A Comparative Error Analysis of Iraqi EFL Students' Timed Paragraph Writing Across Three Language-Related Departments

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[1]Aws A. Al Arabw, [2]Ashraf R. Abdullah
[1,2] Department of English Language, College of Arts, University of Mosul, Nineveh, Iraq.

Abstract:

The current work investigates timed paragraph writing from 30 senior students in three departments in an Iraqi University: The Department of English of the College of Education for Humanities, the Department of English Language in the College of Arts and the Department of Translation in the College of Arts. In a 20 minute-task, the students produced one paragraph each in response to the same topic: writing on the advantages and disadvantages of studying in their department. The sample contained five males and five females from each department, and the total number of running words in the corpus was 2,576 words. Using an error-analysis framework consistent with research on learner language, an attempt is made to code observable errors manually in five broad categories: orthography, grammar, syntax, lexis and mechanics. The findings showed a total of 558 errors. Errors in the category of orthography were dominant; there were 161 instances, making up 28.9 percent of the total number of errors. The category of grammar contained 130 errors or 23.3 percent of the total, and for mechanics it was 97 or 17.4 percent. The category of syntax had 95 errors (17.0 percent), and finally lexis had 75 (13.4 percent). The differences in error density were obvious between departments. The students in the Department of English Language in the College of Arts produced texts with the highest length while having a significantly low mean normalized error density. However, the students of the Department of English in the College of Education for Humanities did the opposite. They wrote short paragraphs with significantly high normalized error density. Adherence to the task also seems rather problematic; out of 30 samples only two were at a length of 130–150 words as required. The conclusion drawn from the current study is that the students' problems in writing should not be restricted to the category of grammar. Other categories such as spelling, paragraph boundaries, editing process and limited elaboration of ideas seem to be an essential contributor in writing quality. The paper concludes with suggestions that should take departmental differences into account, mainly in relation to teaching writing skills, diagnosis and remedial action.

Keywords: Error Analysis, EFL Writing, Iraqi University Students, Learner Language, Paragraph Writing.

1. Introduction

Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a difficult skill to master. The mere production of grammatically acceptable sentences is insufficient for L2 learners in the language classroom. EFL students should also be taught to choose appropriate words, manage grammatical and syntactical structure, spell accurately, use correct punctuation, organize paragraphs, attend to genre requirements and be sensitive to reader awareness. All these factors become more salient at the university level. The academic success of a learner's English language proficiency is primarily assessed through their ability to communicate in written English, e.g., coursework, written examinations and their ability to write effectively in the

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Corresponding author's e-mail: ashraf.abdullah@uomosul.edu.iq

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professional world. Weak writing may thus not be a mere product of linguistic errors. It can reflect problems such as inappropriate pedagogical sequencing in grammar, weaknesses in the assessment of student writing and inconsistencies in writing guidance across students' academic programs (Hyland, 2019).

An error-analysis approach is valuable to this end because it considers student errors not as a failure, but rather as a sign of ongoing learning. Corder's (1967) pioneering work contributed to this notion by redefining the view of error. Corder (1967) rejected the idea of considering learner errors merely as a sign of deficit. Instead, he considered error a product of the learner's developing system. This perspective was further expanded by Selinker's (1972) interlanguage which described the learner's unique language system with its own characteristics and rules of operation. Richards (1971) showed not all errors are transfer, a number of which may derive from the target language being learned and its internal rules rather than from the learner's first language. James (1998) and Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) offered more precise guidelines for collecting and categorizing learner data and interpreting them with a pedagogical purpose.

A growing number of studies on EFL writing also argue against viewing grammar in isolation as the sole reason for the difficulties that EFL students experience in writing. According to Hyland (2019) and Ferris (2011), student writing offers much more information regarding students' control of the written language. It also tells the educator a good deal about students' ability to handle audience, revision, organization, and strategic language use. In this vein, Ferris (2010) and Bitchener and Ferris (2012) claim that error patterns are useful if they are related to the focused feedback that is provided, which helps the instructor make instructional decisions. To put it simply, error analysis requires going beyond error counting; it involves drawing attention to recurrent error patterns, their interconnection as they occur in student texts, and how these patterns might be addressed through explicit instruction.

