

Investigating Students' Ability in Handling Problems in Writing Mechanics at King Saud University

Yasir Saad Almukhaizeem

King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

E-mail: Lord_yasir11@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates the problems related to writing mechanics of Saudi students at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT). The researcher will examine punctuation and spelling problems by conducting a written test. The participants in the study included 100 college students and 20 language instructors. The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative research design to assure a high level of reliability. The study shows that English Department students at the first level of the College of Languages and Translation commit many errors in writing mechanics. Specifically, the number of spelling errors was 984 more than the number of errors in punctuation mark.

Keywords: Mechanics of writing, Error analysis, Inter-lingual errors, Spelling

1. Background

Writing is a challenging task that requires both effort and skill. During the learning process, English as a foreign language and English as a second language (EFL/ESL) learners face many obstacles, such as learning how to do the mechanics of writing. The concept of writing mechanics aims at making “the writing systematic and is concerned about how to be correct in punctuation and spelling” (Cornell, 1980, p. 20). Fageeh (2003) states that errors in the mechanics of writing are the most frequent in Arab writing of English. Punctuation errors are more frequent than spelling (Almarwany, 2008). Many Arab students are not aware of the role of punctuation in writing as well as in reading (Fageeh 2003). Irmischer (as cited in Cornell, 1980) states that “even though many writers do not want to be concerned with punctuation, , , they have to be because the reader cannot easily do without them. Sending out the wrong signals is misdirecting the reader or often momentarily delaying the coding process.” (p. 120)

Sometimes, first language (L1) interference causes problems in choosing correct punctuation marks. According to Koch (1983), the Arabic punctuation system does not follow the same rules as its English counterpart. Students are sometimes confused between the Arabic and English systems of punctuation; when students fail to choose the right punctuation, they will struggle to convey their ideas.

Spelling, the second aspect investigated in this research, also has an impact on students’ writing. Even native speakers of the English language have problems with spelling (Bebout, 1985). Students sometimes avoid using certain words that they cannot spell, thereby limiting their vocabulary and failing to express themselves clearly. Moreover, some students may paraphrase what they want to write if they are unable to spell the words. For Arab learners, the English spelling system causes a great deal of uncertainty (Harmoush, 2000). As Atwneh noted, English is based on phonetic pronunciation, yet many English words are not spelled as they are pronounced (cited in Almarwany, 2008). Harmoush (2002) also confirms that the first problem confronting Arabs who are learning English are its unfamiliar sounds and symbols and its spelling. Teachers should address these problems before students start writing sentences. From this perspective, it has been demonstrated that some EFL/ESL Arab learners have problems in spelling that they do not know how to solve.

This study is significant in many ways. It begins by identifying problems in writing mechanics in punctuation and spelling faced by COLT students. The results of the study will help language instructors determine the needs of students in solving writing mechanics problems. This study, moreover, will help decision makers at COLT realize that their students have serious problems with the mechanics of writing. The study encourages decision makers at COLT to evaluate the content of writing textbook, and to determine if these books are solving the identified problems. Since COLT is developing computer software to independently teach all language skills, this study may help experts to design software that can improve students’ writing abilities. Finally, the study provides recommendations and suggestions on how language instructors can teach punctuation and spelling.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Language Transfer

Language transfer is seen by EFL/ESL instructors as a means to learn second language (Lekovo, 2010). Second language learners tend to transfer some of first language (L1) rules to express their needs in the second language (L2). Some of L1 rules may be similar to L2 rules and the student will not make a writing error, i.e., there will be a positive transfer. This occurs when the second language transfer uses his/her first language in second language context when the second language form is correct (Gass, 2006).

On the other hand, sometimes learners use rules assuming that they are correct, but it turns out that they are wrong. This is known as language interference. It can be defined as “errors in the learner’s use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue” (Lott, 1983). Of course at early stages, learners use such a method because they do not know the L2 rules. However, as the learners begin learning the language, the percentage or the level of language interference decreases (Elkilic, 2009).

