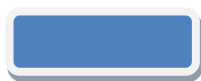


# **Problems Faced by Postgraduate Students in Developing their Writing Skills.**

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### ***Abstract:***

The paper aims at clarifying the main problems which postgraduate students (both M.A. and Ph.D. students in the different departments of the College of Education, scientific and literary) face when using English in writing. English is given to them as a secondary lesson in the two courses of their preparatory year of study. Teaching English is supposed to help students develop their reading and writing skills and thus they will be able to understand their mainstream subjects taught in English. Students' problems have been

explained by identifying and analyzing the different types of mistakes they committed in their examination papers and assignments to specify the reasons lying behind committing them.

The different types of mistakes, taken from students' examination papers and assignments, have been identified and explained first. They are classified into different types and arranged into groups to clarify the main areas where students have more problems. Then, reference has been made to the possible causes of these problems like the interference of students' mother

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tongue, incomplete knowledge in relation to the basic rules of writings and English grammar, the course time, students' interest and teaching materials and methods. Some suggestions to help students overcome such problems in their future writings have been presented as well.

### ***Keywords:***

Mistakes (errors), error analysis, writing skills, mother tongue interference, teaching methods.

## ***1. Introduction***

### ***1.1 The Problem:***

English as a foreign language is taught in most of the departments of Iraqi colleges: scientific and literary. There are certain definite objectives behind the non-departmental teaching of English. These objectives must take into consideration students' needs for learning the foreign language. English is mainly taught for postgraduate students as an aid to

facilitate the process of studying and understanding the main topics they have in their curriculum especially in the scientific departments. The problems that are associated with this issue include the following which will be presented and discussed in this study:

- What types of mistakes are more frequent and serious in students' writings?
- What makes students keep on committing almost the same mistakes though emphasis, through teaching, has been put on those areas which cause them more troubles?
- Is it possible for teachers to develop the writing abilities of postgraduates who have different levels of English and who study in different departments (scientific and literary)?
- Are the textbooks they have quite adequate to help them learn the language or do they need additional

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teaching materials to support their learning of English?

### ***1.2 Aims of the Study:***

The study aims at achieving the following:

- Identifying the main problems facing postgraduate students (M.A. and Ph.D.) and specifying the areas where they err more.
- Explaining the main reasons making students commit such mistakes.
- Showing to what extent teaching English in their two courses has an effect on their mastering some of the important rules used in writing.
- Presenting some suggestions related to the teaching materials used and methods applied.

### ***1.3 The Hypothesis:***

It is hypothesized that postgraduate students have many problems related to learning some of the important language rules which they need to apply in their current study or future writings. It is supposed that good English teaching can be of

significance for them and may help them overcome some of the problems they have. It is also assumed that postgraduate students are over-loaded with the main subjects they have as part of their program in the first preparatory year of study, and thus they do not have enough time or interest for secondary lessons as English.

### ***1.4 Procedures:***

The procedures followed to attain the required aims include:

- Diagnosing and then analyzing the different types of mistakes committed by postgraduate students in their monthly examination papers and assignments.
- Illustrating the main possible causes making students commit different types of mistakes when they write.
- Identifying students' needs and specifying if the used teaching materials and methods are quite efficient and sufficient to attain good and fruitful results.

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–Suggesting some ideas for teaching and improving students’ writing skills.

### ***1.5 Limits of the Study:***

The paper is limited to the analysis of mistakes committed by postgraduate students (both M.A. and Ph.D.) at the College of Education for Girls – Kufa University during the academic year (2017–2018). The samples for the study include their examination papers and assignments. Students’ problems have been identified and explained in terms of the different types of mistakes they committed in their writings only.

### ***1.6 Significance of the Study:***

It is hoped that the discussions and analyses presented within this paper will be of importance to English language teachers teaching English in the different departments of Iraqi colleges. It helps them identify the main areas that cause students more problems and thus their mission in choosing and

presenting their teaching materials will be easier and more fruitful. Besides, it is also significant for students themselves as they can have a look at the different types of mistakes committed and thus they may be aware of the areas where they err more and avoid doing them in their future writings.