The EFL and ESL research literature reports that the areas of spelling, punctuation, verb forms, articles, prepositions, and punctuation and boundary control still trouble learners. Karim et al. (2018) reported frequent grammatical and syntactic errors in the EFL classroom writing of students. In a study in an English language course at a Saudi university, Chaudhary and Al Zahrani (2020) found that many learners still struggled to avoid frequent errors involving spelling, and lexical choice. Khatter (2019) examined a writing task performed by Saudi undergraduate students and found frequent errors in writing in the areas of punctuation, spelling, prepositions, articles, verb forms and verb tense, and word form. Aknouch and Bouthiche (2022) also found that grammatical errors are among the common writing difficulties of students studying in Morocco, however, they noted that these errors do not stem only from interference effects from the mother tongue, rather there are multiple sources of these types of errors.

Similar concerns have been reported in the Iraqi and Kurdish EFL context as well. For example, Ali (2024) investigated errors made by Kurdish students learning English as a foreign language, specifically at postgraduate level of studies. He found a wide range of errors in writing such as grammatical errors, errors in punctuation and spelling, capitalization, and unnecessary use of words. Azeez (2024) investigated the errors and challenges faced by upper-intermediate English majors in English Department in Salaheddin University. Results showed that even English students may produce written fossilized errors despite years of language learning and repeated exposure in class. It is important to note that these findings are especially relevant to this study because they show that being at the senior level of a major with close involvement with writing does not necessarily mean having mastery and command of academic writing.

To our knowledge, there has been very little research attention directed toward comparing a set of closely related groups under the same writing conditions (timed in-class essay prompt). This is important because similar departments are likely to have different types of writing. For example, English and translation at the College of Arts, and applied English at the College of Education will all be similar in that students at those levels are exposed to the language, however, they are also different in their goals of the programs, their approaches to assessment, and the types of writing that their students practice. Using the same writing prompt across departments

will enable the study to identify not only common error areas, but also to explore the ways in which writing performance may be influenced by departmental context.

The present work compares timed writing tasks produced by senior English students majoring in three closely related departments of study. Like previous studies, the present work was not designed to penalize students in any way. Its goal was diagnostic rather than prescriptive or presiding. That said, the present work does not intend to generalize, or to produce an overall or definitive ranking of the departments' students. Instead, the work aims to investigate the short, written texts students produced as an indication of their writing proficiency in terms of accuracy, writing skills like developing a paragraph, following task instructions, and the possible remediation students might need.

The study attempts to answer three research questions. First, what are the main errors in student writing tasks? Second, what are the patterns, differences, and similarities of students' writing tasks, especially regarding the length of writing, compliance with writing task instructions, and the normalized frequency of error rates? Third, what teaching practices can inform the present study's findings? The study's significance is that, unlike many previous studies on students' written errors, this study employed a timed writing prompt that was shared across all student samples, all of whom were seniors in similar English language departments. The study also explored a set of errors and the extent of compliance with a given task, which are both aspects of writing performance. As such, this study can provide a useful indication of the common errors and the degree of compliance with task instructions. To this end, the current study provides a practical analysis of writing errors that may include a set of spelling, grammatical and mechanical, sentence-level, lexical and phrasal, and prompt compliance errors. Finally, the findings of this study may aid English instructors in their remedial and instructional efforts and assist administrators in curriculum planning and other pedagogical activities.

2. Literature Review

The relevance of error analysis lies in its dual capacity for linguistic description and classroom application. Corder (1967) asserted that learner errors reflect evidence of the learner's current rule system, a perspective that continues to underpin research on EFL writing. For teachers, recurring errors can indicate what students have already begun to master, what is still unstable, and the appropriate point for providing feedback. As James (1998) expands, errors are better seen as significant deviations from the standard, rather than as a generalized mass of "bad English".

A separate research strand concerns how learners come to commit these errors in the first place. Richards (1971) argued against the assumption that errors were solely due to first-language interference, highlighting instead the intralingual and developmental causes of error in the form of errors in how learners interpret and generalize the target language's rules. Selinker (1972)'s framework of interlanguage similarly illustrates that the learner's language is both systematic and developmental, and not simply the product of L1 interference. This observation is relevant in the context of a timed writing task where students may be more likely to overgeneralize known patterns, use fewer complex structures, or apply grammatical rules inconsistently, as well as because of external factors that might affect their performance as they write (for example time constraints, as discussed above) and because of insufficient or incorrect monitoring/editing processes.

