

ERROR ANALYSIS IN EFL STUDENTS' WRITING SKILL

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Abstract

"Error Analysis" looks at actual errors, explains them linguistically, and explains some of the possible causes of the errors to provide an understanding of the processes underlying the second language acquisition area. The purpose of this current study is to assess, describe and analyze errors committed by students. The researchers followed the error analysis methodology proposed by Corder (1973). It was to recognize, describe and to explain errors in terms of their causes. After that, errors will be evaluated. For this purpose, a written test was performed on the study samples. The aim of the study is to analyze the linguistic errors in the writing skill of EFL students in an Egyptian high school namely the Future high school. There were two instruments applied in this study: written tasks and a semi-structured interview. For error analysis, eighty written tasks by a group of 20 students were collected and analyzed. The results showed that the frequently committed errors were at the sentential level as well as the word level. The most frequent errors were the errors of spelling, and the least were the errors of demonstratives. The marked errors were categorized as errors of omission, addition, misinformation, and disordering. Further analysis of the collected data from the semi-structured interview indicated interlingual interference, intralingual interference, inadequate practice in English writing and carelessness of students as the major sources of the errors. Hence, the study has pedagogical implications as it will help teachers to devise appropriate measures for improving the students' writing proficiency.

Index Terms: Error Analysis, Writing Skill, Spelling.

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the Basic English language skills that needs a lot of practice. It is a complex skill because the learner needs to pour his ideas and feelings into a written form to be understood (Nur Fitria, 2020). Jayanti (2019) explained that writing skill needs a lot of practice by the students to master it. She added that mastering the writing skill is achieved by giving the students some writing activities which stimulate the students' abilities for writing. Then the student may have some mistakes or errors. These mistakes and errors should be corrected whenever they are made by the students to avoid them in the next writing tasks.

Yaghi & Abdullah (2015) differentiated between the error and the mistake in the context of language learning. They explained that the error is a gap in the learner's target language. That explanation matches the definition by Corder (1975) "errors of performance (mistakes) are characteristically unsystematic and errors of competence are systematic". To illustrate, the error can't be self-corrected by the learner himself because he lacks the right information. On the other hand, the learner can correct his own mistakes as he knows the correct form, but he made these mistakes due to some nervousness, fatigue, or tiredness.

A. Research Significance

The errors of the learners should be studied and analyzed to find out their weaknesses and to be corrected. As rightly pointed out by Nur Fitria (2018), error analysis is very fruitful for both the students and their teachers. The teachers should look for the best ways to trigger the passive awareness of the students to help the students write in a meaningful way. She also added that teachers should help the students get rid of their errors during their EFL classes. Wu & Garza (2014) illustrated that error analysis is very important during the students' learning as it shows the teachers what areas that need to be focused on. Error analysis in language education can be defined as the study of the wrong forms produced by a language learner, especially the foreign language learner (Crystal, 2012). Similarly, Ulla (2014) pointed out that error analysis EA gives the researchers and teachers the ability to deal with the students' weak areas in any language skill or aspect. These weaknesses may be due to unsuitable teaching strategies or the students' gap and incompetence in the English language. Chaudhary & Alzahrani (2020) added some other reasons for the importance of studying error analysis. They stated that EA became a necessity nowadays to examine the weak areas in the students' process of learning the English language. Having found out the learners' weak areas, the teachers work on solving these problems with the students to help them not to stay passive in the class because of feeling afraid of making errors.

B. Aim of the Study

English teachers play an important role in developing students' English proficiency. English teachers should identify their students' mistakes to focus on the needed methods to correct these mistakes. Given the importance of English in this global perspective and writing skills specifically, teachers need to prepare their students to compete in a competitive marketplace. The investigators, who are English teachers, tried to know the common errors among Egyptian students when writing in English. Thus, it will help formulate necessary corrective action.

C. Research Questions

1. What are the most frequent errors committed by the EFL students in writing essays?
2. What are the reasons for committing errors in writing essays by the EFL students?

