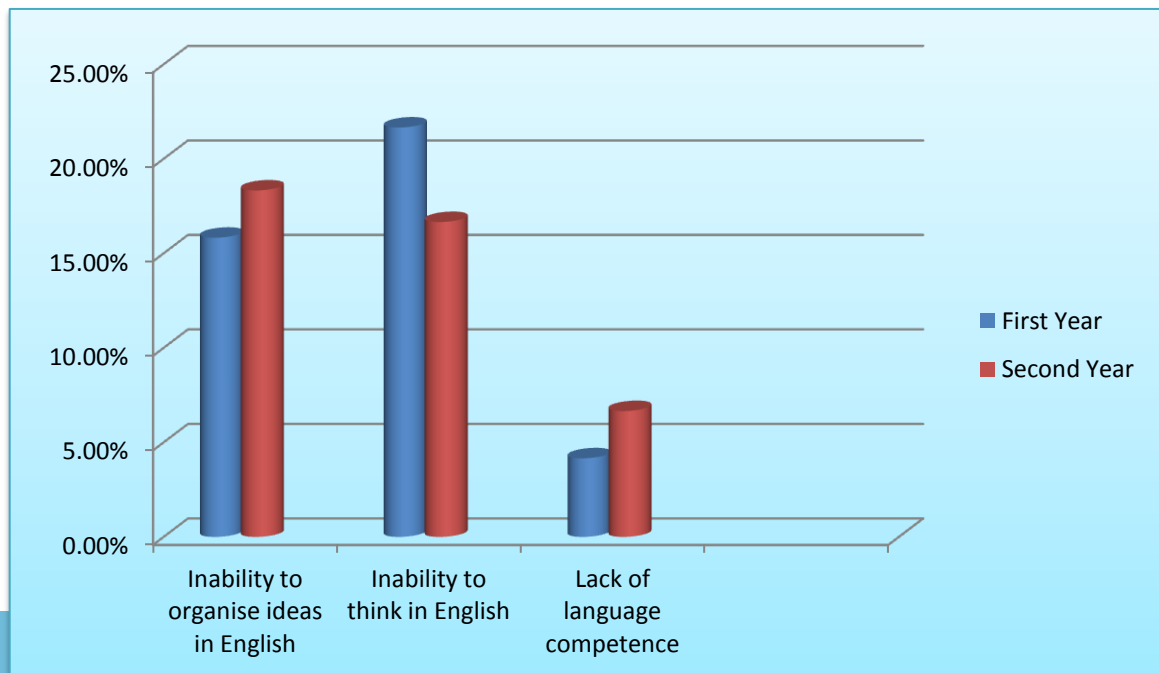
1- What are the problems facing you in writing in English?

- Inability to organize ideas
- Inability to think in English
- Lack of language competence

**Table 1. Problems facing learners in writing in English**

Problems	First Year	Second Year	Total
Inability to organize ideas	19	22	41
Inability to think in English	26	20	46
Lack of language competence	05	08	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 demonstrates that learners' view vary between the two previous suggestions, i.e., most of them revealed that they used to think in Arabic; hence, it will be difficult for them to think and write in English. They added that they found themselves unconsciously translating their thoughts in the first language into English, whereas some of them argued that they lack the ability to organize their ideas in English due to their poor writing skill.



### Figure 1. Problems facing learners in writing in English

Figure 1 gives a detailed account of the previous answers of the students. The findings revealed that most of the students did not think that the lack of the language competence can lead to the lack of ideas and inclusion of the first language in English when they are trying to develop their writing skill. In fact, they turned their attention towards the point that they cannot think in English since they used to think in Arabic.

2- Do you think that the interference of the first language in writing in English is due to?