The utility of such error analysis depends on clear coding procedures. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) emphasize the importance of being very clear about the units of analysis and the boundaries and categories for classification when analyzing learner language. This is particularly important for small samples of handwriting that might be collected from learners, because a single sentence might contain several overlapping errors and there might be some subjectivity in deciding whether something constitutes an error. The coding procedure is not an attempt to remove subjectivity; rather, it helps make explicit how the researcher arrived at each decision, and to explain how those decisions might be interpreted in a subsequent quantitative count.

Studies of EFL writing typically illustrate that student error is not simply attributable to one specific error class. Karim et al.

(2018) noted grammar, information error, and word order errors as recurring errors in student writing. Chaudhary and Al Zahrani (2020) reported recurrent spelling errors in a corpus of EFL university students. Khatter (2019) reported punctuation, spelling, prepositions, articles, verb tense, and word form were the most common errors among Saudi female learner essays. Aknouch and Bouthiche (2022) reported grammatical errors to be the most common errors in Moroccan EFL essays, while they viewed error sources as multifarious.

Studies on regional language learners show that these difficulties also affect even relatively advanced language users. Ali (2024) reported 14 types of errors in the written work of Kurdish postgraduate students, specifically including grammatical errors, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and wordiness. Azeez (2024) proposed that a written learner error becomes fossilized if not corrected and remediated through direct and explicit feedback. Such results bear on this study because all participants were senior students. Their level of study, therefore, implies a considerable degree of experience with written English, but such studies remind researchers that experience alone does not produce the development of accurate, stable written performance.

Most previous studies, by contrast, have relied on a single class, a single academic level, or a general writing task. More studies comparing closely related groups under the same prompt and time limit are relatively less common. The present study addresses this lacuna by studying three senior classes simultaneously. By looking at the writing samples in parallel across departments, this research design asks whether the types of errors identified are common or distinct for the various departments.

Recent research on L2 writing assessment also cautions that errors cannot be treated as the sole indicator of writing skills. Writing is affected by the nature of the task, the type of assignment, the extent of the revision available, and the manner in which the essay was scored. Timed impromptu writing provides a very restricted perspective on this construct (Hyland, 2019; Weigle, 2002). In the context of the current study, the analysis of short-time paragraphs may not only demonstrate a local problem in language but also limitations on the extent, planning and fluency of writing. Hence, this study considers both the prompt compliance and the error rate together, rather than in isolation or in a complementary relationship.

3. Method

Data were collected through a small-scale comparative descriptive design based on error analysis, using a sample of thirty (30) handwritten paragraphs. These paragraphs were written by the participants as part of a class test. Handwritten scripts were translated into typed analytic transcriptions. Transcriptions in this study represented a verbatim record of written data from the students (i.e., the original handwritten scripts). This was because they recorded the same wording, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and spacing as those used in students' handwritten scripts. The analytic transcriptions were used as a verbatim transcription rather than being edited for readability or corrected for error prior to analysis. In this sense, transcription was analytic in that it facilitated the coding of the same forms that were available to observe in the classroom script.

The sample consisted of thirty (30) senior students chosen from three departments. Specifically, ten (10) participants were drawn from the Department of English in the College of Education for Humanities, another ten (10) were from the Department of English Language in the College of Arts, and the remaining ten (10) were from the Department of Translation in the College of Arts. Within each departmental group, five (5) male students and five (5) female students were selected. While the group size was balanced, this is not necessarily a randomly sampled corpus. Hence, the results of the study must be interpreted as a comparative study of departments rather than an estimate of generalizability to all students in each of the three departments in the university. In addition, to maintain anonymity, participants in the study were identified in terms of department, gender and participant number codes. All participants were senior students from language-related departments from the same university, a feature which may help improve comparisons between the three groups of participants. However, the departmental variable in the study is a contextual one, rather than

representing an independent variable for English proficiency. Thus, this study did not employ an independent variable for English proficiency. Therefore, differences between participants can be observed within a departmental group rather than being used as an indicator of generalizability to all students' performance from these departments. Other factors which could impact the outcome include students' previous exposure to English writing or writing tasks, curricular focus and content, instructional practices, testing/assessment culture, and the students' ability to complete a task within a given time frame.

