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## **Examining writing errors among Saudi EFL learners: Practices and perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Mastering error-free writing is challenging, especially for Arab EFL learners who often manifest these errors in areas such as grammar and mechanics. A step toward addressing these challenges is to explore the typical errors they encounter in writing. This study aims to examine Saudi EFL undergraduates' writing difficulties using a sequential explanatory research design (a mixed-methods approach). In the quantitative phase, paragraphs written by 41 students were analyzed, and errors were identified and categorized. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 23 participants to gain further insights into the types and causes of their writing errors and suggestions for improvement. The qualitative data were analyzed using *ATLAS.ti 9*. The results revealed that the most common errors identified were punctuation, capitalization, and grammar. However, participants' views on spelling errors differed from their actual writing practices. They cited teaching methods, textbooks, and a lack of interest as reasons for their poor writing proficiency. Additionally, they believed that increased writing practice and the development of reading habits could improve their writing skills. These findings offer valuable insights for English language educators and learners, with implications for contextualized instruction, teaching practices, learning strategies, material development, and curriculum design.

**Keywords:** EFL learners, undergraduates, errors, challenges, writing skill

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Trial and error help students enhance the process of learning a new language (Kidd & Garcia, 2022; Leacock et al., 2022). We cannot expect learners to master a language without making errors, just as toddlers acquire the ability to walk by falling and rebounding. Without a doubt, errors are an integral component of language learning and development (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Little, 2022; Zhang, 2020). Nevertheless, many teachers and theorists in error analysis have emphasized the significance of errors made by EFL students (Amara, 2015; Richards, 2015). Corder (1975) and James (2013) argue that studying language learners' errors is valuable since it reveals the learners' current levels of understanding.

Writing is a complex process. Writers go through three stages of writing: pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing. Even when writing a simple paragraph, they need to pay attention to organization, punctuation, capitalization, coherence, cohesion, and spelling. Writing becomes even more complex for Arab students, as Arabic and English are two completely different languages. As Ankawi (2015) asserts, Saudi students are not only required to learn a set of

grammatical rules in English such as nouns, verbs, and prepositions, but they are also required to learn to write from left to right, whereas Arabic is written from right to left.

In Saudi universities, EFL students are taught writing skills, especially in the first three to four semesters, but writing is considered the weakest skill among Saudi students. Alshammari (2016) argues that Saudi students studying in English departments in Saudi Arabia are weak in academic writing. One reason might be the way this skill is taught in many EFL classrooms. Alkubaidi (2014) contends that Saudi students use rote memorization to learn composition questions without understanding the meaning or structure of the sentences. As a result, many students aim only to pass the examination in order to continue their studies or get a good job, while having limited writing skills.

Extensive research has been carried out on error analysis (Ababneh, 2017; Alfaki, 2015; Alsher, 2021; AlTameemy & Daradkeh, 2019; Barzanji, 2016). However, no study has investigated the issue in greater depth. The majority of the previous studies mentioned have conducted quantitative studies to analyze the learners' errors. Although some studies such as Ahmed (2019) and Ahmed and Elnour (2018) used writing activities and interviews, the authors did not give learners the opportunity to share their views on the issue. Instead, the faculty members were interviewed.

The current study makes a major contribution to research on error analysis by employing an extensive design. The study analyzes Saudi undergraduates' errors in paragraph writing and explores the challenges they face in writing. A sequential explanatory design was used. Learners' errors were analyzed in the first phase and their interviews were analyzed in the second phase.

Making errors is not something that should be avoided or punished. According to Corder (1975), errors are more than just a problem to be eliminated as they may have value in themselves. Researchers believe that most of the errors made by students are common. For example, AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019) found that most errors made by Saudi learners involve grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Tananart (2000) found that grammatical errors were the most frequent. Similarly, Dweikat and Aqel (2017) discovered that spelling is the most frequent error. However, the majority of the previous studies have failed to consider learners' voices on this issue. The current study investigates the most common errors made by Saudi students and provides the participating students with a chance to express their own views on their writing errors.

Previous studies have enumerated various errors in EFL learners' writing. However, grammar, spelling, and lexis appear to be the dominant errors in the error analysis literature. Barzanji (2016) and (Ababneh, 2017) focused their studies on female students. Barzanji (2016) studied common writing errors of 58 female Saudi university students. The study investigated whether the nature of the prompt influences the occurrence of errors. In a similar vein, Ababneh (2017) investigated EFL writing challenges encountered by 50 female Saudi students at the University of Tabuk. Interestingly, both studies found that the most common errors were in grammar, spelling, and lexis.