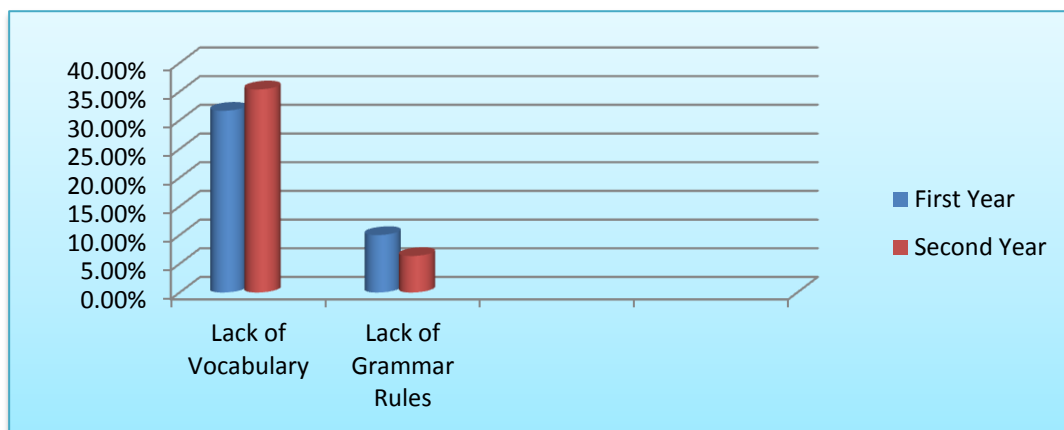
- The lack of vocabulary in the target language
- The lack of grammar rules

**Table 2. Reasons for the interference of the first language in English writing**

Reasons	First Year	Second Year	Expressed in %
Lack of vocabulary in the target language	38	43	81%
Lack of grammar rules	12	07	19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>50</b>	

The data provided in table 2 revealed that most of the learners maintained that they are suffering from the lack of vocabulary due to their lack of readings. Hence, they tend to include their mother tongue's ideas and adjust them in few words they know, i.e., they do not develop a writing style due to their poor lexis.





**Figure 2. Reasons for the interference of the first language in English writing**

As figure 2 revealed, most of the participants viewed that the main reason for the use of their first language in writing is their poor background in vocabulary due to the lack of reading in the target language. On the other hand, a small minority of the learners argued that they are suffering from problems in using tenses, articles, prepositions, passive and active voice...etc. for this reason, they find themselves lost when it comes to the structure of their English; as a matter of fact, they depend on their mother tongue.

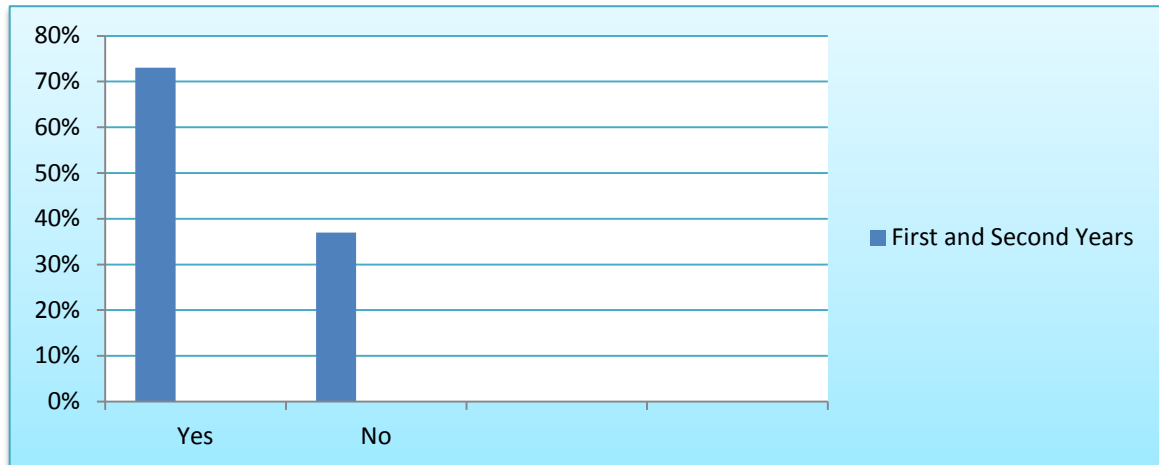
3- Do you base your writings on readings?

- Yes
- No

**Table 3. The importance of reading in developing the writing skill**

Importance of reading	First Year	Second Year	Expressed in %
Yes	17	56	73%
No	33	04	37%
Total	50	50	

Table 3 gives an account of the participants' views concerning the importance of reading in writing production of a second or a third language. Indeed, a great number of the learners argued that reading is among the linguistic approaches that improve their writing competence.