The question arises whether language transfer is an inappropriate method of learning the language. At early stages and in non-native environments, using language transfer is expected, because the learners have already started their journey of learning the language. In grammar classes, for example, the learners try to see some common areas between L1 and L2. It will be an effective strategy for a teacher who is teaching the students grammatical rules. He can begin with rules similar to the students’ native language; otherwise, it will be a time consuming and demanding process to teach rules different from their native language.

2.2 Writing Mechanics

2.2.1 Punctuation

Punctuation is a problem for EFL/ESL learners (Fageeh, Elkılıç, 2009 and Cornell, B.,1980). The problems of punctuation are due to several factors. As stated above, one of these factors is L1 interference. Elkılıç (2009) insists on the importance of teaching punctuation and capitalization appropriately. He investigated the impact of L1 interference on the punctuation and capitalization shortcomings. He conducted a study on 32 Turkish intermediate language learning students. The students were asked to take an exam based on writing. Also, the researcher gave the students in-class and out-of-class assignments. Three hundred exam papers were analyzed. Elkılıç’s objective was to find out whether L1 — in this case Turkish — interfered with the L2 system of punctuation.

The researcher asserted that the number of errors that resulted from interference is fewer than general errors at higher level. Also, he pointed out that, as long as the level of the students increases, the percentage of interference errors decreases. Based on this finding, we can infer that, especially at early levels, EFL/ESL students acquire their knowledge of language by transferring L1 rules. As stated above, this kind of acquisition can be useful when L1 and L2 rules are almost the same. However, one must be careful regarding the level of the students. Such justification can be accurate only when the students are in advanced level.

In the case of Saudi male and female high school students, Almarwany (2008) confirms what Elkılıç states with regard to the punctuation problems. Almarwany (2008) states that students' first language causes many writing problems. Among these problems are capitalization and punctuation. Her research methodology was based on testing the students writing production. The subjects of her study were 173 male and female high school students. The test consisted of open-ended questions, which was, in this case, controlled writing and error identification. According to Almarwany (2008), the results of the test revealed that the students committed various mistakes in grammar, organization, and, most importantly, in capitalization and punctuation (p. 10). Like Elkılıç, she pointed out that errors in punctuation were the most frequent. The findings indicated that errors in punctuation resulted from inadequate mastery of L2 rules as well as Arabic interference. Due to inferior language proficiency, students apply L1 rules without realizing that L1 and L2 have different systems of punctuation. There are some punctuation marks commonly used in both Arabic and English, but such is not true all the time. Only if there is a similarity between L1 and L2 will this lead to a positive transfer.

2.2.2 Spelling

Spelling is addressed differently in several studies. Among these is Firth's study (1980). He investigated the unexpected spelling problems of secondary school students in South London. He begins his argument by asking two questions:

- 1) Do those poor spellers who are good readers make different kinds of errors from those poor spellers who are at the same time poor readers?
- 2) Do poor spellers who are good readers recognize words differently from other good readers?

Firth selected 29 students out of 120 students aged 19 and 20. He divided the students into three groups, A, B, and C. Group A included good readers and good spellers. Group B included good readers and poor spellers, whereas Group C had both poor spellers and poor readers. At first, the students were tested and classified according to the group criteria. He stated that "to test reading and spelling ability, I used Schonell graded word lists." (Firth, 1980 p.35) The students were asked to spell different words. Some of these words did not follow sound letter correspondence rules. So, students misspelled some of these words in all groups.

Firth (p. 500) suggested that: "What can we infer about the spelling strategy of unexpectedly poor spellers? It seems that they are concerned to retain correct sound of a word even if they do not retain the correct spelling. They can use sound-to-letter correspondence rules, but they do not seem to know the precise letter-by-letter structure of a word. Unfortunately, relying on sound-letter correspondence rules in English is not a very satisfactory strategy. Group C who had more nonphonetic miss-spelling, and hence must be worse at using sound-letter correspondence rules, managed nevertheless to do as well as Group B on the spelling test. One might deduce from this that in languages with strictly phonetic orthographies Group B would not exist. However such languages are rare." (Firth, p. 40) This paragraph should be

indented and single-spaced with no quotation marks.