A writing task was administered to all participants from each of the three groups. Participants were assigned one paragraph topic and were asked to write one paragraph of 130 to 150 words discussing the pros and cons of being a student in their own department. Participants were instructed to discuss at least two advantages and two disadvantages, to write at least one complex sentence, use at least three to four cohesive devices, and finally, to propose one solution on how they thought students' writing could be improved. The time limit for writing the task was twenty minutes. All participant groups completed one essay prompt. Thus, performance differences observed can be reasonably attributed to actual writing ability rather than the difficulty of the prompt. See the appendix for the full writing prompt given to the students (Appendix B). A conservative operational definition of prompt compliance was employed in this study: to complete the task to the degree of word count range, because word count was the easiest measure across scripts. Other prompt elements such as inclusion of advantages, disadvantages, cohesive devices, and a final suggestion were utilized to shape the qualitative interpretation of performance, but not a distinct rubric score. As writing assessment scholarship argues, task features should be either scored directly or separated from language-error measures within the construct (Weigle, 2002); a future iteration of this design might include a parallel task-response rubric alongside the current error-analysis procedure.

Once the corpus was prepared, each script was reviewed line by line and annotated for errors according to five broad categories, derived from James (1998) and Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005):

- Orthography, including spelling and spacing
- Grammar, which covers agreement, articles, verb form, number, and similar morphosyntactic errors
- Syntax, covering sentence structure, fragments, fused clauses, and significant word-order issues
- Lexis, including word choice, collocation, and inappropriate register
- Mechanics, encompassing punctuation and capitalization

The analysis followed a minimal independent error principle to avoid double-counting a single error when subsequent problems were clearly downstream of the original one. Given that the present study was intended for classroom diagnosis, its categories aimed to be more transparent and consistent rather than finely detailed micro-classifications; a summary of the coding scheme's operational emphasis appears in Appendix A. Coding was performed manually by a single researcher; no inter-rater coefficient is claimed, so the coding scheme here should be viewed as a transparent analytic tool rather than a fully psychometrically validated scoring rubric. To avoid overgeneralizing, therefore, general trends are described in the results section, category definitions are explicit and frequencies are only used as an indication of relative frequency for this particular group of students, rather than for all students at this level. This is especially important for more limited scale error coding studies where credibility relies upon the clarity with which coding categories are defined and boundaries are set (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Word counts for each script were tallied, and normalized error density was calculated by dividing the number of annotated errors in each script by the number of running words and multiplying the result by 100. Word totals in this study are based on whitespace-separated running words in the typed analytic copies, and they form the basis for Table 1 (including total corpus size) and for the word counts associated with the samples in Appendix C. Owing to the limited, exploratory nature of the sample, combined with the diagnostic aims of the study, we report the findings descriptively rather than through inferential statistics. Appendix B reproduces the exact prompt that students responded to in the classroom. Appendix C

reproduces three anonymized sample scripts (one from each department), selected to demonstrate different performance profiles in the corpus.

4. Results

The data comprised 2576 running words taken from 30 scripts. The first discernible difference between the groups is the variation in length. Scripts in the English Language group in the College of Arts were the longest, on average, and those in the English group in the College of Education for Humanities were the shortest. Not surprisingly, few scripts (only two of the 30) satisfied the required length (130-150 words), and both of these were from the English Language group in the College of Arts. That this is important is that underproduction is not just a failure to follow an instruction in a test; for some of the scripts in this analysis, length is a sign of poor writing and underdevelopment (the script does not elaborate on the topic, does not follow directions, or is cut off without a concluding sentence) and therefore should be considered as part of the analysis of writing, not simply as an administrative matter. Since length was the only parameter specified for the requirement, later mention of underdevelopment in relation to the prompt should not be taken as the assessment criterion in a separate checklist, but rather as observation resulting from reading the script.

As seen in Table 1, the English Language group in the College of Arts was closest to meeting the length of the required task (118.9 words) and the English group in the College of Education for Humanities produced the shortest scripts (54.9 words). Translation remained below the required length on average (83.8 words). It would be fair to say that a component of performance on this task is the ability to produce a script that responds to a topic for the length required

Table 1. Participants, Text Length, and Prompt Compliance by Department.