D. Research Objectives

1. To identify the most frequent errors committed by the EFL students in writing essays.
2. To investigate the reasons for committing errors in writing essays by the EFL students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is one of the two productive English skills English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students need to master for written communication and academic writing such as: Letters, essays, articles, journals, project reports, papers, etc. We found that writing plays a key role in the generation of language used for global knowledge transfer (Toba, R., et al, 2019).

Writing is an important skill for learners, enabling them to clearly communicate their thoughts

and ideas. Also, it is a very complex productive skill, requiring thought and cognitive processes that go through different stages before, during, and after writing. Additionally, successful writing requires many overlapping aspects such as:

Organization, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, consistency, and cohesion, etc. The basic unit of a script, the paragraph (Jayakaran, 2005), is a series of connected sentences that generate the main idea. A long or short paragraph generally begins with a topic sentence that introduces the idea that guides the entire paragraph. The supporting sentence then explains to the reader the main idea of the topic sentence by providing ideas, details, and examples. To end the paragraph, summarize the overall idea of the paragraph with a closing sentence. Therefore, English learners need advanced linguistic and cognitive skills to write paragraphs. This ability must be challenged in order to have a good understanding of what is written. Due to its abstract nature, Students' mistakes form an indirect way of examining learners' writing skills.

Making mistakes in a foreign language class can be an embarrassing experience and may lead learners to miscommunicate in the target language to avoid further mistakes. It's often not the error correction per se that evokes emotion, but the general idea that errors are bad and should be avoided at all costs. This idea can also be confirmed at school. We often find that elementary school students are typically less afraid to make mistakes or be corrected than high school and college students. This may indicate that as people grow up, they learn to interpret mistakes as negative events (Bakan, H., et al, 2020).

Ahmed (2010) reported that Egyptian students encountered cohesion and coherence problems while writing essays. Al-Jaro, Al-Quiadhi, and Ramadhan (2016) reported that his EFL student in Yemen, in teaching writing at Sana'a University, found that his writing skills He pointed out that he is aware that there are errors and errors in Belkhir & Benyelles (2017) uncovered the writing difficulties and sources of his EFL learner essay at Tlemsen University. Their study found that students faced difficulties in both coherence and cohesion due to poor reading comprehension, poor first language communication, and little writing practice. Nasser (2019) diagnosed the writing difficulties of her EFL students in Iraq, revealing that student errors included the use of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting.

Error analysis theory was developed by Stephen Pitt Corder in the 1960s to analyze errors produced by language learners. Error analysis helped teachers understand students' mistakes and difficulties in learning a second language. Moreover, teachers use error analysis as a useful tool to improve teaching practice and support students (Kartini, 2022). In addition, Amara (2018) stated that the purpose of error analysis is to recognize the learner's knowledge of the language and provide teachers with useful information and the right kind of data to develop a better conception of rules in the target language.

A. Types of Errors

Errors during the second language acquisition were classified into different types by different scholars. For example, Dulay and Burt (1974) classified them into three major categories:

- 1) Developmental errors: errors that are almost like the acquisition of L1.
- 2) Interference errors: they are clearly noticed because the learner used the structure of his mother tongue.
- 3) Unique errors: errors that are not developmental or interference.

On the other hand, there are two main types of errors classified by Richards (1974)

1. The first type is the interlingual error. This type occurs within the sentence level due to the influence of the first language on the learner as he thinks using the first language, then he translates to the second language. That means the student writes in the second language but using the rules of the first language. This type may include errors with the fragments, word order, or the subject-verb agreement. For example, "I have a car nice."
2. The second type is the intralingual error. That type exists within the word level because the learner makes overgeneralization. To explain, the learner knows one rule of the language and he applies this rule over the other rules. For example, "I'm don't a doctor." This type may include different errors such as the errors with the demonstratives, word choice, and the adjectives.