Further, he pointed out the three stages of how students spell words:

“First, the students start by analyzing the phonemes of the speech words. So, they will first want to know phonemes (sounds). Secondly, they move on to the next step converting the word’s phonemes to graphemes (letters) according to the rules of the language.” (Firth, p.45) The last stage that Firth noted is the confirmation on whether the phonemes and the graphemes of the words are correct or not.

3. Methodology of the Study

3.1 Data Elicitation

The College of Languages and Translation at King Saud University (COLT) offers four writing courses in all language programs: Writing I, Writing II, Writing III, and Writing IV. Students must choose one writing course at each level. Although students take all these courses, their knowledge of the mechanics of writing remains weak. Language instructors insist that this is one reason that prevents students from expressing themselves well. Simpson (cited in Almarwany, 2008, p. 35) confirms that students worry about how to express their ideas, as they have not mastered punctuation and spelling. This aspect of writing therefore needs to be investigated. The topic of writing problems has been the subject of considerable research (Fageeh, 2003; Joe, 2000). Some of this research has suggested that problems with writing mechanics should be investigated at the school or college level. This study explores the causes of problems in writing mechanics with COLT students at King Saud University. It also proposes possible solutions.

The participants of the study were 100 male students from COLT, between the ages of 19 and 24. They were randomly selected from one level. Twenty language instructors teaching this level at COLT were also selected.

3.2 Research Instruments

The instrument of the study is English Writing Achievement Test (EWAT). The test identifies the kinds of spelling and punctuation errors students commit. It consists of three parts: In the first part, the students write an essay about the advantages and disadvantages of spending a great deal of time on sports. In the second part, the researcher examines punctuation problems. This punctuation section assesses the students’ ability in the accurate use of comma, period, apostrophe, and the contracted form of auxiliary. The third part of the test will evaluate spelling ability.

The content of the test items was based on the most frequent topics being taught in writing classes at COLT. According to the course portfolios for all writing classes, COLT students should have full mastery of punctuation and spelling rules starting from the *Writing I* class. Although some of these items may seem simple, they remain a problem for COLT students. The templates of Almarwany’s (2008) English Writing Achievement Test (EWAT) was very similar to the content analysis by the researcher. However, the researcher has modified some items of Almarwany’s study since her study was conducted on high school students who used

completely different textbooks.

3.3 Reliability and Validity of the Research Instruments

As far as the reliability of EWAT is concerned, the researcher used the inter-rater and internal consistency methods. The first method is based on scoring the EWAT by different raters and then comparing the results with other rater. It is essential to have similar results because our findings will be based on them. The second method of EWAT reliability is Cranach's alpha. Table 6 shows the values of each variable in addition to the total reliability which is 0.885.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Values of EWAT

N	Item	Value
1	Adding Comma	0.721
2	Adding Full Stops	.939
3	Inserting Possessive "s"	.732
4	Using Contracted Forms (short forms) of verb "to be"	.845
5	The Plural Form of Nouns	.784
6	The Correct Forms of the Verbs after Adding Suffixes	.794
Total Reliability Value		.885

The second most important element in any quantitative research is the validity of the research instruments. Validity is based on the extent to which the research instruments are measuring the research questions. Moreover, there are several ways to test the validity of the research instruments, depending on what those instruments are. The researcher used the approach of content validity to examine whether the research tool can explain the research topic. The researcher asked ten English professors to review the EWAT. All feedback was taken into consideration. Further, the researcher conducted a pilot study on 30 students to examine the face validity of the tools and to remove any difficulties or ambiguities from the instruments.

4. Discussion

4.1 English Language Achievement Test

The English language achievement test was the second research instrument along with the questionnaire and interview with the teachers. This test identified students' errors in spelling and punctuation. It also identified the percentages of these errors based on the benchmark for every error type. Therefore, this part examines the students' errors in those two skills.