Department	N	Females	Males	Mean words (SD)	Range	Within 130–150
English (Education for Humanities)	10	5	5	54.9 (21.6)	22–84	0 (0.0%)
English Language (Arts)	10	5	5	118.9 (29.3)	79–168	2 (20.0%)
Translation (Arts)	10	5	5	83.8 (34.0)	43–162	0 (0.0%)

Note. The target length for the task was 130–150 words. Only two scripts met the target range, both from the English Language group in the College of Arts. SD = standard deviation.

Table 2 provides the distribution of the categories of error for each department, and mean individual normalized error density for each. The total number of coded errors in the whole corpus was 558. Orthography was the largest category with 161 errors (28.9%). The next largest category was Grammar with 130 errors (23.3%). Mechanics accounted for 97 errors (17.4%), syntax 95 (17.0%), and lexis 75 (13.4%). At departmental level, the English group in the College of Education for Humanities produced the highest mean individual normalized density of error and the English Language group in the College of Arts the lowest. The most frequent category was orthography in all three departments. Grammar was a secondary major area of difficulty.

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Table 2. Distribution of Coded Error Categories by Department.

Department	Corpus words	Orth.	Gram.	Syntax	Lexis	Mech.	Total	Mean individual normalized error density (errorsper 100 words)
English (Education for Humanities)	549	45	34	24	20	34	157	26.79
English Language (Arts)	1189	69	54	37	28	40	228	19.35
Translation (Arts)	838	47	42	34	27	23	173	22.10

Note. Categories were coded manually and represent minimum independent observable errors. The final column reports the mean individual normalized error density for each department (errors per 100 words), calculated from individual scripts. Orth. = orthography; Gram. = grammar; Mech. = mechanics.

The fact that the three sub-corpora vary greatly in length means that raw totals need to be interpreted with some caution. The longer texts, of course, afford more opportunity for development and for error. So, the normalized error density is a better indicator than a simple error count. There is also a limit to the amount of information a normalized error density can yield. Short scripts can appear to be error-rich because there is very little development, whereas long scripts may present a higher variety because there is more language. The overall results can be interpreted descriptively; no attempt should be made to rank the quality of the departments on the basis of this evidence.

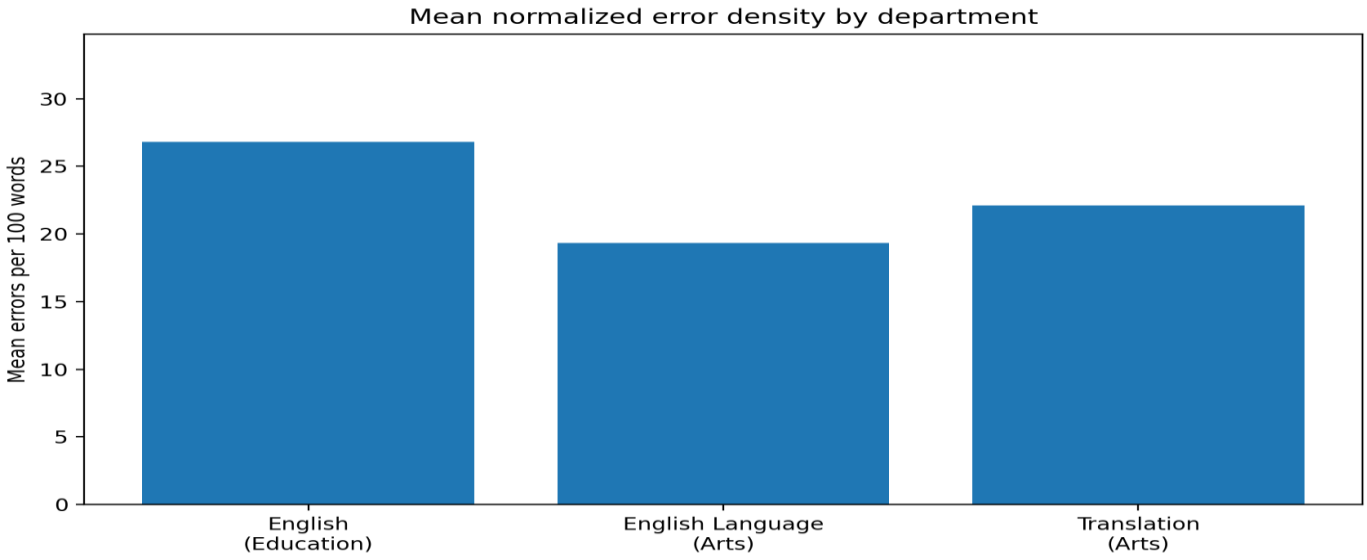


Figure 1. Departmental mean normalized error density (Errors per 100 words).