### ***2.1 Introduction:***

English is given as a secondary lesson for students in most Iraqi colleges in both their preliminary and higher studies (M.A. and Ph.D.). The term ‘English for Academic Purposes (EAP)’ is usually used to refer to English taught to students in these stages. EAP, which is a branch of ‘English for Specific Purposes’, “is usually defined as teaching English with the aim of assisting learners’ study or research in that language” (Hyland, 2006:1). Blue (1988:96) makes a distinction between two types of EAP: English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for

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Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The former includes “academic English skills, language, and activities relevant for students studying in any field”, while the second is “relevant for students in certain fields only” (Harwood and Petric, 2011: 245 in Simpson eds.). They further add that EGAP “may appeal where student populations and fields of study are diverse, and where EAP teachers have little time or resources to design subject-specific programmes...”(ibid:246). This is the type of English used in teaching the language in most of our departments due to the reasons given above and the fact that we have few English language teachers specialized for this purpose.

The study tries to complete certain issues presented in a previous study by Saad (2014) entitled "Grammatical Mistakes in M.A. Students' Theses Written in English: Reasons and Remedies". The paper showed and explained

the different types of mistakes committed specifically by MA students in the Mathematics department writing their theses in English before being corrected by the linguistic supervisor. The present paper aims at diagnosing and explaining the different types of mistakes committed by postgraduates who had been taught English for two courses and they were supposed to avoid committing certain types of mistakes as emphasis had been put on those areas where students usually err more and which some of them were specified and discussed in the first paper. The different types of errors (grammar, spelling and punctuation) committed by students in their examination papers and assignments will be diagnosed and analyzed, and then they will be discussed to specify the areas where students have more problems.

## ***2.2 Selected Samples of Students' Writings:***

Writing is a form of communication whereby students express their ideas and feelings on paper. Teaching the writing skill is an important part in the process of learning English as a foreign language as students have more time to express what they want carefully and correctly. They are supposed after a considerable period of learning the rules of the language to express themselves well, but usually teachers are shocked with terrible pieces of writings that are full of a variety of mistakes: expected and unexpected. As an important part of any English lesson plan and as a requirement of the items of their prescribed textbooks, students are given chances to write different pieces of writing like letters, emails, summaries, essays and compositions. This is a good opportunity for them to express their

ideas on papers as the oral use of English constitutes a serious problem for them. They are usually asked to write such pieces in the class because writing at home makes them consult friends or use net or books as an aid in writing. And that is why, as we had noticed, the pieces of their writings at home contained fewer mistakes than those written in the class.

The following samples of students' writings have been chosen to clarify the main areas where students err. They have been chosen from both MA and PhD students' papers. They have been identified and analyzed in the following pages where the chosen samples have been listed under different headings showing the types of mistakes students committed.

## ***2.3 Identifying and Analyzing Students' Errors:***

Corder (1973:277) points out that errors can be described "in terms of the physical difference between the



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learner's utterance and the reconstructed version". The result of such preliminary classification will be a variety of differences which he decides to classify into four categories: "omission of some required element; addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element; selection of an incorrect element; and misordering of elements". Corder suggests a deeper description of errors by including the four categories above within the linguistic levels: orthographic / phonological, syntactic and lexico-semantic (ibid:278). In this paper, identifying and analyzing students' errors have revealed that most of them fall within the syntactic level of analysis. The four processes which Corder mentions, including omission, addition, selection of an incorrect element and misordering, have been identified as part of students' errors. Students tend to delete certain important elements, add other unnecessary ones,

choose some incorrect elements or use incorrect word order.

Focus has been put on syntactic errors as they constitute the majority of errors committed by students and by doing this teachers' attention is drawn to those areas causing problems to students and thus emphasis is put on them to help students avoid doing them in the future. Few phonological errors have been identified like '*groub*' for '*group*', '*proplem*' for '*problem*' and '*porder*' for '*border*'. Students also made a number of lexical errors like the following which show how students had chosen the incorrect words to express certain meanings they had in their minds. Note the following:

– *take information, every (a very) young student, The article is speak (talke) about..., goes to the home, she take the third class, ... to study her children, look for in Gogole, you apply of lecture..., in self house.*

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The following pages present a survey of the different types of syntactic errors committed by students. They are cited under certain headings in an attempt to classify the different types of errors found in their papers. Moreover, special topics have been allocated for spelling and punctuation mistakes as they constitute a large number of those errors committed by students.

### **2.3.1 Syntactic Errors:**

It has been quite difficult to analyze certain pieces of students' writings as one can find a series of different types of mistakes within a single sentence as in the following instances:

- I know want (*want to know*) Type (*the type*) of course (*courses*) they (*you*) offer....?
  - Could you please send me *form it* have types of courses they offer, and *date start* of the new courses.
- There are mistakes related to the choice of words, grammar and

punctuation marks. So, within the heading of 'syntactic errors' we have included samples which incorporate a variety of mistakes as they were written by students to depict their real problems when writing.