4.2 The Results of the Spelling Error Test

The spelling test was measured by four standards:

1. Errors related to adding [s] to the verb;
2. Errors related to adding [ing] to the verb;
3. Errors related to adding [ed] to the verb;
4. Errors related to adding [s] to the noun to form the plural.

To measure these standards and students' errors, this test was designed to contain at least one example for every standard as well as to determine whether students made errors in this standard throughout the exam, even in guided composition. Therefore, this section will highlight spelling errors committed by students in those four standards. These standards are based on the content analysis of the current textbooks.

4.2.1 Adding "s" to the Verb

It was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that 100 students took this test. The errors pertained to adding "s" to the verb, which led to changes in the verb spelling. The study has classified four types of these errors:

- 1) Adding [s] to the verb ending with a consonant (e.g. talk);
- 2) Adding [s] to the verb ending with a consonant and preceded by a vowel (e.g. stay);
- 3) Adding [s] to the verb ending with a grapheme "s" (e.g. express);
- 4) Adding [s] to the verb ending with "y" and preceded by a consonant (e.g. cry)

It is significant to say that these standards were selected based on the fact that these additions lead to obvious changes in the verb spelling. The textbook of this course also discussed these standards.

The highest percentage of errors, 31, (38.75 percent) pertained to adding "s" to the verb ending with a consonant preceded by a vowel. This was followed by the errors involving the addition of "s" to the verb ending with "y" preceded by a consonant with 27 errors (33.75 percent) out of the total errors. The errors involving the addition of "s" to the verb ending with a consonant and adding "s" to the verb ending with "s" were equal with a frequency of 11 errors with 13.75 percent for each. In total, there were 80 errors with adding "s". Table 8 depicts the percentages of these errors.

Table 2. Errors Involving Adding "s" to the Verb

Items	Frequency	Percent
Adding S to the verb ending with consonant	11	13.75
Adding S to the verb ending with Y preceded by vowel	31	38.75
Adding S to the verb ending with S	11	13.75
Adding S to the verb ending with Y preceded by consonant	27	33.75
Total	80	100.0

4.2.2 Adding "ing" to the Verb

The "ing" suffix is the second standard used in this research. Students are often confused and do not know how to add suffixes to verbs. Some students add "ing", for example, without deleting "e" if it is at the end of the verb. Table 6 shows the errors participants made when

adding the “ing” suffix to verbs. The highest percentage of errors, 39 (47.5 percent), was related to the addition of “ing” to the verb ending with a consonant preceded by a vowel. That was followed by the errors related to adding “ing” to verbs ending with consonants with a frequency of 23 errors (28.05 percent) of the total errors. The errors that came last were ones related to adding “ing” to verbs ending with “e”.