Reading of the scripts revealed that the categories of error overlap. For example, spelling errors were frequently combined with faulty punctuation, and both often combined to hide the boundaries of clauses. Short scripts are often the result of limited development with abrupt, fused, incomplete or incomplete phrasing. Most of the longer scripts were characterized not by complete accuracy but by the capacity to hold onto a paragraph even when local troubles surfaced. Recurrent error patterns in the corpus are shown in Table 3.

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Table 3. Illustrative Examples of Recurrent Error Types.

Category	Illustrative example	Comment
Orthography	ELA-F3: “exprience”; TR-F5: “traryet”; EEH-M1: “techniqes”	Spelling and spacing problems were widespread and sometimes influenced intelligibility or slowed interpretation.
Grammar	EEH-F1: “The course improve…”; ELA-F1: “there few training opportunities”; TR-F1: “this department make us choose…”	Agreement, missing function words, and unstable verb forms appeared in all three departments.
Syntax	TR-M3: “…students feel stressed I suggest increasing…”; ELA-F3: “…many careers moreover, studying literature…”	Fused clauses, weak sentence boundaries, and abrupt clause chaining were usual.
Lexis	ELA-M4: “sign in this department”; EEH-F5: “you gonna Face music”; TR-F4: “semantics language”; TR-F4: “correct themes”	Some texts showed inaccurate word choice, odd collocation, or register mismatch.
Mechanics	EEH-M4: “Being sTudent in english department…”; ELA-F2: repeated random capitals and missing punctuation	Capitalization and punctuation problems were especially noticeable in some scripts.

Note. Categories were coded manually and represent minimum independent observable errors. The final column reports the mean individual normalized error density for each department (errors per 100 words), calculated from individual scripts. Orth. = orthography; Gram. = grammar; Mech. = mechanics.

Table 3 examples suggest that the most salient weaknesses were found across multiple linguistic levels. Certain scripts were weakened primarily by local accuracy issues; others demonstrated a general challenge in paragraph development under time pressure. The corpus thus reflects a confluence of both language control and written fluency.

5. Discussion

The present findings yield three primary takeaways. The first is that orthography and grammar remained the biggest problems, representing more than 50% of errors coded in the corpus. This is consistent with some EFL writing research on how spelling and morphosyntactical errors and control of function words remain an issue for university students (Chaudhary & Al Zahrani, 2020; Khatter, 2019). In the present corpus, spelling errors were not limited to individual words, but sometimes also affected punctuation or disrupted the sentence structure, negatively influencing readability and making it difficult at times to infer meaning from the text.

A second takeaway concerns differences between departments in terms of both accuracy and productivity. The College of Arts English Language group wrote the longest texts and registered the lowest mean normalized error density. In contrast, the College of Education for Humanities English group wrote the shortest texts and registered the highest mean normalized error density. These differences are pedagogically meaningful, though they should not be read as clear evidence that one group's curriculum was more or less successful than another's. The present study collected no independent measures of proficiency, prior writing instruction, feedback practices on the part of instructors, or exposure to extended writing on the part of the students. An interpretation at the safe end of the spectrum would note that the three departments demonstrated different levels of performance within the framework of a single timed task. Such performance differences may have reflected a range of fluency, task management, revision, editing control, local teaching and learning experience, and similar factors.

A third takeaway is that writing deficiencies found in this corpus were not attributable to problems in grammar alone. Mechanics, syntax, and lexis all contributed significantly to the overall error profile; so did non-compliance with the prompt. Several students did more than make sentence-level errors; they were also unable to meet the expected length limit, write a response that addressed the whole prompt, and expand their

response beyond short assertions. In several scripts, the topic shifted away from the specific topic area related to departmental study. The pattern of errors thus suggests that writing instruction should include planning, elaboration, revision, and task interpretation, in addition to work on language accuracy.

