

# INVESTIGATING COLLEGE STUDENTS' PROBLEMS IN WRITING ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper investigates Iraqi college students' writing performance at Imam al-Kadhum College to identify the problems students encounter with the hope of putting forward suggestions to overcome them. Twenty-five undergraduate students' essays have been chosen as the data of the study. The essays have been examined at different levels starting with the word and ending with the discourse. Case study methodology is adopted in this research and this method is composed of four consecutive steps: the selection of sample, preparation of the students, and analysis of the collected data. The results of the analysis reveal that the students under investigation have problems at every level examined and such problems may be attributed to a number of factors such as low language proficiency, little reading and weak writing practice, overgeneralization and mother tongue interference. A number of suggestions and recommendations are given to improve the students' writing skill. The study is divided into five sections: introduction, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion.*

**Keywords:** Applied linguistics, writing skill, undergraduate student, composition, mistake/error.

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Preliminaries

Writing is the one of the oldest skills that Sumerians invented in Mesopotamia to document all their daily events, religious rituals, financial transactions, experiences, needs, feelings, ideas, etc. It was also used to pass down family information, fairy-tales and legends from one generation to another. That type of writing was practiced on baked-clay tables and was known as cuneiform and since then it has greatly been adopted and developed by different nations in many different ways.

Widdowson (1978) defines writing as “an act of producing correct sentences and transmitting them into words on paper.” According to this definition, the skill of writing is seen as a way of recording one’s ideas and feelings, using a correct grammar in a concrete manner. Troyka and Nudelman (1994, as cited in Abderraouf, 2016:1) hint at the difficulty of the process of writing by asserting that “writing is more than just taking a pen in hand and expecting words to flow perfectly on paper”. Ransdell and Levy (1996: 93) define writing as “a process that requires extensive self-regulation and attentional control...writers must change ideas into text, repair organization and mechanics, and monitor their success - all while trying to formulate a coherent message”. For Byrne (1996: 190), writing “involves encoding of a message written through a sequence of

sentences ordered together in certain ways, and it requires some conscious mental effort including making notes, drafting, and revising.” Bell and Burnaby (1984, as cited in Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017: 81) view writing as a cognitive skill whose mastery necessitates an appropriate selection of vocabulary items, a careful attention to spelling and punctuation as well as sentence structure.

## 1.2 Literature Review

In foreign or second language context, the focus is always on the development of the four major skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. In each of these skills, the learner faces some problems which may be ascribed to various sources. The present paper is concerned with investigating the problems EFL learners have in the writing skill.

### 1.3 The Importance of Writing

As for the importance of writing for EFL learners, Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008: 19) mention three ways in which writing helps students learn the target language. First, writing reinforces grammar, idioms and vocabulary they students have already acquired. Second, writing gives the students the chance to be creative with the language, to try structures and words they have not learned before. Third, as students think of what to write next or how to write it, “they often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their ideas” (Ibid.). In this regard, Raimes (1983: 6) points out that writing is an important part of any language course because of the close relationship between writing and thinking.

### 1.4 Writing Challenges

According to Grami (2010: 9), writing is a complex mental production which requires “careful thought, discipline and concentration.” Previous studies have identified some challenges that students face when writing in English. To begin with, Al-Fadda (2012) found out that the main challenges ESL students encounter are differentiating between written and spoken forms, choosing the right tense and joining sentences together to make a coherent paragraph. The major problems for the students in Al-Khairy’s study comprise eight items: grammatical errors, misspellings, weakness

or lack of punctuation, inappropriate choice of vocabulary, incorrect use of irregular verbs, articles, prepositions, and question words, (2013: 5). Other causes that could lead to the problems and difficulty in writing are the “ambiguity of writing instructions from professors, influence from their first language, inaccuracy of grammar usage, and deficiency of content”, (Chou, 2011: 53).

At a higher level, challenges - students face - include cohesion and coherence. For Halliday and Hasan (1976:4) cohesion is a semantic concept that subsumes meaning relations within the text and define it as such. Bailey (2003) stresses that text cohesion is aimed at clarity and readability in terms of the writer establishing a connection through the use of such cohesive devices as reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunctions and lexis. As far as coherence is concerned, Kouch (2004) notes that coherence relates the ability of the writer to construct the text in such a way that it is easily decoded and understood by the reader. This requires from the writer a careful selection of the vocabulary and the proper arrangement of sentences to form unity which enables the reader to appreciate the piece of writing (Favero, 2010; Lee, 2002). Thus, learners need to have the linguistic knowledge which should be complemented by the ability to integrate information cohesively and coherently in a written discourse (Bell and Burnaby, 1997 cited in Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017: 81).

In this section, a key distinction is to be conducted between error and mistake, for which the phrase ‘inaccurate component’ is employed to refer to all deviant forms that occur in the writing of students’ compositions. For Davies, errors are incorrect forms or uses that occur because the user simply does not know what the appropriate form or use is, (2000: 112). Error is also defined as incorrect form or use of language that a student cannot correct because he/she does not know what the correct form or use is. (ibid: 206).

Mistakes, on the other hand, are incorrect forms that occur in spite of the user knowing the appropriate form or use. Brown (2007: 257) opines that “it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly”. This distinction is important because students, while writing their compositions, commit both errors and mistakes. Falk (1978: 360) defines mistakes as “random deviations,

unrelated to any system, and instead representing the same types of performance mistakes that occur in the speech or writing of a native speaker (e.g., slips of the tongue or failure to produce correct subject-verb agreement in a long, complicated sentence”.

### 1.5 The Aim of the Study

The study is aimed at finding and identifying all mistakes and errors committed by the undergraduate students along with their percentages, pointing out the reasons behind the occurrence of such ICs, and presenting effective - yet possible - solutions that may help the English language instructors to concentrate on these problems and devote more time and effort to adjust the current teaching techniques.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Due to the variety of difficulties that occur in the learning and use of the foreign language, there have been different types of contrastive analysis studies, such as contrastive phonological analysis, contrastive morphemic analysis, error analysis, etc. In this study, a type of an error analysis is conducted on a number of actual essays written by collegestudents. Richards and Schmidt (2002: 258) states that ‘error analysis’ is locating, counting, and categorizing errors to discern patterns of error in written texts.