Similar results were reported by Nuruzzaman et al., (2018) and Man (2023). Both studies used large sample sizes, 90 non-English major Saudi students and 74 non-English major Vietnamese students, respectively. Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) found that the most common errors made by Saudi learners were grammar, lexis, and word choice. In a more recent study, Man (2023) analyzed writing inconsistencies across various academic majors. The findings revealed that the most common errors were grammar, spelling, verb forms, word order, and sentence fragments.

Much of the current literature on error analysis also pays particular attention to the mechanics of writing. One such study is Alfaki (2015), who aimed to identify the English language writing difficulties faced by university students in Sudan. Twenty English language learners were selected through a random sampling process. The findings revealed that the learners made a variety of writing errors, including morphological and syntactic issues, inappropriate word choices, and mechanical errors such as incorrect spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

A broadly similar point has also recently been made by Alsher (2021) and AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019). Alsher (2021) investigated writing errors made by Palestinian EFL students, examining essays written by 54 undergraduate students. Likewise, AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019) compared male and female students' errors in paragraph writing at a university in Saudi

Arabia. The study recruited 40 male and 40 female students from a preparatory year program. The findings of both studies revealed that the most frequent errors were in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Cohesion and coherence errors are also common among EFL learners. Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) as well as Alqasham et al., (2021) argue that cohesion and coherence present significant challenges for EFL learners. Masadeh (2019) examined cohesion and consistency in the writing of 16 Saudi English majors. The analysis demonstrated that the learners' essays were inadequately developed and lacked cohesion and coherence. Wahid and Wahid (2020) also noted that learners often struggle with cohesion and coherence, frequently overuse or misusing cohesive devices.

There is a relatively small body of literature (Ahmed, 2019; Faradhibah & Nur, 2017) that has focused on cohesion and coherence errors. Ahmed (2019) evaluated Saudi EFL students' inconsistencies in unity and coherence when writing paragraphs. The study concluded that the students' limited knowledge of cohesion and paragraph unity contributed to their difficulties in writing. Similar problems were investigated by Faradhibah and Nur (2017), who investigated the difficulties faced by 36 English learners in maintaining cohesion and coherence. The results indicated that the students struggled to maintain cohesion and coherence throughout the writing process.

Inspiration and motivation are among the important factors in language learning. According to Ahmed (2019) and Ahmed and Elnour (2018), a lack of inspiration and lack of motivation are some serious challenges that hinder EFL learners' performance in academic writing. Alzubi and Nazim (2024) suggest that when learners write about topics of personal interest, they invest more time and effort, therefore becoming more intrinsically motivated and as a result, their writing improves.

The existing literature on error analysis is extensive and focuses primarily on a single aspect of paragraph or essay writing. Ababneh (2017), Alfaki (2015), Barzanji (2016), Masadeh (2019), and Masagus and Syahri (2022) analyzed writing samples from students majoring in English, whereas Alsher (2021), AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019), Man (2023), and Nuruzzaman et al., (2018) analyzed non-English majors' writings. Interestingly, however, all these studies used quantitative approaches and produced broadly similar results. Most of these studies found that the most frequent errors learners made in paragraph writing were in grammar, lexis, word choice, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

There is a scarcity of literature on error analysis using mixed-methods designs. Ahmed (2019), Ahmed and Elnour (2018), and Faradhibah and Nur (2017) are among the few examples that incorporated writing activities and interviews. However, these studies were not without limitations. Ahmed (2019) and Ahmed and Elnour (2018) interviewed faculty members instead of the students who participated in the writing activities. Moreover, both Ahmed (2019) and Faradhibah and Nur (2017) limited the scope of their research by focusing only on cohesion and coherence errors.

The current study provides a more comprehensive investigation by employing sequential explanatory design. Unlike previous research, it examined a wider variety of errors in paragraph writing and utilized a larger sample size. Additionally, the study conducted interviews with the same students who participated in the writing tasks, allowing for more in-depth insights. The interview data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti 9, enhancing the findings' reliability and inclusiveness. The study specifically addresses two key questions: 1) What are the most common errors made by Saudi EFL undergraduates in paragraph writing? 2) What are Saudi undergraduates' views on their writing problems?