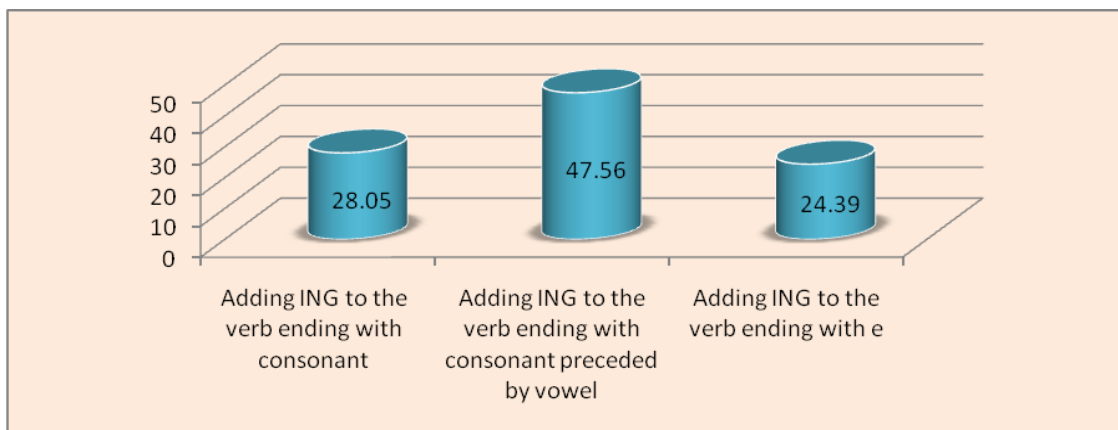


Figure 1. Errors Involving Adding “ing” Error

4.2.3 Adding “ed” to the Verb Stem

The previously mentioned rules of “s” and “ing” are similarly applicable when adding the “ed” suffix to the verb; yet the test has revealed more details in some irregular cases where the verb ending was changed. Since the rules of adding “ed” to verb are more complicated, there were 411 errors, accounting for the highest percentage of spelling errors. This enormous number of errors may have resulted from linguistic weakness. Table 13 shows the cases where student skills were measured.

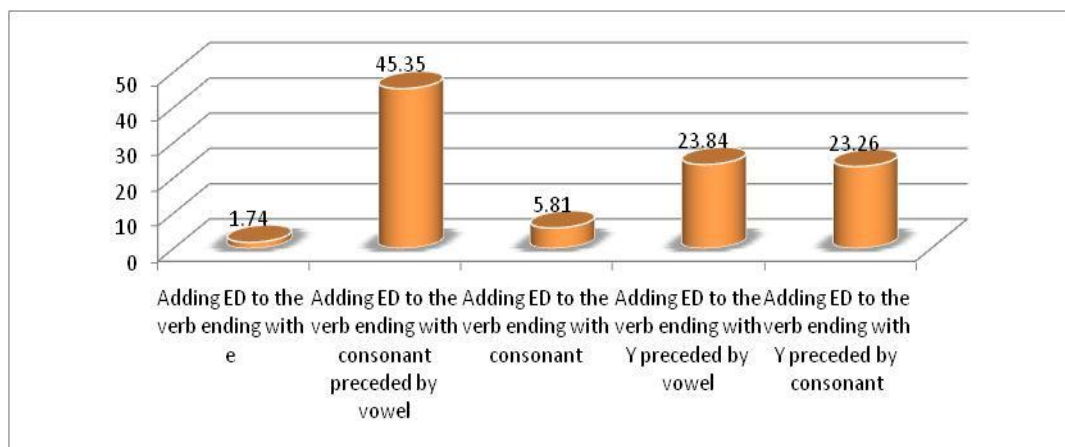


Figure 2. Errors Involving Adding the “ed” Suffix

Figure 2 shows errors related to the addition of “ed”. Seventy-eight errors (45.35 percent) were related to adding “ed” to verbs ending with a consonant preceded by a vowel. Errors related to adding “ed” to verbs ending with “y” preceded by a vowel were the second most common with a frequency of 41 errors (23.84 percent of all errors). The third type of error

pertained to the addition of “ed” to verbs ending with “y” preceded by a consonant. The fourth type of error related to adding “ed” to verbs ending with a consonant with a frequency of 10 errors accounting for 5.81 percent of all errors. Only three (one percent) errors related to adding “ed” to verbs ending with “e”.

4.2.4 Errors Involving Adding “s” to Nouns to Form the Plural

This section discusses the errors committed by the students related only to the addition of “s” to a noun. Some readers know that the plural form in English is completely different from Arabic. Some students may see it as only adding “s” to the end of a noun. This is incorrect, as English has specific rules indicating how to form the plural. It is also important to know that this test does not include all types of plurals, but only focuses on those in the writing book in *Writing I*. Therefore, the standards used to assess students’ knowledge of plural form are:

- 1) Adding “s” to the nouns ending with “F” (e.g. shelf);
- 2) Adding “s” to the nouns ending with “o”, “ch”, “x” (e.g. tomato, sandwich and box);
- 3) Irregular plural forms (e.g. fish and children);
- 4) Adding “s” to the nouns ending with “y” preceded by consonant (e.g. army);
- 5) Adding “s” to the nouns ending with “y” and preceded by a vowel (e.g. key);
- 6) Adding “s” to regular nouns(e.g. cat)

The results appear in Table 3.

Table 3.