### **2.3.1.1 Incomplete or Incorrect Sentence Structures:**

#### **- Missing be as a main verb:**

- I interested in the studying.... (repeated) - / intersting in Biology and Ecology,
- The suitable age to join a university 14.... - I 23 old from Iraq.
- I could 43 years old - I have 42 years old - Some phone expensive and cheap
- ... the first part receiver, the second part a stallites, and ...
- I thik the suitable age to Join a university in 18 age. because The presond be young
- ... plenary session at 10 am, chair by Dr. ... - I really execited to see you **Ph.D.**

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– The first study in Cairo suburb and the second in Ottawa, Canada.

– There are two big rivers. There are many beautiful areas in Iraq, – The chiled Jaffer.

### – Missing the subject, the object and even the verb in certain

#### instances:

– Could have send me information about the things you like to study.

– I would you like to know the types of courses offer – could you please send information.

–... take (*talk*: a wrong choice of the verb) about important the GPS

– It is the article about... – Finally to go The house at 1:00 pm and to eating...and sleep

– ... is advice like a computer...

– Most these body (...) about the sun, ...

–When *the* get new address or ring to meet you –... in inviting to Wars.... **Ph.D.**

– ... is the a major all over the world of the days.

– I'm writing the letter to telling that want to move to London to ...

### – Wrong forms and

#### constructions:

– Could you please send me *form it* have types of courses they offer, and date start of ...

– GPS is advice *use for locate the pace (position) and small use from* the people.

– The parts are *the first receiver The second statite. the third network of* GPS.

–... very young student *University in Oxford.* – My sister is *Layla's a teacher in at school*

– Finally *to go* The house at 1:00 pm *and to eating* The lunch and *sleep*

– At 11 o'clock *another class. to end at 1 o'clock...* – At 2 o'clock *to leaves at home.*

–... another object *to likes* the Earth and Moon, – Most of *These is body orbits* the sun

– I need your *helping* to *finding*

– It *booked to yours* in ... **Ph.D.**

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- Just writing to tell you *to got* a good job.... but I'll *not sure to be living*
- I *would to tell him* about  
-on the first day *will you* give a lecture *entitle* ...
- on the second and third *day will include the program* a lecture at 10:00 for *two an hour*
- I *just to tell you a place* to study ...- Air pollution is *a* biggest problem in the world
- Air pollution *is appearance* from natural or man-made sources *cause harmful* to human.

### **- Use of unnecessary and irrelevant words or disconnected constructions:**

- GPS *is a mean* advice *to known located* The persons, GPS *are parts of Three* part.
- The *first part. You can use hold* your hand,      - The *second part* group satellites...
- It is *a dives which that cuses* a satellite to *the locat* cusr position

- the first parts *in* the reiver and the scound *in* the A group satellit orbeting Eerth.

- two studies *done* the firstly aCairo suburb *shows* that the tiny particle.

### **Ph.D.**

- *ottawa cand the children living near busy roads* were more likely to develop asthma. and link between treafic and ill children.
- *They are* nachere sources are folanens and firest They mad-humaen inrece car in city.
- *They tow* studies done abute it first study done in cairo and scound done in ottawa in canad. *They study in* cairo study headatteed and cunser the scound study the astame.
- it *porder* with turky in north, Irain east, kuwat swath Arabia. It (...)*nattaral* resources oil, faming and phosphate. it attraction historic city Bablon and tourism.
- I am writy inviting to your to be held in kufa university from 9-11 of December to a conference 'Arabic Language and literture' and and

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going to Aslamk university and Denar and hotel and in second day going Emam Ali and liblery to looking books and good bay Denar. (*Note how this paragraph, which is supposed to be a letter sent as an invitation, is completely incorrect*).

– The are: man mad such as motor vohcle, ...such as volecanes and tres fiair. The are Two studies. The are : *man mad* such as motor vohcle, and *sources natural* such as volecanes and tres fiair.

### – Wrong word order:

– I know want – department Geography, – in university Oxford.

– Never again Lost – The Gbs a partable small users... – ..., *found Gbs* in life

– Article is Lost Never again about..... – *Phone* we need our life.

– The *usually* she is drink of tea and to go The teach of study... – *I'll my know address...*

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– I completed... and *a new my work* in the factory... – and *the good coast* do not forget that.

– *on* the first day *will you* give a lecture...

– *on* the second and third *day will include the program* a lecture at 10:00 for *two an hour*

– *the studied (study) first* in cairo, But *studend soucnd* in...