## **METHOD**

The study adopted a sequential explanatory design. In the first phase, students were asked to write a ten-sentence paragraph about their college or university. Forty-one undergraduate students participated in this phase. The writing task was conducted in a classroom and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The paragraphs were analyzed by the principal

investigator and rechecked by two co-researchers. In the second phase, the students were contacted for semi-structured interviews. Twenty-three students volunteered to participate. The interviews were analyzed using *ATLAS.ti* 9.

Two research tools were used: a descriptive paragraph and a semi-structured interview. The paragraph prompt was adapted from previous research and reviewed by three experts to assess its validity. Their comments were taken into consideration and necessary revisions were made. Similarly, the semi-structured interview was developed by researchers and sent to three experts for validation. Most feedback concerned the wording of the questions. However, some experts also suggested adding more questions to the interview. Their comments were incorporated into the final version of the interview protocol, which consisted of nine main questions and several supplementary questions.

All the participants were male due to the gender-segregation policy at all levels of the education system in Saudi Arabia. The students were enrolled in the first level of the bachelor's degree program, also referred to as an intensive course, at a university in Saudi Arabia. Of the 45 students in this level, 41 students were present during the writing task. These classes are typically heterogeneous, consisting of students with high, average, and low levels of English proficiency. Before entering the intensive course, students had studied English for eight years, beginning in primary school (grade five) and continuing through secondary school (grade twelve). They were admitted to colleges and universities after passing the secondary school examination.

Participants were informed before the study began that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. A consent form was signed by all participants. To ensure anonymity, students were coded as S1 to S23 (Student 1 to Student 23).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

Data were analyzed in two phases. In the first phase, quantitative data were analyzed through error analysis of paragraphs written by Saudi undergraduates. In the second phase, qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using *ATLAS.ti* 9.

#### Quantitative Findings

The study adopted Chanquoy's sentence-level error classification, which includes grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors. According to Chanquoy's (2001) framework, as cited in AlTameemy & Daradkeh, 2019, errors are categorized into three types. Grammatical errors involve issues such as subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, gender and number agreement, as well as agreement among nouns, verbs, adjectives, and articles. Punctuation errors refer to mistakes in the use of punctuation marks and capitalization. Spelling errors concern incorrect spelling in writing.

In addition to the above categories, this study also analyzed errors related to prepositions. Table 1 presents the error analysis of Saudi undergraduate students' writing.

**Table 1. Analysis of errors**

No.	Types of Errors	Frequency	Percentage
1	Grammar	92	30
	Subject-verb agreement	23	7
	Verb tense	16	5
	Articles	15	4.9
	Sentence structure	15	4.9
	Word choice	11	3.6
	Number	10	3
	Adjectives	1	0.3
	Preposition	1	0.3
2	Punctuation	99 (80 periods, 15 commas, 4 apostrophes)	32 (26, 4.9, 1.3)
	Capitalization	80	26
3	Spellings	37	12
Total		308	100

Table 1 shows that most of the errors made by Saudi undergraduates were related to punctuation and capitalization (58%) and grammar (30%). The analysis also identified 37 spelling errors (12%), reflecting participants' orthographic errors or deviations from standard English spelling norms.

Punctuation errors involved incorrect use or omission of punctuation marks, such as commas, apostrophes, and periods, which affected sentence structure and clarity, potentially leading to misunderstandings. A total of 99 punctuation errors were found with 80 involving periods, 15 commas, and 4 apostrophes. These errors accounted for 32% of the total errors.

The analysis also revealed 80 capitalization errors, representing 26% of the total. These included incorrect or inconsistent use of capital letters. For example, failing to capitalize proper nouns, beginning a sentence with a lowercase letter, or using unnecessary capital letters within a sentence.

In addition to punctuation and spelling issues, grammar emerged as another major area of difficulty in student writing. There were 23 errors (7%) related to subject-verb agreement, which resulted in grammatical inconsistencies. Verb tense errors accounted for 5% and involved incorrect use of past, present, or future verb forms, affecting the accuracy and clarity of the writing. Article-related errors (misuse or omission of 'a', 'an', and 'the') made up 4.9% of the total. Faulty sentence structure also accounted for 4.9%, including fragmented sentences, run-on sentences, and improper constructions that obscured the intended meaning.

Grammatical errors also included the use of unsuitable or imprecise words, creating semantic confusion or ambiguity. These word choice errors accounted for 3.6% of the total. Another category involved mismatched plural and singular noun forms, representing 3% of the total errors. Preposition errors such as incorrect usage or omission affecting sentence accuracy and coherence constituted 0.3% of the total errors. Finally, there was a single error involving adjective-noun word form errors, also comprising 0.3% of the total.