The current study is conducted using case study methodology to achieve the main objective of the research. It is divided into a number of consecutive steps: selection of sample, preparation of the students, and analysis of the collected data.

### 2.1 Sample and Population

The population of the study are undergraduate (third year) students in the English Department/Imam al-Kadhum College in the academic year of 2017-2018. They have studied writing for three years at college and have received a lot of instruction on sentence building, paragraph compositing and essay writing along with related technicalities and writing aspects such as punctuation, choice of words, cohesion and coherence. Moreover, the sample students previously started the process of learning English when they were in the primary and secondary school. Supposedly they have

developed their writing skill very well. However, an observation of their writing has pointed out to some problems they commit at the different levels of writing, i.e. word, sentence and discourse.

### 2.2 Preparation of the Sampled Students

To measure the skill of writing in an objective manner, adequate and clear instructions were given to the students on writing essays. Thus, a number of various topics - as the major part of the preparation procedure - were offered to the sample students and asked to write essays of approximately 100 words about them.

### 2.3 Collection of Data

The data of this study is collected from twenty five randomly-selected compositions written by the aforementioned students at the end of the academic year 2017-2018.

### 2.4 Model of Analysis

The selected twenty-five essays are analyzed with regard to the following language aspects:

1. Words: words are considered for their spelling, capitalization and choice.
2. Sentences: sentences are examined for punctuation, grammaticality and variety such as simple, compound and complex.
3. Discourse: here matters of cohesion and coherence are investigated in the students’ essays.

## 3. RESULTS

In this section, the analysis of the essays is conducted on three levels through statistical tables that present the details of frequency and percentage of the inaccurate components (ICs) from all selected essays along with the correct forms. Throughout the whole study, the symbol of asterisk (\*) is used to mark that the utterance is ungrammatical or unacceptable by the native English-speaking people. In the tables, the parentheses brackets (...) are specifically used to appropriately reconstruct the utterance. The square brackets [...] are used to make only a critical comment about the utterance. Though utilized in a few situations, the

underlined utterance indicates that it does not exist in the original composition and it was added by the researchers to give a better understanding of the utterance. The three dots (...) are used in the study to mark the ellipsis and to avoid redundancy. The representative examples used in

all tables are exclusively selected for giving a better clarification and understanding of the cases. In many cases, understanding utterances, reconstructing their correct forms and/or giving comments are mostly based on the researchers' interpretations.

### 3.1 The Word Level

Problems at this level fall into two groups; those related to spelling and capitalization and those related to word choice. The analysis of (25) students' essays at this level shows a number of problems in the spelling of the words, capitalization and choice. The tables below illustrate the frequency and percentage of such problems with regard to the total number of words used in every essay.

**Table (1): Problems at the Word Level (Spelling and Capitalization)**

Essay No.	Total No.	Freq.	%	Examples
1	209	6	2.87%	expeted; spirtual; dye ( <i>die</i> )
2	123	8	6.50%	proffesor;baghdaduniversity; low ( <i>law</i> );perposity
3	341	-	0%	NULL
4	115	6	5.21%	...City;socity;...Hospital
5	86	7	8.13%	academic;...Eninngner; will ( <i>well</i> )
6	202	37	18.31%	...City;bulding;wehen;famuse;finelly
7	157	4	2.54%	proplem;accedents
8	137	13	9.48%	...Theirself; its ( <i>it's</i> );mercefullness;
9	98	13	13.26%	...Essay ( <i>easy</i> );deffict;delicouse;because;delicouse ( <i>delicious</i> )
10	131	9	6.87%	pleace ( <i>place</i> );dengours;efect;envorment;inalation ( <i>inhalation</i> );
11	191	-	0%	NULL
12	131	8	6.10%	neibuorhood; sometime; wish
13	85	1	1.17%	...Anether
14	199	12	6.03%	proplem;croded;wather;nois
15	94	9	9.57%	Befor the Last Year;beatiful;...War.
16	156	2	1.28%	helpe;helpfull
17	100	4	4%	citys;earias ( <i>areas</i> );acheaved
18	174	5	2.87%	bridiges;propebly;...Since;unnicessury.
19	242	5	2.06%	pumped ( <i>bombed</i> );famus;... That
20	208	20	9.61%	every think ( <i>everything</i> );pleac ( <i>place</i> );feuture;always
21	176	2	1.13%	Nowdays;healty
22	156	9	5.76%	sicen ( <i>since</i> ); lock ( <i>look</i> ); tow ( <i>two</i> );couse ( <i>cause</i> )
23	107	7	6.54%	becaus;...Main;contint ( <i>contain</i> )
24	134	0	0%	NULL
25	120	10	8.33%	...The;...Month; ... Met
	3872	197	5.08%	

Seemingly, the frequency (197) and percentage (5.08%) of the students' ICs in word capitalization and spelling, as shown by Table (1), are very low.

The problems of word choice, as Table (2) suggests, are somewhat few in number and result mostly from translation from the mother tongue or confusion between English words that are somehow related with one another in spelling, sound or meaning. Moreover, some words and phrases which they students use in their writing are ambiguous.