Items	Frequency	Percent
Adding “s” to regular noun	3	0.73
Adding “s” to noun ending with x, ch, O	117	28.47
Adding “s” to the noun ending with f	137	33.33
Adding “s” to the noun ending with y	35	8.52
Adding “s” to irregular plural noun	94	22.87
Adding “s” to noun ending with y preceded by vowel	25	6.08
Total	411	100.0

Table 3 shows errors related to making plural forms. Errors related to adding “s” to the nouns ending with “F” came in the first with a frequency of 137 errors (33.33 percent), while the errors related to adding “s” to the nouns ending with “o”, “ch” and “x” ranked second, with a frequency of 117 errors (28.47 percent). The errors related to adding “s” to the irregular plurals came in third, with a frequency of 94 errors (22.87 percent) of all errors related to making the plural forms.

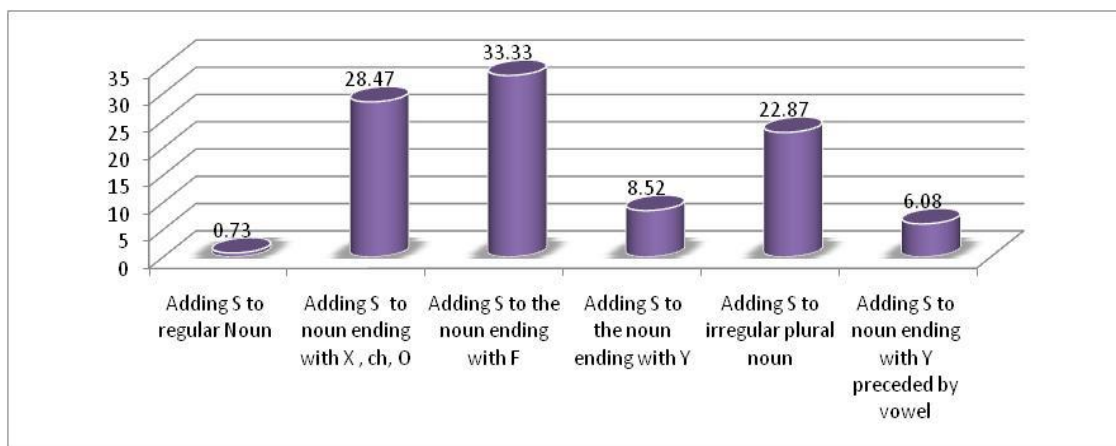


Figure 3. Errors Involving Adding (the Plural Form)

4.3 The Results of the Punctuation Test

Punctuation is one of the most important writing skills students must master. Therefore, the test was designed to assess the students' abilities to use specified punctuation marks. In this section, we will discuss the percentage of students' errors in the use of the apostrophe, the comma, and the full stop. In each of these standards, the study will show some specific cases where the students have to use these punctuation marks. If a student makes errors in the use of those marks, they will be counted as only one error.

4.3.1 Apostrophe-Related Errors

Errors in possessive nouns and contracted verb forms are very common and accounted for 285 errors. Compared to spelling errors, these kinds of errors were relatively greater. They were categorized into two types:

4.3.1.1 Possessive errors;

4.3.1.2 Errors in verb contracted "to be" forms.

The total number of errors in apostrophes was 285. Errors involving the possessive forms were first at 143 or 50.2 percent, while errors involving contracted forms were second at 142 errors. Table 8 shows the results of comparing those two sections. The two percentages are very high even though if we compare the plural forms, there are only two kinds of such errors.

Table 4. Errors Involving "Apostrophes"

Items	Frequency	Percent
Contracted form	142	49.82
Possessive	143	50.18
Total	285	100.0

4.3.2 Errors Involving Comma Use

Prior knowledge of the use of some Arabic punctuation marks is useful for the student if the

same punctuation mark is used in a similar manner in English. The comma is a good example. Some students used Arabic punctuation marks in their answers. Therefore, the high percentage of students' errors with commas may be attributed to their reliance on prior linguistic knowledge of Arabic and the transferring of that knowledge to English. Moreover, the students showed a lack familiarity with the English punctuation system. This ignorance on the part of the students posed a major obstacle.