A department-sensitive interpretation of the error patterns is also helpful. The College of Arts English Language group appeared better able to sustain paragraph-level writing, though its scripts still showed frequent errors of spelling, word choice, punctuation, and sentence segmentation. The Translation group displayed a mix of patterns. Certain scripts remained reasonably successful in terms of content control, while others were weakened by abrupt clause linkage, lexical imprecision, and incomplete sentence connection. The College of Education for Humanities English group produced responses that were notably compressed, were generally least able to meet length expectations, and, in some cases, demonstrated less than reliable control of capitalization, spelling, and phrasing. The observed variation between groups further suggests that applying a single remedial plan uniformly across all departments is unlikely to be as effective as a needs-based response.

The pedagogical application is simple: all three departments could benefit from more frequent, short, timed writing tasks, with explicit instruction to correct a limited number of the most recurrent error patterns. In this corpus, the priority for corrective attention was the control of sentence boundaries and the accuracy of punctuation, the usage of the most frequent grammatical categories (agreement, article use, and verb forms), and spelling/editing routines. It is well-established that feedback on learners' written production is more helpful if it focuses only on a few recurrent error patterns that are directly linked to common problems in their writing (Ferris, 2010; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023). For the English Group at the Faculty of Education for Humanities, instruction might begin by focusing on the expansion of short paragraphs, the completion of sentences, and proof-reading. For the Translation Group, the emphasis might be clause linkage, lexical precision, and control of sentence flow. In the case of the English Language Group at the College of Arts, longer paragraphs could first be corrected for spelling, punctuation, and sentence-boundary accuracy. A departmentally-driven solution may therefore involve the design of short 'error logs' for students, to be developed with teachers as a record of the most frequent problem areas identified and used across several writing tasks.

The present research results also have consequences for the design of writing tests and assessments. The prompt used required the examinees to compose a short 130-150-word paragraph, containing one complex sentence, three to four cohesion devices to link together the paragraph, two advantages and disadvantages, and a paragraph closing with a suggestion. These are many demands for a short 20-minute paragraph. In future test administrations, it might be beneficial to distinguish between one of two possible objectives: identifying the language proficiency demonstrated in a sample of unrehearsed writing, or measuring the extent to which the requirements of the task are met. It is clear that, in the field of language assessment, the writing prompt and the scoring rubric used both constitute part of the construct being assessed (Weigle, 2002). If the purpose of a particular writing test or assessment is to ascertain students' proficiency, the writing prompt may be made simpler so as not to distract them from using the language they do know. If, however, the writing assessment is also to measure examinees' ability to comply with the details of a task prompt, then the extent of prompt compliance could be rated through a separate, distinct criterion rather than simply noted as an observation.

The research has a number of limitations. The corpus used in this paper was small, and groups of writing were differentiated by the departments from which the exam scripts were collected, rather than the other way round. Therefore, these categories cannot be used as explanatory factors of variation, since they represent institutional designations rather than language groupings. Also, the data are from just one single writing prompt, while the length of students' responses varies widely. Because most scripts fell far short of the length specified in the assessment prompt, some of the examinees were offered an unequal opportunity to demonstrate more advanced control of discourse; the shortest scripts provide the weakest evidence of cohesion and development. The present research was also undertaken by one analyst, using typed transcriptions of handwritten papers in the analysis of some of

its findings. Therefore, there may be some uncertainty associated with the application of certain categories in the coding scheme, particularly for forms that are ambiguous in their function. For these and other reasons, no claims are made here to the psychometric precision of the study or to any conclusions regarding the causes of variation in the writing of students from the three departments. Rather, it provides a descriptive profile of the writing of students from these three departments when asked to complete the same writing task in the same exam conditions. It has the merit of providing some data from naturally occurring writing tasks, which can be used to identify recurring patterns in students' writing which teachers and curriculum specialists can address.

6. Conclusion

This research investigated a sample of timed, paragraph-length compositions written by senior students in three university English-related departments in Iraq. By using the same classroom writing prompt and the same overall error analysis scheme, it found that the corpus was characterized mainly by orthographic and grammatical errors, with mechanical, syntactic, and lexical errors also occurring significantly.

Students in the English Language major in the College of Arts wrote the longest and more controlled paragraphs; students in the English major in the College of Education for Humanities wrote the shortest paragraphs, and also demonstrated the highest error rate per word. The major in Translation took up the middle position in the hierarchy of control, though their paragraphs again showed many uncontrolled sentences and words.