This research will adopt the classification of (Richards, 1974) as its theoretical framework.

B. Steps in Error Analysis

Corder in Ellis (1992) explained the steps of performing an Error Analysis according to the following steps:

- a. Collecting samples of the students' written essays.
- b. Identifying the students' errors.
- c. Describing the identified errors.
- d. Explaining the errors.
- e. Evaluating the errors.

C. Sources of Errors

There are five sources of errors identified by Selinker in Nzama (2010). They are as follows:

- a. **Language transfer:** There are two kinds of transfer; one is positive and the other is negative. The positive transfer is that one in which the learner uses some features from L1 to help him learn L2. On the other hand, L1 may negatively affect the learning process of L2 because of the negative transfer. Examples of language transfer are word order, pronunciation, culture transfer, and grammar.

- b. **Training transfer:** It happens when the learner applies what he learned earlier in a different situation. For example, a student, who studied verb to Be, may write a sentence when he writes the present simple like this “He is works in a hospital.”
- c. **The second language strategies for learning:** these strategies are meant to increase the linguistic and sociolinguistic competence.
- d. **The second language strategies for communication:** These strategies focus on the trial to solve the problems that occur during the learners’ interaction.
- e. **Overgeneralization of the English language L2:** This type occurs when the student generalizes the grammatical rule of L2 over all the parts of the language without making any exceptions.

D. Research Studies

Hussain (2019) investigated the most common mistakes made in English composition by 130 Saudi undergraduates at King Khalid University (KKU) and to track the frequency ratios of different categories and types of mistakes. Am. The importance of this research is to identify the reasons for weaknesses in academic writing and find corresponding solutions and suggestions. This survey seeks to find the answer to the question: What are the most common English spelling mistakes made by her EFL learners in Saudi Arabia at KKU's Faculty of Languages and Translations? What is the frequency ratio of different categories and types of errors? What are the possible identified reasons for these errors? Samples are randomly selected from levels 4 (Beginner), 5 (Intermediate), and 6 (Advanced Intermediate). Quantitative methods are used in this study because it had a closed questionnaire and an analytical-quantitative design in which statistical and numerical data were examined to analyze the results. Analysis of written essays derives from the error analysis method of Corder (1967). Research shows that the most common errors occurred in his four categories: grammar, vocabulary, semantics, and mechanics. Most errors occurred in the mechanics category (51.5%), including punctuation, capitalization, and misspellings. Moreover, spelling was worked very hard by all the students. The results also showed that teachers had the highest percentage of negative criticism. Because when teachers are bad, students usually feel left out and dislike the material (37.4%). This result has led to recommendations for improving the writing skills of Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students.

Altameemy & Daradkeh (2019) presented an empirical study that utilized error analysis and comprehensively examined the types and frequencies of errors in paragraph construction, conducted by 80 EFL Pre-Year undergraduates at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. In addition, differences between male and female students were examined in relation to these errors and whether native and non-native English teachers significantly influence the type and frequency of spelling errors. About 80 paragraphs were analyzed at sentence and paragraph level based on a specific rubric and found that the eighty students made a total of 1580 errors. At the sentence level, subjects made 1316 errors in grammar (42.15%), punctuation (16.14%), spelling (14.81%), and capitalization (10.19%). At the paragraph level, the participant-generated their 264 errors, presented in the following order:

Paragraph expansion error (5.13%), paragraph consistency error (4.87%), paragraph-level error (3.80%), and disagreement error (2.91%). Results showed that, except for grammatical errors, there were no statistically significant differences in the types of paragraph writing errors among preparatory students at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. In addition, statistical analysis showed that several types of paragraph writing errors, namely H. errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation, were found between undergraduates taught by English-speaking teachers and undergraduates taught by non-native English-speaking teachers. Have a statistically significant difference.