Table 4 ranks the errors with commas and arranges them according to the order. The time order and sentence modifiers came first, with 139 (47.4 percent) of all errors. Comma errors involving dependent and independent clauses ranked second at 56 or 19.11 percent of all errors. Comma errors came in the third relating to "separating items" at 45 (15.36 percent). Next, the comma errors "separating day, month and year" were fourth, accounting for 39 (13.31 percent) of all errors. Finally, the comma errors involving tag questions had a frequency of 14 (4.78 percent) of the total number (Figure 3 and Table 4).

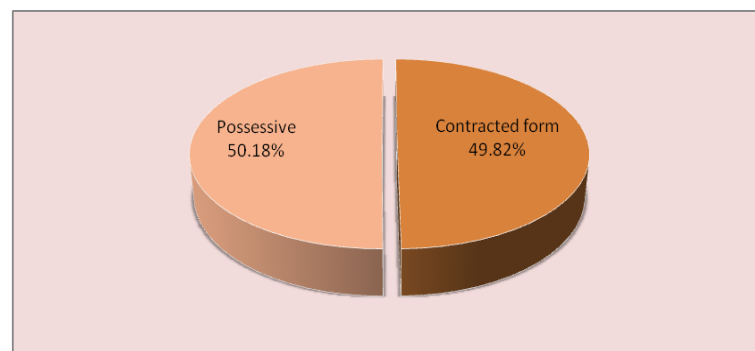


Figure 4. Errors Involving "Apostrophes"

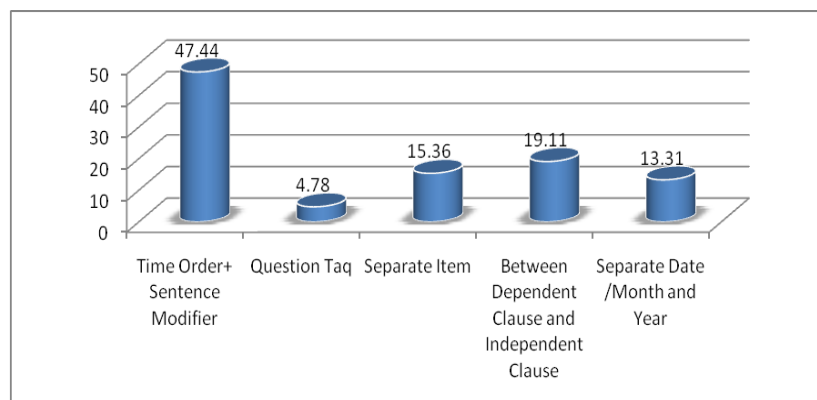


Figure 5. Errors Involving "Commas"

4.3.3 The "Full Stop"

Although the difference in error percentage between the full stop and comma was not significant, the percentage of the errors committed by the students in the use of the full stop was the lowest of all punctuation errors, with 271. These errors were divided into two categories: 1. Putting a full stop at the end of the sentence; 2. Using the full stop with

abbreviations.

The study showed that the errors related to adding the full stop at the end of the sentences had the highest error rate with a frequency of 174 (64.21 percent) of the total. Errors with abbreviations ranked second at 97 errors (35.79 percent). These errors could be a result of a lack of knowledge regarding when they use the full stop at the end of a sentence. Strangely enough, this rule is not limited to the English language, but is also found in Arabic. However, the rule of using the full stop in abbreviations is unique to English. The percentage of these errors could have resulted from students' lack of awareness of using the full stop in short forms.