### ***Qualitative Findings***

Qualitative data were analyzed using *ATLAS.ti 9*. Two types of code were employed, i.e. open codes and in vivo codes. In total, 62 codes and five themes were generated. Two of the themes were pre-determined: 'the most common errors' and 'the biggest challenge in writing', while two additional themes emerged from the data: 'reasons behind poor writing proficiency' and 'suggestions for improvement.' The following section presents the themes and sub-themes in detail.

#### ***Theme 1: The most common errors***

##### ***Grammar and spelling errors***

Participants reported that the most common errors made by Saudi undergraduates in writing a paragraph involve grammar and spelling. Although some students mentioned only spelling, and others referred exclusively to grammatical errors, most considered both spelling and grammatical errors as the most frequent issues. Table 2 presents the codes and representative quotations related to sub-theme 'Grammar and spelling errors'.

**Table 2. Grammar and spelling errors**

Codes	Quotations
Grammar and spelling	S10: spelling errors and tenses and singular plural errors.
	S12: most common errors made by Saudi undergraduates are 'misspelling, verb conjugation mistakes, and prefix and suffix confusion'
	S13 explains, 'they lose the correct spelling of words, and they do not use the rules of writing correctly'
	S19: 'spelling, grammar and wrong punctuation'

##### ***Capitalization and vocabulary errors***

Some participants identified capitalization and vocabulary, rather than grammar and spelling, as the most common errors made by Saudi undergraduates. S2 and S6 mentioned both capitalization and vocabulary as the most common errors, while S8, S10, S14, and S21 referred

to either capitalization or vocabulary as the most frequent errors. Table 3 presents the codes and quotations related to sub-theme ‘Capitalization and vocabulary errors’.

**Table 3. Capitalization and vocabulary errors**

Codes	Quotations
Capitalization and Vocabulary	S2: ‘Vocabulary and capitalization for names and famous places so many students they forgot it.’ S6: ‘They don’t write capital letter and they don’t have much vocabulary.’ S8: ‘I think capitalization....’ S10: ‘Maybe there is a lot of challenges but for me is vocabulary problem’ S14: I think it is the lack of vocabulary S21: ‘Capitalization because in Arabia we don’t have this thing so it’s now for us.’

### ***Theme 2: The biggest challenge in writing***

When asked about is the biggest challenge that Saudi undergraduates face in writing, most participants identified spelling as their primary difficulty. However, some of them considered grammar, while others pointed to punctuation. For example, S6 and S8 viewed grammar as the main challenge, whereas S11 and S19 identified punctuation. Table 4 presents codes and quotations related to Theme 2, ‘The biggest challenge in writing’.

**Table 4. The biggest challenge in writing**

Codes	Quotations
Grammar and spelling errors	S2: ‘I will mention just a single one, about getting spelling mistakes of the words’ S5: ‘Spelling was a problem for me’ S13 ‘the correct spelling of the long words’ S18: ‘Spelling is the biggest challenge they face’ S22: ‘The biggest challenge in writing for Saudi students is the spelling’. S 6 ‘Having issues dealing with irregular verbs.’ S8: ‘In my opinion it is grammar’.
Punctuation errors	S11: ‘They can’t write it perfectly punctuation marks.’ S19: ‘I think punctuation is a bit hard.’

### ***Theme 3: Reasons behind poor writing proficiency***

#### ***Students’ lack of interest***

The participants frequently attributed their poor writing performance to a lack of practice. For example, S2, S3, S7, S9, and S22 stated that that Saudi undergraduates rarely engage in or practice writing. Others cited a lack of seriousness such as S2, S10, and S12 who identified this as a key reason for their poor writing, while S15 noted that students often do not recognize the importance of developing writing skills. Table 5 presents codes and quotations of sub-theme ‘Students’ lack of interest’.

**Table 5. Students’ lack of interest**

Codes	Quotations
Lack of Practice	S2: ‘They do not practice a lot.... they are careless about their writing skills.’ S3: ‘The students don’t have the chance to practice English outside’ S7: ‘The lack of reading and writing.’ S9: ‘student don’t practice writing in their home or while studying.’ S22: ‘I think they don’t write more or they don’t practice.’
Lack of interest	S10: ‘Some of the students are not interesting [interested] in writing.’ S12: ‘Not taking writing seriously.’ S15: ‘Not taking the subject seriously...and not realizing the importance of this.’ S16: ‘Lack of practice, and .... not work on their own.’