At the sentence level, Connell (2000) asked Japanese students to write grammatical and meaningful sentences. Analysis revealed more errors in the subject, part of speech, and word order usage. In his study at Chulalongkorn University. On the other hand, Tananart (2000) found that students made errors mainly in grammatical structures, writing 73.86% of paragraphs, followed by transition signal errors at 10.01%, and verb form errors at 7.68%. %, followed by word choice at 6.90%, indicating the fewest spelling errors. Was 1.55%. A study by Cheng (1994) analyzed errors in English composition in six of his first-year English majors and three of his second-English majors at the University of China in Beijing. The results showed that most of the errors were syntactic errors, then semantic errors, and finally morphological errors.

E. Literature Gap

A series of investigations into the error analysis of written works were carried out. But the authors think there is a need for more in-depth research in the Egyptian context. The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the most common mistakes made by EFL students in Egyptian high schools.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research has adopted a mixed mode; both the qualitative and the quantitative methods are used in this research. The quantitative method is represented in counting the frequency of the students' errors while writing their essays. On the other hand, the qualitative mode is used through the interviews with the participants to investigate the source of errors made by students while writing their essays.

A. Research Design

The research design, participants of the research, research instruments, research procedures, and data analysis are presented in detail.

This study has adopted both quantitative and qualitative method. First, student writing errors are counted in an analytical-quantitative design. Statistical and numerical data are investigated, and the results are analyzed. Qualitative methods are used to interpret student responses to semi-structured interviews. Samples are randomly selected, which is considered one of the most reliable ways to obtain a representative sample.

B. Participants

The participants are 20 male and female students in the first year at Future High School in Egypt. This school is a public school where English is taught as a foreign language.

C. Instruments

There are two instruments: the written essays gathered from the 20 students and the semi-structured interviews.

The semi-structured interview consists of 5 questions related to 5 main sources of errors.

Table 1: The semi-structured interview questions

	Sources of errors	The question
1	Interlingual Errors	Are you usually confused between the grammar of Arabic and English?
2	Intralingual Errors	Do you find it difficult to find the correct vocabulary and the correct grammar in English?
3	Language-learning Strategies	Does your teacher have a clear teaching strategy?
4	Communication Strategies	Do you use English while communicating in the class easily?
5	Teacher-induced Errors	Do you find your teacher helpful in terms of knowledge and motivation?

D. The Research Procedures

- i) The students were given a writing task every two weeks to have four written essays by each student at the end. So, the total received written essays were 80 essays.
- ii) The second step was to perform an interview with the 20 students individually to have more information about the sources of errors in detail. The interviews helped the researcher to get more clarification about the reasons for the students' written errors. Also, that will help the teachers to adopt new strategies to teach students how to correct and avoid these errors.
- iii) The errors were categorized into two main groups: at the word level (intralingual) and at the sentence level (interlingual).

E. Data Analysis

- a) The researcher collected the data through written tasks and semi-structured interviews.
- b) The writing tasks were checked manually to find out the errors existed in the essays.
- c) The errors were analyzed and categorized into two main categories: at the sentence level & at the word level. Then each group has its sub types of errors.
- d) After classifying all the errors, each error was counted to find out its percentage.
- e) All the results were noted down in a table.
- f) The individual interviews were interpreted to find out the sources of errors.