**Table (2): Problems at the Word Level (Word Choice)**

Essay No.	Total No.	Freq.	%	Examples with Corrections& Comments
1	209	2	0.95%	1. *rescue yourself to risk him [other way round]; 2. get him to the *safety ( <i>take him to a safe place</i> )
2	123	5	4.06%	3. The college has many *Acadime( <i>departments</i> ); 4. There are many buildings in Iraq such as *Altarmy[ambiguous]; 5. The first *located ( <i>location</i> ) is near ...
3	341	1	0.29%	6. The city has an excellent *position ( <i>location</i> )
4	115	3	2.60%	7. In my *position ( <i>area</i> ), there are a lot ...
5	86	3	3.48%	8. How society live at *fraid ( <i>fear</i> ); 9. ... people were *nutral ( <i>normal</i> ); 10. the best student is awarded with *predicate ( <i>present</i> )
6	202	0	0%	11. NULL
7	157	5	3.18%	12. The traffic jam *raised ( <i>increases</i> ) in the morning; 13. the time of *the went( <i>going</i> ) to school; 14. it causes *the later ( <i>delay</i> ); 15. the traffic problem is *wide ( <i>big</i> )
8	137	3	2.18%	16. this month has its own *weather ( <i>atmosphere</i> ); 17. it is the time to *delete all senses and *hateness ( <i>forgive all sinsandhatred</i> )
9	98	1	1.02%	18. Ramadhan is a *comparison ( <i>contrast</i> ) between us and the poor
10	131	2	1.52%	19. These chemicals *effect on people ( <i>affect people</i> ); 20. he cannot *leaving the cigarette ( <i>give up smoking</i> )
11	191	1	0.52%	21. to buy *a bignumber ( <i>a large number</i> ) of cars
12	131	4	3.05%	22. Its *position ( <i>location</i> ) is near ...; 23. In Ur Neighborhood, there are many *gardens ( <i>parks</i> ); 24. Its weather is always filled with *buse [ambiguous]; 25. It is difficult to deal with the society from one *side ( <i>perspective</i> ).
13	85	1	1.17%	26. We hope this society will change to *well ( <i>a better condition</i> ).
14	199	1	0.50%	27. After 2003, people became *expensive ( <i>rich</i> ).
15	94	0	0%	28. Iraq was *save ( <i>safe</i> ).
16	156	1	0.64%	29. I will not leave my lovely town *whatever( <i>whenever</i> ) I get the chance.
17	100	0	0%	30. NULL
18	174	2	1.14%	31. There are many *solves( <i>solutions</i> ) to this problem; 32. there must be much care about this problem from the *heads ( <i>officials</i> ).
19	242	2	0.82%	33. The cooperation of many *beside and far away ( <i>neighbouring and remote</i> ) countries is to weaken this country; 34. Military personnel *died ( <i>were killed</i> )

20	208	0	0%	35. NULL
21	176	3	1.70%	36. *to apply the right ( <i>follow the formal</i> ) rules of the driving; 37. *to build ( <i>construct</i> ) new streets; 38. *to open ( <i>build</i> ) new bridges.
22	156	1	0.64%	39. The *cuts ( <i>blocks</i> ) at the street of Baghdad.
23	107	2	1.86%	40. The best *thing ( <i>way</i> ) to avoid traffic jam...; 41. ... use cars that make our country more *publishing [ambiguous]
24	134	1	0.74%	42. It is Ramadhan*what ( <i>that</i> ) made her behavior ...
25	120	1	0.83%	43. ... helped the poor people without any *opposite ( <i>anything in return</i> )
	3872	45	1.16%	

### 3.2 The Sentence Level

Problems at this level have been found to be in grammar and punctuation on the one hand and in sentence variety on the other hand.

#### 3.2.1 Grammar and Punctuation Problems

The exclusively selected examples in the statistical Table (3) below illustrate that problems at the sentence level are of high frequency; about (75.88%) of the sentences are erroneous. For the most part, the problems identified are considered to fall within the grammatical field as they are connected with matters such as tenses, concord, lack of subject, double subject, etc. Other sentence problems are punctuation problems.

**Table (3): Problems at the Sentence Level (Grammar & Punctuation)**

Essay No.	Total No.	Freq.	%	Examples with Corrections
1	13	13	100%	1. *In 2013, the war against ISIS had begun, ( <i>In 2013, the war against ISIS began.</i> ) 2. *I expeted it will be blow up, ( <i>I expected it will blow up.</i> ) 3. *He reached the baby and get him to safety, ( <i>He ... and took him to a safe place.</i> ) 4. *The army and the national police has ... ( <i>The army . . . have. . .</i> ) 5. *but when I focus I saw an old man ... ( <i>but when I focused I saw ...</i> ) 6. *"Why did you rescue yourself to risk him." ( <i>"Why did you risk yourself to rescue him?"</i> )
2	12	11	91.66%	7. *It is foundtion in 1989. ( <i>It was founded in 1989.</i> ) 8. *The building have many.... ( <i>The building has many ...</i> ) 9. *there are many building ... ( <i>there are many buildings ...</i> ) 10. *My college is the best and my proffesor special.



				<p><i>(My college is the best and my professors are special)</i></p> <p>11. *You have many departments. <i>(It has many departments)</i></p> <p>12. *You have garden, library, café ... <i>(It has a garden, library, café ...)</i></p>
3	22	6	27.27%	<p>13. *this of course is applied on that place also. <i>(this of course is applied to that place too)</i></p> <p>14. *children are prevented from education and deprived from going to schools. <i>(children are prevented from education and deprived of going ...)</i></p> <p>15. *They are still those who are kind and has a great deal of morals. <i>(They are still those who are kind and have ...)</i></p>
4	10	10	100%	<p>16. *this class consist of ... <i>(this class consists of ...)</i></p> <p>17. *the houses in my City very beautiful and clean. <i>(the houses in my city are very beautiful ...)</i></p> <p>18. *they spent most of the time play football. <i>(they spent most of the time playing football.)</i></p> <p>19. *but we skip this by help them and made them feel in love. <i>(but we skip this by helping them and making them feel in love.)</i></p>
5	5	5	100%	<p>20. *There are many ... such as: <i>(There are many departments, such as).</i></p> <p>21. *I think at the future is doing will. <i>(I think the future will be good)</i></p> <p>22. *but this to need hard working in the present <i>(but this needs hard work in ...)</i></p>
6	16	16	100%	<p>23. *it contain a lot of from shops ... <i>(it has a lot of shops).</i></p> <p>24. *one day I am going with my friend gone famuserestaurant. <i>(One day, I went with my friend to a famous restaurant).</i></p> <p>25. *finelly the Pay Money and go to My home. <i>(finally, we paid money and went home.)</i></p>
7	11	11	100%	<p>26. *The traffic jam is common proplem. <i>(the traffic jam is a common problem.)</i></p> <p>27. *because that the time of the went to school. <i>(because it is the time of going to schools.)</i></p> <p>28. *the every bodyhave a car. You are see in one house many cars. <i>(everybody has a car and you can see many cars in one house.)</i></p>
8	16	8	50%	<p>29. *Ramadhan the month of forgiveness. It's a beautiful times. <i>(Ramadhan is the mouth of forgiveness and it has beautiful times.)</i></p> <p>30. *Ramadhan and Eid is the time of happiness. <i>(Ramadhan and Eid are the times of happiness.)</i></p>
9	13	11	84%	<p>31. *Ramadhan become have exams. <i>(Ramadhan coincides with the exams.)</i></p> <p>32. *I am reading in Ramadhanbecause exams.</p>