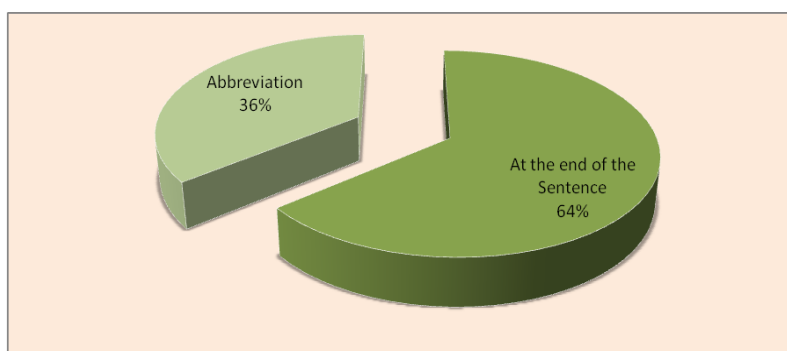


Figure 6. Errors Involving the “Full Stop”

5. Conclusion

5.1 Results of the Research

This section discusses the most important results found in terms of the largest quantity of errors recorded in the student achievement tests. The concentration of the research has been on spelling and selected punctuation errors. For each type of error, there was a focus on the following aspects:

1. Spelling errors: we have focused on students' errors adding "s" to a verb, adding "ing" to the verb, adding "ed" to the verb stem, and adding "s" to the nouns.
2. Punctuations mark errors: we have focused on students' errors in possession, commas, and full stops.

Table 5. The Total Errors in Spelling and Punctuation Marks Committed by Students in the Achievement Test

No.	Type of Error	Frequency
1	Errors when adding "s" to the verb	80
2	Adding "ing" to the verb	82
3	Adding "ed" to the verb stem	411
4	Adding "s" to the nouns	411
	Total of spelling errors	984
5	Students' errors in possession	285
6	Students' errors in the apostrophe	293
7	Student errors in the full stop	271
	Total of errors in punctuation marks	849

Table 5 shows the number of errors committed by students in every measured variable. It is known that English Department students at the first level at COLT commit many errors in writing mechanics. Specifically, the percentage of spelling errors (984) was greater than the punctuation mark errors. This suggests to the decision-makers at the College that the substantial number of errors must be taken seriously. This finding differs from that of Almarwany's research. Although the two fields of this research focus on the percentage of errors in two variables, namely punctuation and spelling, the amount of errors in these two fields are high absolutely. As for the causes of these errors, this study confirms what has been stated in earlier studies (Fageeh, 2003; Chen and Almarwany, 2008) on the causes of these writing weaknesses as well as other related causes. Language interference has a particularly negative impact on students' writing mechanics. So, we can conclude that that is one reason why COLT students make errors in punctuations. Among the causes are:

- a) L1 interference;
- b) Incomplete mastery of L2 rules;
- c) Overgeneralization of L2 rules.
- d) Lack of awareness of punctuation role in text writing

Spelling errors, on the other hand, are caused by different reasons, including:

- a) Lack of familiarity with L2 rules;
- b) Sound-letter correspondence differences;
- c) The difficulty of English phonological system.
- d) Lack of writing practice.

This study is unique because it has presented the percentage of errors committed by students along with the teachers' perspective, so readers may objectively compare the causes of

students' errors in writing mechanics.

By comparing error rates in students' writings, readers can also understand that the students at the COLT have a clear problem in writing mechanics. High percentages of errors in writing mechanics reflect the different linguistic levels of students. Among these indicators are:

- 1) The college students do not practice writing continuously, a factor that lowered their level in writing in general, and resulted in a lack of awareness of basic writing rules.
- 2) Homework and exercises assigned to students do not focus on some aspects of writing mechanics. Some teachers may not even discuss writing mechanics in the classroom, but only focus on other issues.
- 3) In the college's study plan, four hours are allocated to writing. The researcher thinks this is insufficient for first level students. Hours should be increased so that teachers can cover the entire school curriculum, especially the writing mechanics.
- 4) Committees in charge of preparing the study curriculum in the college should include writing mechanics in every writing subject. A lecture every week to discuss difficulties with spelling and punctuation marks should be specified.
- 5) Before allowing them to join the English Language Department, students should complete an intensive course in all the English language skills, especially writing.
- 6) Using modern technology to master writing mechanics is very important. There are some commercial software programs and English language teaching centers focusing on the difficulties of writing mechanics such as spelling and punctuation marks.

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