**Figure 3. The importance of reading in developing the writing skill**

In fact, most of the informants claimed that reading is important for developing the writing skill since it helps in acquiring a new vocabulary; however, they argued that most of them do not read.

## Results of the Interview

As it has already been mentioned before, the interview was conducted with four teachers who were teaching English writing for many years. The questions of the interview concentrate basically on their views based on their experience.

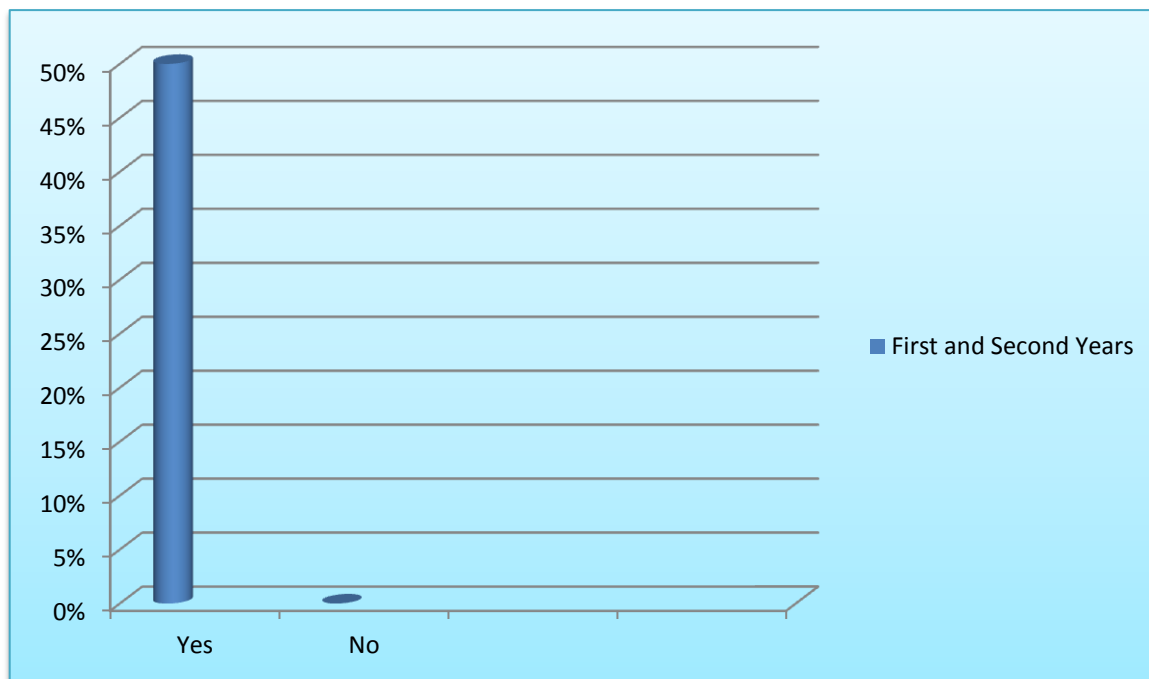
1- Do your students use their first language in their English writing?

- Yes
- No

**Table 4. Teachers' views concerning the use of the first language in English writing**

Teachers' Views	Teachers of the First Year	Teachers of the Second Year	Expressed in %
Yes	02	02	50%
No	00	00	00%
Total	02	02	

All teachers confirmed the point that writing is a hard task and the interference of the first language in English writing is obvious in their students' writings either at class or during the exams.



**Figure 4. Teachers' views concerning the use of the first language in English writing**

Figure 4 gives a clear presentation of the teachers' views. About 50% of the teachers are with the point that their students commit errors in their writings. They proved their views claiming that they depend largely on their first language to cover up their weakness.

2- At what level do the students make errors?