IV. RESULTS

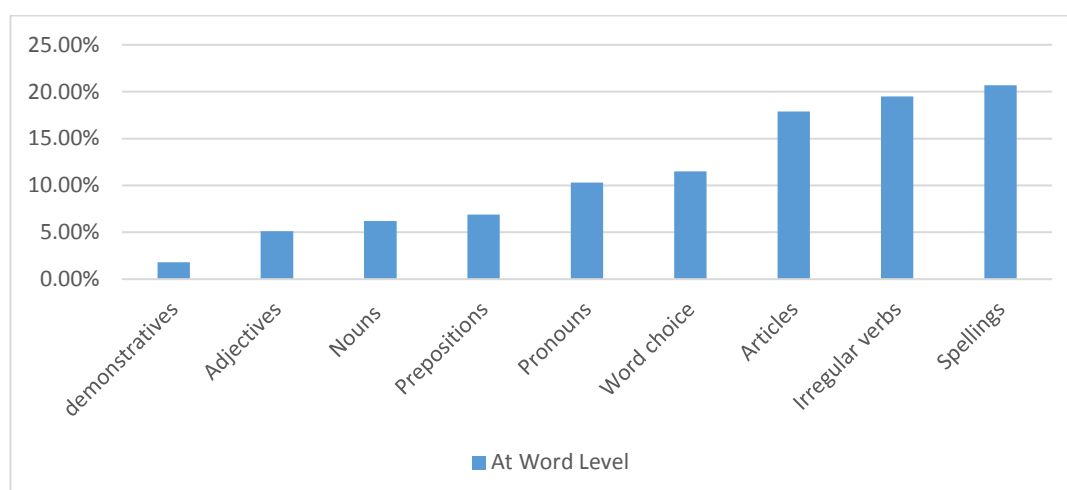
The analysis of the results showed that there are nine types of errors at the word level. These types are demonstratives, adjectives, nouns, prepositions, pronouns, word choice, articles, irregular verbs, and spellings. The following Table 1 shows the types of errors, made by some students at Future high school in Egypt, at the word level. The errors were listed according to their existence percentage from the lowest to the highest.

Table 2: Students' Writing Errors at the Word Level

At word level			
	Types of errors	Frequency	Percentage
1	demonstratives	8	1.80%
2	Adjectives	22	5.10%
3	Nouns	27	6.20%
4	Prepositions	30	6.90%
5	Pronouns	45	10.30%
6	Word choice	50	11.50%
7	Articles	78	17.90%
8	Irregular verbs	85	19.50%
9	Spellings	90	20.70%
Total		435	

From the above Table 1, we can notice that the least frequent type of error at the word level is the demonstratives type. It existed 1.8% out of the total number of errors. To illustrate, it occurred 8 times out of 435 errors. The other types were adjectives, nouns, prepositions, pronouns, word choice, articles, irregular verbs, and spellings. Their existence percentages were 5.1%, 6.2%, 6.9%, 10.3%, 11.5%, 17.9%, 19.5%, and 20.7% respectively. The following Figure 1 represents these errors at the word level in order according to their frequency.

Types of students' errors at the word level



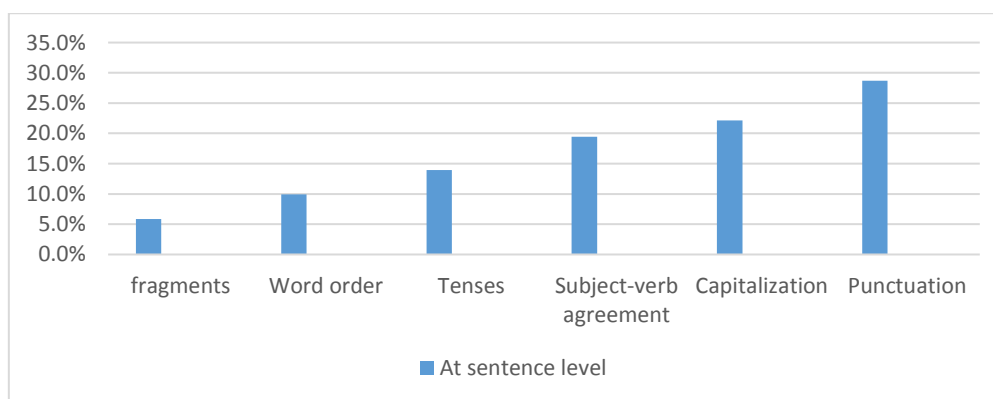
i) Types of errors at the sentence level

The results analysis showed that there are six types of errors at the sentence level. These types are fragments, word order, tenses, subject-verb agreement, capitalization, and punctuation. The following Table 2 shows the types of errors, made by some students at Future high school in Egypt, at the sentence level. The errors were listed according to their existence percentage from the lowest to the highest.