#### ***Poor teaching methods***

Poor teaching methods were also identified as a major factor contributing to weak writing proficiency. S8 and S12 pointed specifically to ineffective instruction, while S2, S13, and S21

emphasized that inadequate writing instruction in secondary school affected their writing performance. Table 6 presents the codes and quotations for sub-theme 'Poor teaching methods'.

**Table 6. Poor teaching methods**

Codes	Quotations
Teaching methods	S2: 'Let us say when they are in high school they do not practice a lot.' S8: 'Ineffective teaching methods...' S12: 'Poor Teaching methods Neglecting its importance from both sides.' S13: 'The weakness of teaching writing skills at the secondary stage.' S21: 'When we were in high school they did not teach us very well.'

#### *The role of curriculum*

Some participants attributed their poor writing performance to the curriculum used in their English courses. This view was expressed by S12, S18 and S22. Additionally, S8 and S18 suggested that teachers are also responsible for their poor writing proficiency. Table 7 presents the codes and quotations for sub-theme 'The role of curriculum'.

**Table 7. The role of curriculum**

Codes	Quotations
The curriculum	S8: 'I think curriculum, textbooks, and teachers...' S12: 'The curriculum is not updated... The textbooks are dull and boring' S15: 'All of them are responsible, curriculum, teachers....' S18: 'The educational system in the early stages....' S22: 'In my opinion, 30% depends on the curriculum.'

#### **Theme 4: Suggestions for improvement**

##### *Practice makes perfect*

Participants suggested that Saudi undergraduates could improve their writing skills through regular practice. Table 8 presents the codes and quotations related to the sub-theme 'Practice makes perfect'.

**Table 8. Practice makes perfect**

Codes	Quotations
Practice	S7 'there is nothing like practice.' S11 '...make them write more' S14 'I think anything with practice will be improved'....' S18: 'You should practice a lot because without practice you would not improve.' S19 'Practice, it worked with me.' S22: 'Practice really does make perfect! If you compare writing to a skill like cooking or even playing a sport, you cannot expect to improve if you don't practice.'

##### *The importance of daily assignments*

Some students believed that assigning daily writing tasks would help the Saudi undergraduates to develop their writing skills. Table 9 presents the codes and quotations of the sub-theme 'The importance of daily assignments.'

**Table 9. The importance of daily assignments**

Codes	Quotations
Daily assignments	S2 'Maybe giving the students a daily assignment to write an essay or a paragraph' S3 '... everyday write 2-3 paragraph[s].' S8 'Making Writing a Daily Exercise' S9 'I suggest daily writing of short paragraphs.' S10 'Make writing a daily exercise' S17 'practice writing every day.' S23 'Because Some teachers do not give students many assignments, especially in writing.'

*Reading can improve writing*

Some participants noted that their writing skills are weak because they are not good readers. They believed that improving their reading habits could positively influence their writing performance. Table 10 reveals codes and quotations of the sub-theme 'Reading can improve writing'.

**Table 10. Reading can improve writing**

Codes	Quotations
Reading	S8 'Reading a lot in English'
	S10 'read a lot as a habit'
	S13 'the best strategy is writing and reading a lot of essays because reading improve your writing skill.'
	S16 'read from other writers to get and gain ideas.'
	S20 'reading a lot of essays because reading improve your writing skill.'
	S22 'When we read, we learn how other people write to convey their messages in the best way possible, and we start to adapt our writing styles to those that we resonate most with.'

**Discussion**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the common difficulties Arab EFL learners face while writing a paragraph in English. The quantitative findings showed that Saudi undergraduates made a substantial number of grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors. Punctuation and capitalization together accounted for more than half of the total errors, whereas nearly one-third of the errors were grammatical. In contrast, spelling errors were comparatively less frequent. On the other hand, the qualitative data revealed that participants perceived themselves as weakest in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Although various types of grammar errors were present in the students' writing, they were not viewed as problematic as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

The interview results revealed that grammar, spelling, capitalization, and vocabulary were perceived by Saudi undergraduates as the most common errors in EFL writing. The data also pointed to several perceived causes of poor writing proficiency, including a lack of interest, poor teaching methods, and an outdated curriculum. Notably, the participants suggested that writing proficiency could be improved through regular writing exercises, daily assignments, and improving their reading habit.