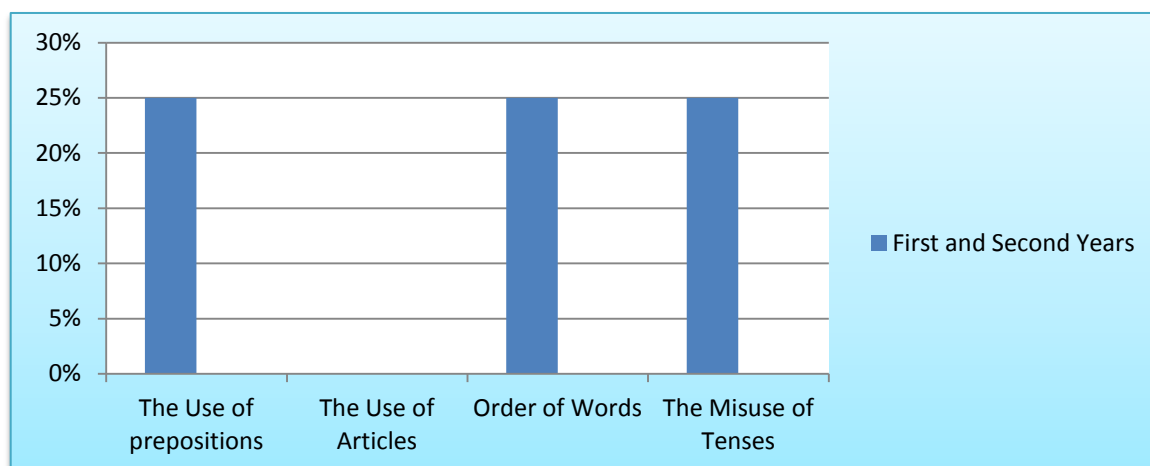
- The use of prepositions
- The use of articles
- Order of words
- The misuse of tenses

**table 5. Levels of error making**

Students' Errors	Teachers of the First Year	Teachers of the Second Year	Expressed in %
The use of prepositions	01	00	25%
The use of articles	00	00	0%

order of words	00	01	25%
The misuse of tenses	01	01	25%
Total	02	02	

As it is obvious in table 5, there is a disagreement among teachers due to the level of their students. First year teachers maintained that their students do not master the use of tense since they are still taking lectures on how to use tenses in details during the session of grammar; for this reason, a lot of errors are made and they resort to include their mother tongue in their writings, although students of the first year are asked to write paragraphs not whole essays. They added that they find difficulties with them in using prepositions mainly at, in, on, between and among. On the other hand, second year English teachers focused on the order of words and the misuse of tenses. They justified their answer claiming that their students are still facing difficulties in using articles and prepositions, but their major problems revolve around the misuse of tenses and order of words.



**Figure 5. Levels of error making**

Figure 5 provides a concise statistical view about the answers of the participants. It confirms that about 25% of the informants maintained that their students are still making errors at the level of tense use; then, 25% of them highlighted that they also have a deficiency in employing prepositions. Finally, the remaining confirmed that foreign language learners make errors in using prepositions.

3- What are the reasons for error making?

- The interference of the mother tongue
- Lack of reading
- Lack of writing in English

**Table 5. Teachers' views concerning the reasons behind errors**

Reasons	Teachers of the First Year	Teachers of the Second Year	Expressed in %
The interference of the mother tongue	00	01	25%
Lack of reading	01	01	50%
Lack of writing in English	01	00	25%
Total	02	02	

The answers of teachers vary depending on the level of their students. Teachers of the second year thought that the lack of reading leads students to use their mother tongue due to their lack of vocabulary, whereas teachers of the first year confirmed that the learners are still beginners and developing their writing skill.

### Error Analysis Test

As a teacher of written expression, the researcher made the test with the above mentioned groups. They asked them to write a descriptive paragraph after reading a text "My Father". Students were asked to include all the features of a descriptive paragraph. About 50 paragraphs were selected randomly from first and second years. They were asked to write their paragraphs without mentioning their names. The task of writing the descriptive paragraphs was given to the students during class for one hour and a half. The researcher found that most of the errors committed in their paragraphs revolve around the following features:

### Grammatical Errors

The findings of this test proved that most commonly errors found in the students' writings is the use of tenses. Although second year learners have a background about tense use, but they still make errors in selecting the appropriate tense and the misuse of composed tenses like past/present perfect, present and past continuous as the following example in table 6 mentions:

**Table 6. Grammatical errors in descriptive paragraphs for both levels**

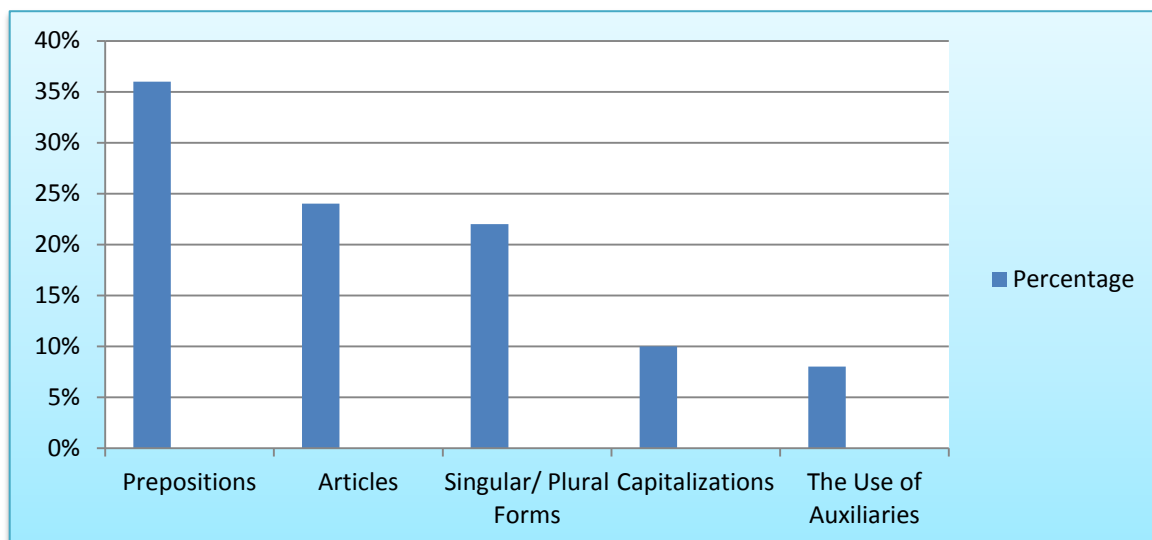
Grammatical Errors	Level	Correction
My father was leave to the country side.	Second	My father was leaving to

	year	the country side.
<b>My father is a person who is given the importance to listening to people.</b>	Second year	May father is a person who is giving importance to listening to people.
<b>He is love to eat with the whole family.</b>	First year	He loves to eat with the whole family.
<b>He is seeing as a wise person by uncles.</b>	First year	He is seen as a wise person by my uncles.
<b>My father is give me support and a warm heart whenever I need him.</b>	First year	My father gives me support and a warm heart whenever I need him.

As table 6 shows, most of the errors committed in the students' paragraphs have to do with composed tenses. The analysis also reveals that they tend to utilise past and present tenses to cover up their weaknesses in using complex tenses due to their poor knowledge. Other errors found in the paragraphs are about the use of prepositions, articles, plural and singular forms, capitalizations and auxiliaries. The analysis also demonstrates that most of the errors are conducted by first year students, while second year learners are suffering from the misuse of prepositions and articles.

**Table 7. Types of other grammatical errors**

Other Grammatical Errors	First Year	Second Year	Expressed in %
<b>Prepositions</b>	11	07	36%
<b>Articles</b>	08	04	24%
<b>Singular/ Plural Forms</b>	06	05	22%
<b>Capitalizations</b>	04	01	10%
<b>The Use of Auxiliaries</b>	01	03	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>	



**Figure 7. Types of other grammatical errors**

Figure 7 shows that students suffer from the misuse of prepositions since some of them are found in both Arabic and English. Secondly, the findings revealed that they do not know how to use articles especially definite articles since there are no rules for their usage in Arabic. Singular and plural forms are also seen as barriers for some learners in addition to the use of capitalizations since the latter does not exist in Arabic language.

### Lexical Errors

Through reading the students' paragraphs, the researcher found that most of lexical errors are the results of the interference of the Arabic in their English writings. These errors can be found in a word, two words or a whole sentence as it is shown in table 8:

**Table 8. Lexical errors**

Lexical Errors	Level	Correction
<b>My father was living outside Algeria during his childhood</b>	First year	My father was living abroad during his childhood.
<b>He knows very well how to learn us to be responsible.</b>	First year	He knows very well how to teach us responsibility.
<b>My father takes the responsibility of the whole family on his shoulders.</b>	Second year	My father carries the responsibility of the whole family on his shoulders.