				<i>(I am studying in Ramadhan for exams.)</i> 33. *Ramadhan is given food or mony to the poor. <i>(In Ramadhan, food and money are given...)</i>
10	16	14	87.5%	34. *Why does is smoking and still know the smoking dengours on health? <i>(Why does someone smoke when he knows it is dangerous to health?)</i> 35. *Many of people smoking in public place. <i>(Many people smoke in public places.)</i> 36. *I would in the future will left the cigarette. <i>(I would like to give up smoking in the future).</i>
11	10	5	60%	37. *having a fun. <i>(having fun)</i> 38. *It will be disappeared in the future. <i>(It will disappear in ... )</i> 39. *there are many traffic jam in their country. <i>(there are many traffic jams in their country)</i> 40. *they must prove enough alternative ... <i>(they must provide enough alternatives ...)</i>
12	12	7	58%	41. *I am student. <i>(I am a student)</i> 42. *Ur neibuorhood is a quite busy and dirty. <i>(Ur neibuorhood is quite busy and dirty.)</i> 43. *Its weather always pollution ... <i>(Its weather is always polluted...)</i>
13	6	5	83.33%	44. *The society that we live in it. <i>(The society that we live in)</i> 45. *either it learn or it is not learn. <i>(either they are learnt or not.)</i> 46. *and there in roads much hole and dirty. <i>(and in the roads there are many potholes and dirtiness)</i> 47. *we hope that this society change to well. <i>(we hope that this society will change to a better <u>condition</u>)</i>
14	19	15	78.49%	48. *Baghdad it is a first one citys in the world have a big of traffic jam. <i>(Baghdad is the first city in the world with traffic jams.)</i> 49. *the Drivers feel angry and tiered, Because they are go to your work or school late. <i>(the drivers feel angry and tired because they reach work and schools late).</i> 50. *these thing began a proplem Because the street can't cear the many cars. <i>(these things cause problems because the road capacity is not sufficient for the large number of cars.)</i>
15	9	8	88.88%	51. *Befor the Last Year was Iraq it beautiful And was save without war.



				<p><i>(Two years ago, Iraq was beautiful, safe and not involved in war.)</i></p> <p>52. *them people was simple and simplicity beauty nature and love people with other. <i>(people were simple and loved one another.)</i></p> <p>53. *But now this time Iraq accident it fought. <i>(But nowadays many accidents and fights are taking place.)</i></p>
16	9	9	100%	<p>54. *I live in a small town knowns by the name "Hay Ur". <i>(I live in a small neighborhood known by the name "Hay Ur".)</i></p> <p>55. *They offer the helpe to everyone needs. <i>(They offer their help to everyone.)</i></p> <p>56. *I am not shy to ask help from them because I already know they are will be greatfull to offer their servise. <i>(I am not shy to ask them for help because I have already known that they will be grateful to offer their service.)</i></p>
17	4	2	50%	<p>57. *The last Iraqi war started after the invasion of "Daash" on three quarter of Iraqi land... <i>(The last war in Iraq started after the Daesh's invasion to three quarters of Iraq.)</i></p> <p>58. *It easrealy hard time and bad situation, but in the same time... <i>(It is really a hard time and a bad situation, but at the same time ...)</i></p>
18	9	6	66.66%	<p>59. *It is a problem for everyone has a job or study or anything. <i>(It is a problem for everyone who has a job, school, etc.)</i></p> <p>60. *there are not any new road built or new bridiges to solve this problem. <i>(there are no new roads or bridges to ...)</i></p> <p>61. *In the last, my opinion is that must there much care about this problem from the heads. <i>(At last, my opinion is that there must be much care about this ... the officials.)</i></p>
19	15	13	86.66%	<p>62. *My friend in jured in Anbar's desert. <i>(My friend is injured in the desert of al-Anbar.)</i></p> <p>63. *The co-operation of many countries beside or far away from us wanted to weak this country. <i>(The cooperation of many neighboring and remote countries is to weaken this country.)</i></p> <p>64. *In the middle of 2014 mosal city has attacked. <i>(In the middle of 2014, Mosel City was ...)</i></p>
20	10	7	70%	<p>65. *The society in which my live is very terable and not comfortabl. <i>(My life is very terrible and uncomfortable in this society.)</i></p> <p>66. *In feature I need to be a good master and help anyone is help me in society live. <i>(In the future, I need to be a good person to help everyone in my society.)</i></p> <p>67. *my society it's meedle and I exceptet it and injouy in my society but I hop to improve to be better than in a feactuer.</p>

				<i>(My society is a middle size and I accept and enjoy it, but I hope it improves in the future.)</i>
21	12	8	66.66%	68. *The traffic jam had effected on the activity of the people. <i>(The traffic jam affected the people's activities.)</i> 69. *In fact, there are so many people who don't apply the right rules of the driving. <i>(In fact, there are so many people who don't follow the formal rules of the driving.)</i> 70. *All of them we must help to make our city beautiful... <i>(We must help each other to make our city...)</i> 71. *In my opinion, to avoid this problem. We should have strict laws in my town. <i>(In my opinion, to avoid this problem we should have strict laws in my town.)</i>
22	11	9	81%	72. *The traffic jam it was found sicen years old ago. <i>(The traffic jam problem started many years ago.)</i> 73. *this thing make me sed. <i>(this thing makes me sad.)</i> 74. *The people became having many of cars. <i>(People have more cars than before.)</i> 75. *The new buildings taking place large because more this buildings the location our insystem. <i>(The new buildings occupy large spacesbecause they are increasing in our area.)</i>
23	4	3	75%	76. *the roads are old can't contint that much of cars. <i>(the roads are old and their flow capacity of cars is low.)</i> 77. *I think the best thing to be away from traffic jam is to every family have only one car. <i>(I think the best thing to avoid traffic jam is that every family should have only one car.)</i>
24	8	3	37.5%	78. *No one likes him due to his bad behaviours. <i>(No one likes him because of his bad behavior.)</i> 79. *She insisted that it is Ramadhan what made her behavior in such a way. <i>(She insisted that it is Ramadhan that has made her behavior in such a <u>good</u>way.)</i>
25	10	9	90%	80. *It is God of month that make for muslim in all world. <i>(It is God who made this month for all Muslims in the world.)</i> 81. *It is made all the people collect with the person did not speak with him. <i>(It makes all people gather around to talk to a person who is <u>resentful</u>.)</i> 82. *In Ramadhan did not feel by tired because we waited in all year. <i>(In Ramadhan, we do not feel tired because it is once a year.)</i> 83. *It is peaceful month and love. <i>(It is the month of peace and love.)</i>
	<b>282</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>75.88%</b>	

### 3.2.2 Sentence Variety Problems

Table (4) shows the sentence variety in the students' essays in terms of simple, compound, complex and compound-complex structures.