These findings align with the previous works in error analysis. Almukhaizeem's (2013) study identified spelling as the most common type of error among Saudi EFL learners, consistent with the results of the present study. Although participants in this study attributed frequent spelling errors to the use of long words, previous studies by Alenazi et al., (2021) and Al-Sobhi et al., (2017) identified the irregular nature of English spelling, first-language (L1) interference, and a lack of awareness of English spelling rules as key contributing factors. Altamimi and Rashid (2019) further argued that flaws in the education system and syllabus, specifically the lack of emphasis on teaching spelling rules and techniques, contribute to spelling difficulties. Participants in this study echoed these concerns, also noting interference between Arabic and English. As Arabic is a pronunciation-based language (Altheneyan & Boayrid, 2019), negative transfer may be a significant factor in spelling errors among Arab learners.

Sandrawati and Jurianto (2021) and Yuliawati (2021) also reported a high frequency of punctuation errors among EFL learners, particularly related to the use of commas and the absence of periods in their writing, patterns that closely align with the findings of this study. These issues may be partly explained by negative transfer from Arabic, where sentences tend to be longer and less punctuated. In Arabic writing, commas are commonly used to separate sentences, and an entire paragraph may contain only one or two periods (Khan & Khan, 2016). Similarly, Arabic does not have a capitalization system which may lead to confusion among learners of English. The absence of distinctions between uppercase and lowercase letters in Arabic writing could contribute to frequent capitalization errors among Arab EFL learners.



Ankawi (2015) identified the change in script direction, i.e., from right to left in Arabic and left to right in English, as a significant challenge in EFL writing, particularly in organizing sentences according to English grammatical conventions. Ababneh (2017) and Barzanji (2016) also emphasized grammar as a major area of difficulty, reporting that Arab EFL learners frequently produced writing marked by consistent grammatical errors. Similarly, studies by AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019) and Hussain and Abdullah (2019) reported that most errors were grammatical, including issues with verb tenses, sentence structure, word choice, prepositions, and articles. Another study by Younes and Albalawi (2015) also revealed that their participants faced challenges mainly in areas such as grammar (tenses, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and article usage), punctuation, and spelling. These difficulties may stem from structural differences between Arabic and English, which participants often find challenging to navigate. A consistent finding across studies conducted in Arabic-speaking countries is that EFL learners frequently struggle with spelling, punctuation, and grammar, an observation supported by the present study. Studies such as Alfaki (2015), Alsher (2021), AlTameemy & Daradkeh, (2019), discovered that spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were major contributors of errors for Arabic EFL learners. Similarly, Ababneh (2017) and Barzanji (2016) found that grammar and spelling were among the most common errors.

Regarding learners' views on what makes writing challenging, the present findings support earlier studies such as those of Ahmed (2019), Ahmed and Elnour (2018), and Masagus and Syahri (2022), who found a lack of interest as one of the main factors that contribute to the students' writing difficulty. Specifically, Ahmed and Elnour (2018) concluded that poor writing proficiency can be largely attributed to two main reasons, a lack of interest and limited vocabulary. Learners in the current study expressed similar views, citing disinterest as a contributing factor and identifying their poor vocabulary as a common area of weaknesses.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the most common errors made by Saudi undergraduate students in paragraph writing and explored their perceptions of challenges encountered in developing writing proficiency. Findings indicate that the most frequent errors involve punctuation, grammar, capitalization, and spelling. This study not only extends the limited literature on paragraph-level writing issues in Saudi EFL contexts but also incorporates learner perspectives—an aspect often underrepresented in prior research. Notably, students demonstrated awareness of their difficulties and proposed constructive suggestions for improvement, underscoring the importance of learner involvement in shaping instructional practices. As Harmer (2008) suggests, learner agency can enhance motivation and promote deeper engagement with the writing process.

In many EFL settings, writing is traditionally taught as a product rather than a process, with instruction emphasizing replication of model texts or responses to set prompts (Alshammari, 2016). This product-oriented approach overlooks the cognitive and strategic components of writing development. Motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, plays a crucial role in overcoming this challenge. Alzubi and Nazim (2024) argue that intrinsically motivated learners write more frequently and with greater quality. Despite the study's contributions, limitations include its all-male sample—due to gender segregation in Saudi education—and a narrow research scope. Future research should adopt more inclusive and longitudinal approaches to better understand writing development trajectories.

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