The most noteworthy result of the study was the low number of texts that successfully fulfilled the writing task itself. Only two students completed the required minimum and maximum range for paragraph length, so issues such as paragraph development and fluent composition must be seen as essential aspects of writing instruction. These results indicate the necessity for providing students with longer, more systematic paragraph writing practice, more targeted correction of the most frequently occurring types of errors, and a more structured and supportive approach to planning, elaboration, editing, and task completion.

Future research in this area could benefit from increasing the corpus size, having more than one coder, and comparing the results of timed first draft writing with those from a second session of untimed and edited writing. Such a design would help distinguish errors that stem from general control of written English in contrast to those arising as a result of the writing time limitation, prompt, and lack of editing. This investigation should be considered as an exploratory comparative diagnosis of English writing control at the individual level rather than a study that represents the general writing quality in this English learning context. The significance of this study is that it reveals that writing instruction should attend to orthographic, mechanical, and grammatical errors as well as control of sentence structure, editing of the first draft, and fulfilling the task requirements.

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Appendix A

Coding framework used in the exploratory analysis

Category	Operational focus
Orthography	Spelling, spacing, and visibly nonstandard word forms (e.g., joined words, split words, letter substitution).
Grammar	Agreement, article use, verb form, plural marking, pronoun form, and related morphosyntactic control.
Syntax	Fragments, run-ons, clause fusion, severe word-order problems, and incomplete sentence structure.
Lexis	Inaccurate word choice, collocation problems, register mismatch, and semantically odd phrasing.
Mechanics	Capitalization and punctuation errors that affected readability or textual control.

Appendix B

Classroom prompt used in the timed writing task

Write one paragraph discussing the advantages and disadvantages of being a student in your department. Begin with one sentence giving your overall evaluation; include at least two advantages and two disadvantages (e.g., courses, facilities, instructors, assessment, community, internships); and finish with one practical suggestion to improve the student experience. Use at least one complex sentence (because/although/which/who/etc.) and 3–4 cohesive devices (e.g., however, moreover, for example, therefore). Rules: Do not use bullet points; no dictionaries/phones/AI tools; write in ink; one paragraph; 130–150 words. Time: 20 minutes (2 min planning + 15 min writing + 3 min checking).

Appendix C

Sample anonymized scripts from the corpus

The following scripts are reproduced from the analytic copies to show three different performance profiles in the corpus. They maintain original wording, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. They are shown for clarity and not as ranking examples.

Sample 1. ELA-F3 (English Language, College of Arts; 141 words).

Overall, being a student in the English Language Department is a rewarding exprience, although it comes with clear challenges. One major advantage is that the courses develop strong skills in reading, writing and critical thinking, which are useful for many careers moreover, studying literature and linguistics helps students understand different cultures and prespectres. Another benefit is the supportive acadmic community, where instructors guide students closely and encourage discussion however the workoad can be heavy, especially during assessment periods, because students are requird to read extensively and submit frequent written assignments. In addition, limited factilites suohos outdated libraries access to libraries or few digital resources may slows

research and learning. For example, finding recent references can sometimes be difficult. Therefore the departement could improve the student experience by expanding library resources and offering more practical workshops that prepare students for future careers.

Sample 2. TR-M3 (Translation, College of Arts; 162 words).

Being a student in the English Translation Department is generally a valuable and challenging experience that prepares me for different career paths. One important advantage is the variety of courses, which develop my language skills and introduce me to legal, media, and literary translation. Moreover, most instructors are supportive and provide useful feedback that helps students improve their writing and critical thinking. Another positive Point is the friendly community, where students Share ideas and learn from each other. However, there are some disadvantages that affect our study, because some facilities such as language labs and libraries are not well equipped. In addition, the heavy workload Sometimes makes it difficult to balance translation practice with other subjects. For example, many assignments are given in the Same many assignments are given in the same week, therefore students feel stressed I suggest increasing the number of practical workshops and internships so that students. Can gain real experience and feel more confident in the job market.

Sample 3. EEH-M4 (English, College of Education for Humanities; 84 words).

Being sTudent in english department is amazing, But For sure There are some Of dis advantages point. However, I will discuss the advanTages Too one of The advanTages is the subJect and The faciliTes they are enriched wiTh useFul informaTion, and The Teachers deLiver these inFormation AL-Thoang the good poinTs, There are The bad ones Too The Large number of studenTs and the communiTy. There should be a TesT To accepT onLy quaLiFied sTudenT and there should be sTricT rules to manage The community.

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