Table 3: Students' Writing Errors at the Sentence Level

At sentence level			
	Types of errors	Frequency	Percentage
1	Fragments	52	5.8%
2	Word order	88	9.9%
3	Tenses	124	13.9%
4	Subject-verb agreement	173	19.5%
5	Capitalization	197	22.2%
6	Punctuation	255	28.7%
Total		889	

From the above Table 2, we can notice that the least frequent type of errors at the word level is the fragments type. It existed 5.8% out of the total number of errors. To illustrate it occurred 52 times out of 889 errors. The other types were the word order, tenses, subject-verb agreement, capitalization, and punctuation. Their existence percentages were 9.9%, 13.9%, 19.5%, 22.2%, and 28.7% respectively. The following chart represents these errors at the sentence level in order according to their frequency. Types of students' errors at the sentence level



a. Examples of all Errors found in the students' written essays

i. Demonstratives (1.8%)

Example: I can't carry **this** book.

Correct form: I can't carry **these** books.

Explanation: The use of **this** is wrong because books are plural. To correct the sentence, we should replace **this** with **these**.

ii. Adjectives (5.1%)

Example: The man is very **long**. He is about 2 meters.

Correct form: The man is very **tall**.

Explanation: When we describe a person's length, we say **tall** not **long**.

iii. Nouns (6.2%)

Example: I played football yesterday. The **play** was very good.

Correct form: I played football. The **match** was very good.

Explanation: **Play** isn't a noun.

iv. Prepositions (6.9%)

Example: I am not good **in** English.

Correct form: I am not good **at** English.

Explanation: The adjective good comes with **at**.

v. Pronouns (10.3%)

Example: My cat is white. **She** is calm.

Correct form: **It** is calm.

Explanation: The cat is an animal. So, the correct pronoun is **it**.

vi. Word choice (11.5%)

Example: I passed all the exams **accept** Math.

Correct form: I passed all the exams **except** Math.

Explanation: The correct word is **except** to match the meaning of the context.

vii. Articles (17.9%)

Example: He arrives at his work in **a** hour.

Correct form: He arrives at his work in **an** hour.

Explanation: The word hour starts with a vowel sound, so we should use **an** instead of **a**.

viii. Irregular verbs (19.5%)

Example: I **drived** my car to the park.

Correct form: I **drove** my car to the park.

Explanation: The past form of **drive** is **drove** because it is an irregular verb.

ix. Spellings (20.7%)

Example: The girl **boght tow** books.

Correct form: The girl **bought two** books.

Explanation: There are two spelling mistakes in the sentence. The word **boght** lacks the letter **u**. Also, the word **two** has disorder of the letters.

x. Fragments (5.8%)

Example: When students came.

Correct form: When students came, **I was happy**.

Explanation: This is a fragment. It lacks the other half of the sentence to have a complete meaning.

xi. Word order (9.9%)

Example: I bought a **car new**.

Correct form: I bought a **new car**.

Explanation: The adjective comes before the noun.

xii. Tenses (13.9%)

Example: Last week, we **go** to the club.

Correct form: Last week, we **went** to the club.

Explanation: The sentence is in the past simple. So, we should use “went” not “go”.

xiii. Subject-verb agreement (19.5%)

Example: She **clean** the house every day.

Correct form: She **cleans** the house every day.

Explanation: In the present simple, we add “s” to the verb with the third-person singular pronouns.

xiv. Capitalization (22.2%)

Example: we went **cairo** to visit the pyramids.

Correct form: **We** went to **Cairo** to visit the pyramids.

Explanation: The first word of the sentence should start with a capital letter.

Cairo is a big city. It should be capitalized.

xv. Punctuation (28.7%)

Example: When we visited Luxor it was hot.

Correct form: When we visited Luxor, it was hot.