**Table (4): Problems at the Sentence Level (Sentence Variety)**

Essay No.	Total No.	Simple		Compound		Complex		Compound-complex	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	F	%
1	13	4	30.76%	4	30.76%	2	15.38%	3	23.07%
2	12	8	66.66%	4	33.33%	0	0%	0	0%
3	22	8	36.36%	4	18.18%	7	31.81%	3	13.63%
4	10	7	70%	0	0%	2	20%	1	10%
5	5	3	60%	1	20%	0	0%	1	20%
6	16	8	50%	2	12.5%	4	25%	2	12.5%
7	11	5	45.45%	2	18.18%	4	36.36%	0	0%
8	16	12	75%	1	6.25%	2	12.5%	1	6.25%
9	13	7	53.84%	1	7.69%	5	38.46%	0	0%
10	16	13	86.66%	3	20%	0	0%	0	0%
11	10	3	30%	0	0%	5	50%	2	20%
12	12	8	66.66%	3	25%	0	0%	1	8.33%
13	6	2	33.33%	2	33.33%	2	33.33%	0	0%
14	19	11	57.89%	3	15.78%	5	26.31%	0	0%
15	9	5	55.55%	4	44.44%	0	0%	0	0%
16	9	2	22.22%	3	33.33%	4	44.44%	0	0%
17	4	1	25%	2	50%	0	0%	1	25%
18	9	3	33.33%	1	11.11%	4	44.44%	1	11.11%
19	15	9	60%	4	26.66%	2	13.33%	0	0%
20	10	2	20%	5	50%	1	10%	2	20%
21	12	5	41.66%	4	33.33%	3	25%	0	0%
22	11	9	81.81%	0	0%	1	9.09%	1	9.09%
23	4	0	0%	2	50%	0	0%	2	50%
24	8	1	12.5%	2	25%	3	37.5%	2	25%
25	10	5	50%	1	10%	4	40%	3	30%
	282	141	50%	58	20.56%	60	21.27%	26	9.21%

As seen in the table, the students tend to use simple sentences more than any other sentence types. Simple sentences have the frequency of 141 times out of 282 total sentences used in the 25 compositions (50%). This preference is justified by students' avoidance of trying more complex structures where more than one idea is expressed.

### 3.3 Problems at the Discourse Level

#### 3.3.1 Cohesion

According to Table (5) below, about one third of the students' essays have cohesion problems. Most problems result from incorrect use of pronouns and the absence of cohesive devices across sentences.

**Table (5): Problems at the Discourse Level (Cohesion Problems)**

Total Essays	No. of Essays	with Cohesion Problems	Percentage	Essays without Cohesion Problems	Percentage
25	9		36%	16	64%

### 3.3.2 Coherence

As stated in Table (6) below, coherence problems are found in (7) essays which constitute (28%) of the total number of essays being analyzed. Incoherence identified in the students' writing is the result of using vague or misspelled words and sometimes by jumping from one topic or idea to another, a way that flouts Grice's maxim of relation and can be called 'drifting'. Author (2015: 93) indicates that "The speaker has to be relevant to the context in which the message has taken place since it will be hard for the listener to understand the message."

**Table (6): Problems at the Discourse Level (Coherence Problems)**

Total Essays	No. of Essays	with Coherence Problems	Percentage	Essays without Coherence Problems	Percentage
25	7		28%	18	72%

## 4. DISCUSSION

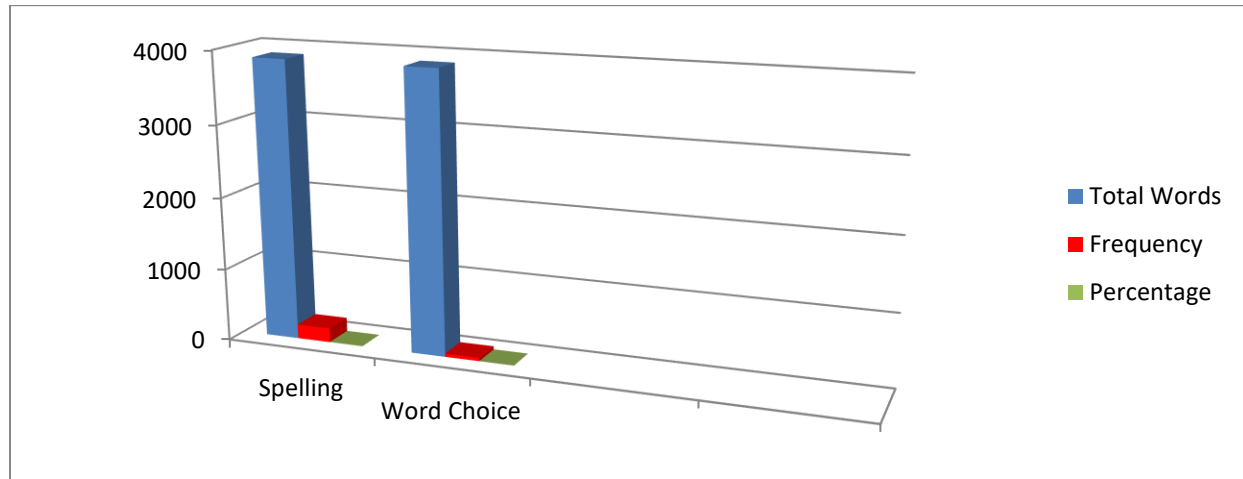
Error analysis helps to reveal the pedagogical difficulties that the IKC undergraduate students usually face during their course of studying English, and to point out what errors they usually make in the natural use of the language. There are explicitly three interrelated reasons for the ICs made by the students. But, it is still believed by many scientists that the major source of difficulty and error in learning the foreign language is the interference from the native language of the learner. The notion of interference is one of the basic notions in language learning and teaching nowadays. It is essentially about the negative influence of one language on another language, especially in a bilingual situation. Interference from the native language structure is believed to form a major source of learning problems of a given foreign language. The concept was stressed by many researchers like Lado (1957) and Wilkins (1972).