The analysis displays that most of semantic errors are conducted by first year students due to their poor vocabulary and the interference of their mother tongue because they are still beginners in learning and acquiring English as a foreign language. As table 8

presents, these errors are committed since learners try to translate directly from Arabic language in order to provide a description of their father.

### Syntactic Errors

Among syntactic errors, there is the problem of word order. The central reason depending on the researcher' analysis is the inclusion of Arabic syntax in the structure of English. In fact, learners neglect sometimes the order of nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs in sentences. In Arabic language, the noun precedes the adjectives, whereas in English it is the opposite. The following table gives a sum to some syntactic errors taken from students' paragraphs:

**Table 9. Syntactic errors**

Syntactic Errors	Level	Correction
<b>My father was a cook good since he used to help our grandmother.</b>	First year	My father was a good cook since he used to help our grandmother.
<b>He used to read Dickens' novels difficult.</b>	First year	He used to read Dickens' difficult novels.
<b>My father taught me three values very essential.</b>	Second year	My father taught me three very essential values.

Table 9 offers an account of some errors conducted by students from both levels. The findings show that first year students have difficulties in word order, while second year learners are still suffering from different types of syntactic errors.

### Data Interpretations and Recommendations

In the light of what has been explored throughout the current research work, one should inform that the previous findings are just results conducted with small group of learners from first and second years at Saida University. They cannot represent all EFL learners in Algerian context. In other words, they can be taken as guidelines for more scholarship. In this context, one can add that teachers can help their students in improving their English writings and can turn the negative points of language interference into positive ones. Error analysis is an approach that plays an eminent importance in helping teachers to develop writing techniques through checking their students' feedback. Most importantly, they have to encourage their students to read and write in class and at home, so that they raise their awareness about the fact that these two features are intertwined. This step can



help teachers to ameliorate their teaching techniques and understand the learners' needs. Besides, it is also recommended that policy makers should give more importance to the point that writing production should be given the first place in syllabus designing and the time allotted for its teaching; as a matter of fact, it helps teachers to cater for the learners' writing competence.

## Conclusion

The findings of this small scale study give importance to the cultural differences and how they affect the writing productions of EFL learners through providing a detailed account of how the interference of the first language affects directly the writing skill at the grammatical, syntactic and semantic levels. It is hoped that this study has provided some guidelines for both learners and teachers on how to confront difficulties in writing.

Language interference is a result of two central reasons. Firstly, it should be noted that the writing skill is a hard task that requires more practice which is absent between most students. Secondly, the student has to link between the four linguistic skills to improve his writing production, so that he can avoid the inclusion of Arabic in his writing.

Most importantly, one can add that the interference of Arabic in writing production results in errors at the grammatical, syntactic and semantic levels. Besides, the most common errors take place on some shared features including prepositions, articles, tense choice and word order. On the other hand, few errors are made in features which are dissimilar. Hence, this preliminary research work yields more insight on developing writing techniques to guide EFL learners in English writing production.

## References

- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (3 ed). Prentice Hall.
- Cook, V. J., & Newson, M. (2007). *Chomsky's universal grammar: An introduction* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Corder S. P. (1974). Error analysis. In Allen, J. P. B., & Corder, S. P. (Eds.), *Techniques in applied linguistics: The Edinburgh course in applied linguistics*, London: Oxford University Press (Language and Language Learning), pp. 122–154.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Jie, X. (2008). Error theories and second language acquisition. *US-China Foreign Language*, 6 (1), 35-42.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1983). Contrastive rhetoric and the teaching of composition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 1 (4), 10-16.
- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nunan, D. (2001). Causes of English spelling errors made by Thai foreign language learners. *ARECLS*, 10, 22-43.
- Richards, J. C. (1974). *Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition (Applied linguistics and language)*. London: Longman.
- Richards, J. C. (1992). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. London: Longman.
- Smith, R. (2005). Global English: Gift or curse? *English Today*, 21(2), 56-62.
- Yule, G. (2006). *The study of language* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.