Explanation: There should be a comma between the main clause and the dependent clause.

Table 4: Sources of Errors according to the students’ responses in the interview

	Sources of errors	Frequency	Percentage
1	Interlingual Errors	45	0.296053
2	Intralingual Errors	40	0.263158
3	Language-learning Strategies	36	0.236842
4	Communication Strategies	19	0.125
5	Teacher-induced Errors	12	0.078947
	Total	152	

From the above Table 3, it can be noticed that interlingual errors have the highest frequency among all the other sources of errors. The four other sources achieved these frequencies in order; intralingual errors 26%, language learning strategies 23%, communication strategies 12% and teacher-induced errors were .07%.

V. DISCUSSION

The results analysis is explained based on the research questions as stated earlier.

i) The types of errors found in the students' written essays

There are two main types of errors: a) at the word level b) at the sentence level.

ii) The types of errors at the word level

The types of errors at the word level are spelling, irregular verbs, articles, word choice, pronouns, prepositions, nouns, adjectives, and demonstratives in order.

iii) The types of errors at the sentence level

The types of errors at the sentence level are punctuation, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, tenses, word order, and fragments in order.

iv) The most frequent errors in the students' written essays

This point is the second question of this study. After analyzing the students' essays, the researcher listed the frequency of the errors in order from the lowest to the highest. As we have two main groups of errors, there will be two highest types of errors. To explain, the spelling errors are the highest at the word level. In addition, Punctuation errors are the most common type of errors at the sentence level. To illustrate, the frequency of spelling errors is 20.7% and the frequency of punctuation errors is 28.7%. This result doesn't match the other studies mentioned in the literature review except (Altameemy & Daradkeh, 2019).

v) The sources of errors found in the students' written essays

To answer the third question of this study, the written essays were checked, and the errors were analyzed first to find out the sources of these errors. Second, the interviews were interpreted to have in-depth understanding of the students' answers. The responses of the students showed that the sources of errors, that are classified into five types, namely intralingual errors, interlingual errors, training-induced errors, language-learning strategies, and communication strategies, all observed but with different frequency. This result matches the results of (Altameemy & Daradkeh, 2019; Hussain, 2019).

This study identified the students' errors at the word level and at the sentence level, too. In addition, the sources of errors were also investigated. The frequency of each error type was calculated. The highest error frequency at the word level was spelling errors and the most frequent error type at the sentence level was punctuation. Error analysis can highly help teachers to change their teaching strategies that may confuse the learners. Also, error analysis shows the teachers the students' common errors. Consequently, the teachers should prepare some class activities as a remedial for these errors. In addition, Teachers need more training to increase their knowledge of effective inquiry-based writing strategies to improve the overall writing quality of their students.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current study made remarkable observations about the most common English spelling mistakes made by Egyptian EFL high school students in Future High School, South Sinai Governorate, Egypt, and identified students' spelling mistakes. The errors are analyzed and identified proper solutions. Analysis of participant errors showed that errors varied according to the type of error itself. Spelling errors were the most common types of errors made by Egyptian high school students at the word level, but punctuation errors have the highest frequency at the sentence level.

In addition, the proportions of supporters and opponents differed for each statement in the semi-structured interviews. The highest percentages were factors related to interlingual factors that deal with the influence of the students' first language grammar on the acquisition of English as a foreign language. To illustrate, when writing in English, students can follow the rules of their first language, such as putting the adjectives after the noun or using the word order according to Arabic rules. The lowest proportion of factors are related to errors attributable to teachers. We recommend that students raise their awareness of learning English correctly and positively. It is also recommended to place more emphasis on writing skills by increasing writing time in school English classes. Students should be encouraged to use English in writing outside of class, either as homework or as interaction on social media. It is also important to choose qualified teachers to deal with students who care about their psychological and educational aspects. Moreover, teachers need more training to increase their knowledge of effective writing strategies to improve the overall writing quality of their students.

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