The other existent reason for the occurrence of the ICs in writing can be ascribed to the students' lethargy and indolence and it is very evident in the teachers' on-going adequate instructions on the materials. In the meanwhile, some teachers should be blamed for their dereliction partially for not devoting a great deal of time and effort to demonstrate and correct the students' ICs whether individually or in group. Overgeneralization can also be seen as a central reason for many students who do not consider the rules for the irregular forms. Discussion, however, is divided into three major parts: word level, sentence level and discourse level.

### 4.1 The Word Level

Topics likespelling andcapitalization and word choicere discussed under this heading. The word choice includes a number of areas such as possession, pluralization and parts of speech. Table (1) lists all the possible facts and statistical numbers of ICs - made by the students - which can be visualized in the following chart:

**Chart (1): Comparison between Word Spelling and Choice**



The total number of words used in all 25 compositions is 3872. Thus, in the above 3-D clustered column chart, word spelling and word choice are compared together in terms of the number of ICs pointed out. The chart illustrates that the frequency of spelling is higher than the word choice. Spelling problems indicate some sort of clumsiness on the most part of the students, which might be attributed to confusion which results from homophony, analogous spelling, mispronunciation, or even carelessness, as seen in the statistical Table (1) that presents - as the results of the analysis - a high percentage ICs, especially words with silent letters, for example, the word 'schedule' was misspelt as \*scdule. Similarly, \*'parlament', \*'eleicism', \*Iraqians and \*democray are misspellings for *parliament*, *election*, *Iraqis* and *democracy*, respectively. Davies (2000: 112) states:

In remedial work you need to distinguish between general problems and those of individual learners. General problems require attention in class, but individual problems are often best handled after class and through individual homework. .... Learners must notice mistakes or errors, and discover for themselves what is wrong and right if they are really going to overcome their problems.

As illustrated in Chart (1) above, the percentage of capitalization problems is lesser than that of spelling. The chart clearly illustrates that students failed to utilize the rules of capitalizing words to produce precise compositions. This is due to the absence in Arabic of the typological pattern of spelling initial letters in caps to express names of person, cities, states, continents, words at the beginning of any sentence or paragraph, etc. that eventually confuses students, and accordingly it becomes a learning problem, as in:

- *\*the suitable and honest characters of iraqiparlament*
- *...\*modern step adopted in our country iraq especially in baghdad university*

According to the English punctuation rules, the first letter of: *iraqiparlament*, *iraq*, and *baghdad university* must be spelt with capital letters. At the same time, the study also found many words that must NOT be capitalized as in (*\*the Election was agood experience*). In many essays, capitalization was accompanied with the total or partial lack of punctuation.

One of the most notable ICs frequently made by students is the case of the English irregular rules, like the plural form of the word 'ox' is oxen. Such rule causes a kind of difficulty for many college students who may

overgeneralize the regular basic English rule by adding the inflectional suffix -s or -es to the morpheme and produce forms such as \*oxes. A notable number of is *foots*. It can be described as an internal learning problem as irregular forms exist in English. It is “An error made by the learners that shows that they are beginning to make generalisations about the target language”, (Nunan and Bailey, 2008: 306).

Moreover, the absence of some formal features and functions in Arabic, which are formally used in English, causes some sort of difficulty for the students, for instance, the English ‘possessive -s’, connected to the noun to mark possession, often causes an imperfect sentence, such as (*\*it is people desire and concern*). The above sentence does not contain any morpheme or suffix that stands for the possession, though it can be understood. Arabic has different typological system of genitive features and this accordingly causes a sort of complicatedness to students. As long as they have been provided with the adequate information about possession in English and its various forms, the incorrect form of the above example is considered a mistake, like when they fail to form a correct sentence like (*it is people’s desire and concerns*). In some cases, mistakes on the phrasal level also occurred in the form of missing information, as in (*\*Ramadhan is the month forgiveness*) where the *of-construction* denoting possession is missing in the phrase (*Ramadhan is the month of forgiveness*).

From the researchers’ point of view, the choice of the incorrect word is an error that many students do due to their ignorance of the concept of collocation and the proper use of words, for example, the word ‘in’ was used instead of the preposition ‘on’ as in (*\*he is in the bus*). The word ‘answered’ substituted ‘replied’ in (*\*She answered the email*). Another observation is the

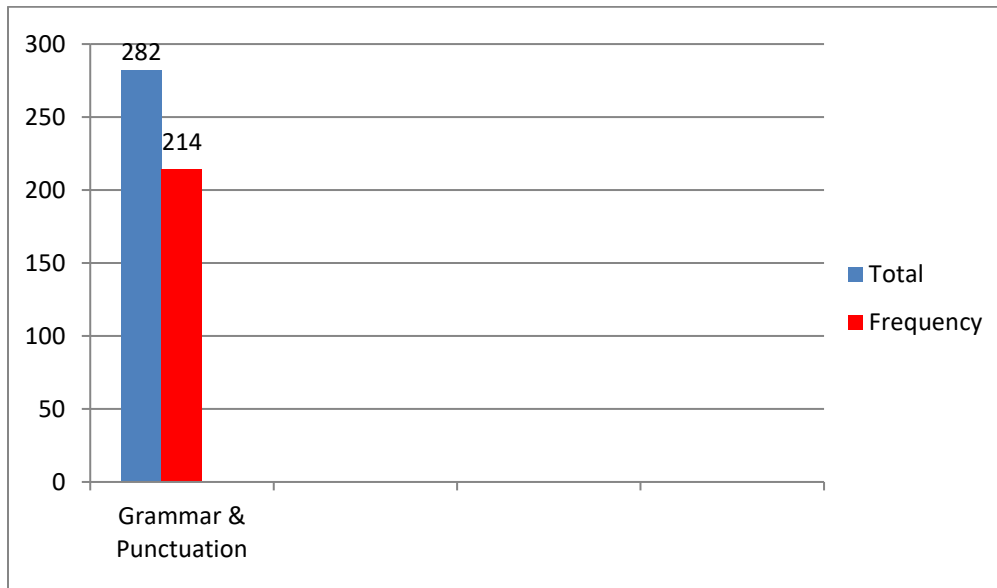
semantic analogy of words, when an Arabic word can mean different things when translated into English, for example, the word ‘actors’ was used to mean *representatives* as in (*\*they were elected as the actors of the city*). This is ascribed to the fact that the Arabic word ممثل (mu‘mathel) is a homonymy that can either mean an *actor* or a *representative*, and the actual correct use relies completely on the context in which it is used. This error is an explicit example of the interference of the mother tongue into the foreign language, as the students confuse one word with another. The word ‘\*voices’ used to mean *votes* is an error that is very much similar to the above example of the word ممثل (mu‘mathel); the Arabic word صوت (saut) is homonymous meaning either a *vote* or a *voice*. In the meanwhile, the phrase ‘\*collection boxes’ was used to mean *polling stations* or *boxes of elections*. The phrase ‘\*apply external agenda’ was used to mean *apply foreign agenda*. It is observed that mistakes can also occur across the parts of speech; a noun is used instead of a verb and an adjective is used for an adverb and so on. The word ‘\*honesty’, for instance, was used to mean *honest*. That is, the noun was used in the place of the adjective, otherwise ‘honesty’ could be regarded as a spelling mistake. The word ‘arabic’ is a noun that either means the language of the Arabs or an adjective that is connected with the literature and language. So, the phrase ‘\*arabic homeland’ was used to mean *Arab Homeland*.

#### 4.2 The Sentence Level

Three matters are discussed in this section: sentence structure, punctuation and sentence variety. In the following chart, a comparison is made between the total number of sentences written in all 25 compositions and the number of grammatical ICs committed by the students.

#### Chart (2): Comparison between Accurate and Inaccurate Sentences

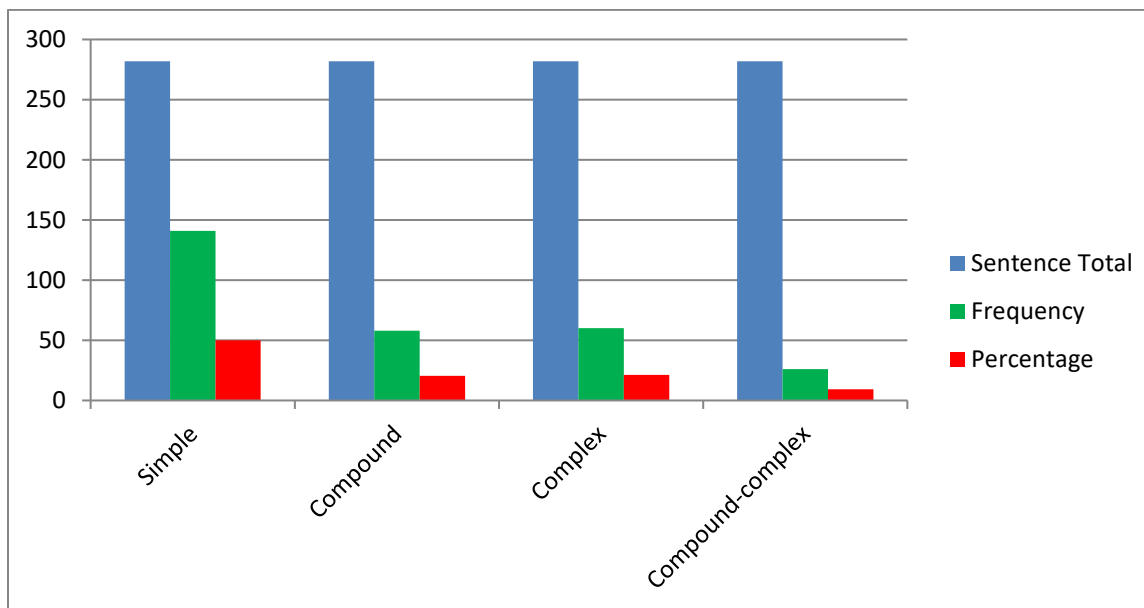




The above chart illustrates that most sentences contain some sort of inaccurate components. It also indicates an inevitably academic failure arising from circumstances beyond the instructors’ control.

The total number of sentences used in all essays is 282 most of which are classified as simple sentences. The following chart illustrates all four varieties of English sentences as written in the compositions and both compound and complex sentences were used by the students in about the same quantity. The chart also indicates that the higher amount of sentence variety is used, the higher ICs occurred.

**Chart (3): Sentences Variety and Frequency of ICs**



One of the most notable grammatical ICs made by the students is the non-use of the inflectional suffix -s that marks the third person singular of the present

simple as in (*She like the kids*). The absence in Arabic of a formal equivalent to this English suffix -s causes the following inappropriate English sentences:

- *It take care of people issues,*
- *it representacivil remark for any community in the whole world,*
- *she agree with the principle of democratic balance.*

These sentences are in the present simple with the third person singular subjects, and the verb doesn't mark the person by the suffix -s used in Standard English, but it does not have equivalence in Arabic. The undergraduate college students are predominately controlled by the formerly acquired speech rules of their mother tongue leading them to unconsciously leave out this suffix when writing English. Davies (2000: 103) states:

errors are an integral part of language learning. They are not just evidence of failure to learn. Anyone who remembers how they learnt a foreign language is aware of how long it took them to eliminate certain elementary errors from their speaking and writing. Even advanced learners who are quite fluent usually have a number of fossilized errors in their English, for example 'He said me' instead of 'He told me', and leaving off the final 's' in the third person singular of the Present Tense.

Another common IC is the use of the pronoun 'who' in the place of 'whom'. A sort of a repetition is also made in certain compositions for the objective pronouns, especially 'whom', as in (*\*We hope the man whom we voted for him will do our wishes*). It is NOT necessary in English language to re-mention the object in the same sentence. The word 'whom' is used as an objective pronoun and there is no need to use another objective pronoun (*him*). The entire sentence can be reworded as (*We hope that the man whom we voted for will fulfill our wishes*). This error is ascribed to the interference of the students' mother tongue into the foreign language because the Arabic word for 'whom' is repeated in a form of another pronoun (called in Arabic 'connected/enclitic pronoun'). The absence in English for this objective pronoun, usually used in Arabic, creates some problems for the students of English.

Another grammatical IC is in the following sentence where the prepositional clauses must be put at

the beginning of the sentence: (*\*Iraqians played of all classes from south to north big and unique role challenging all difficulties and fears*). It is supposed to be reworded as (*Of all classes from south to north, Iraqis played a big and unique role challenging all difficulties and fears*). "All people make mistakes, in both native and second language situations", (Brown, 2007: 257). But some students have fossilized ICs. They are errors that are hard to correct because fossilization is "Fixing of certain mistakes and errors in a learner's English, especially intermediate and advanced learners." (Davies, 2000: 206).

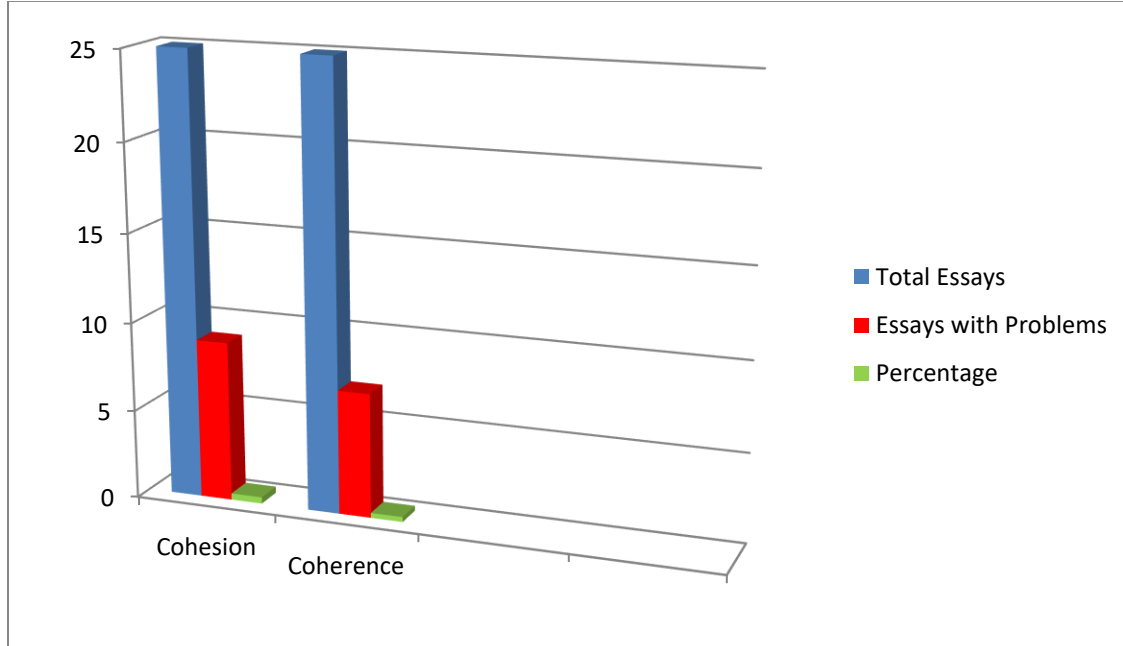
Differences between the native and foreign languages are essentially accountable for learning difficulties. Corder (1973: 229) states that "difference and difficulty are synonymous". Although difference can be the source of difficulty for all language students, there still remains an overlapping area among the punctuation rules of the two languages that can facilitate the process of mastering the writing skill. However, many students failed to utilize these rules to produce texts with correct punctuation marks. Commas, for instance, were added randomly; they were either totally unnecessary or in the wrong position. There was also a tendency of using three dots after the definition of any word or term. The following sentence includes some ICs (*\*Therefore ... it is our chance to say our word frankly ... without any fear*). The word 'therefore' must be followed by 'a comma' instead of the three dots and the other three dots after the word 'frankly' can better be replaced with the word 'and' as in (*Therefore, it is our chance to say our word frankly and without any fear*). The word 'yes' in (*\*Let us say yes to that man who can help us*) requires its first letter be spelt with a capital letter, otherwise apostrophes can be added before and after the word or using both procedures, as follows (*Let us say 'yes' to that ...*) or (*Let us say Yes to that ...*).

#### 4.3 The Discourse Level

Under the heading of discourse, three topics are discussed: cohesion, coherence and spacing. When occurred, spacing was usually made throughout the whole composition. The following chart illustrates that about third of the twenty-five essays selected as samples for the study have consistency problems. Cohesion problems are a little bit higher than those of coherence

and in some cases it was difficult to make sense of the composition.

**Chart (4): Cohesion vs Coherence**



As far as spacing is concerned, the most notable mistake in spacing is combining articles ‘a’, ‘an’ and ‘the’ with noun-phrases that follow them. Although all students know that the article and the noun-phrase that follows it are two different words, they make such mistakes, as in ‘\*abad road’ which must be spelt as *a badroad* and ‘\*foodormony’ which stand for *food and money*.

**CONCLUSION**

Through the analysis of students’ writings, the present paper has shown the types of problems students face in writing essays in English. Although the students have studied writing for three years, they still make avoidable mistakes in spelling, capitalization, grammar, punctuation, etc. This calls for the review of writing textbooks and teaching methods used, terms of students admissions, and even the qualification of the teachers who are assigned the job of teaching the subject especially in the first two years of study at the college. The first years are very crucial in building and developing students’ language capacities and skills, especially the speaking and the writing ones.

The choice of writing textbooks should be given more importance and carried out by teachers who

have good experience in teaching writing. Teaching methods should also receive considerable concern as the textbook by itself does not do much to achieve the promising results.

The terms of granting admissions to students are to be reviewed in a way that high-school average and interview, for example, must be included. Students themselves should also have their active participation in the remedial process by dedicating more time and effort to practice writing paragraphs and essays and do not neglect the editing stage in writing because it is useful in drawing their attention to the mistakes they make at all levels. Group work should also be encouraged - while in classroom or at home - where two students either write essays together or exchange their essays for proofreading and reviewing.

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