–... and *sources natural...*(repeated)

### **2.3.1.2 Verb tenses and forms:**

#### – Be+ base for verbs in the present simple:

In the following samples *be* is incorrectly used before the main verb:

– I *am study* of the University of Baghdad... – The article *is speek* about GPS

– I *am send* to ask ... – *is talke...* – It *is mean...* – It *is weigh* about

– She *is works* ..., – She *is have...* – *Most these bodies are orbit...*

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– she *is drink* of tea and *to go*  
Note the following paragraph which is supposed to be in the present. The student has some knowledge related to the form of verbs in the present, as some verb forms are correctly written, but her knowledge is confused and uncertain. She kept shifting in tenses and forms.

– She *is goes*.... she *is drink* cup of tea in room's teacher. Then she *goes* to the first class *its started* at 8 o'clock. After that she *take* the third class *its start* at 10: o'clock. In 1:00 o'clock she *goes* to the home to cock food. Next, she *begen*... They *are study* in the school. in the morning. she *writing* plan to study the pupils. finally she *goes* to bed.

– It is result diseases via life cycle in and it is contain ... **Ph.D.**

– and it is contains *much* – I'm *love* the chiled. – I'm *live* shared house

– I *am very love* my mother, Because It's *making* life and staying her, she *is brings* the health and

Alsada, – I'm wishes a drem of the docter. – ... *it is contain*

The reason for committing such type of error is that students associate the use of verb to *be* forms (*is, are, and am*) with pronouns and the idea that they represent the present simple.

### – Misuse of tenses:

– Yinan's family *move* to London because father Yinan's got jobe (past) (repeated)

– Yinan *study* oxford university  
– Satellites is an objects which *is orbiting*,

– Many *this devices* important because they *became* part of our life.

– I *am prefering study*..

– I *arrive* to America at sunday about 7 o'clock evening (*future*).

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– ... and *he* come back to your hotel. – I'm *study* in the university (*future*)

– These studies *are* in Cairo university and Ottawa, (past)

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- Whereas The second study *is finding* (past)
- they *are containing...* and *are not containing* – Bacteria *are entering ... are causing...*

– I’*d like to tell* you I’*m loving* and *admiring* you

### –Incomplete or incorrect forms of the required tenses or verbs used:

– When we *using* satellites, we normal *means* articulated satellite

– I *writing* to *asking* –I would like *apply* (repeated)

– *At the moment I am study....* – Could you *sent....?* – I would also *studing....*

– I would like (...) in college of education – this router *routing* and *conversion* of data

– This type *doesn’t causes* diseases **Ph.D.**

–... we *can not seeing* in the naked eyes because ... and we *can saying* in the ...

### **2.3.1.3 Concord**

Under this heading, many cases showing students’ misunderstanding of the different types of concord in English are cited. Concord, which may include concord of number between subjects and verbs, between demonstratives (or quantity words) and nouns and other cases, constitutes a serious problem for students as their mistakes show:

– in all *place..* ,... *a stallites*, *Three part..* , – *Some phone* – the first parts...

– *Tow other Employer* – *another objects* like .... – G *mean* global, P *mean* position, ...

– The parts of the GPS is The first part.... – *She go* to first class at about 9 o’clock.

– *we normal means...* –*These is* a man-made object, – ... scientists also *uses...(repeated)*

– *Satellites is an objects which is orbiting* – ... *others orbits...*

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– *These are a man-made object...– other computers usually has... many thing*

– *Satellite is objects which is orbit another objects – Most these body orbits*

– *Laptop are a types of personal computers which prints and saves many information*

### **Ph.D.**

– *I want flat near in Job and contain one , – The program of this conference include*

– *on the second and third day will include the program a lecture at 10:00 for two an hour*

– *a heart attacks – their body is unicellular, – There are two type (part) – many Disease ...*

– *Bacteria is one of moicroorganisms. It is harmful and some of them ...*

### **2.3.1.4 Use of Pronouns:**

Though pronouns in English are few in number, they constitute a big problem for many students. Students really ignore how to

change or use pronouns in their writings. In the following instances, students kept using the same pronouns given within the questions where they were asked to address a person (or persons) or they unnecessarily shifted in pronouns (*him* into *they*) within the same sentence. They even misuse the correct forms of subject, object and possession pronouns and their references. Note the following cases:

– *Type of course they offer (supposed to be you offer)*

– *I am Asking him (you) about the study the types of courses they (you) offer.*

– *I would you like to knew the types of courses ... offer, the things you (I) like ...*

– *you sensierly – yours time... – he father got a job....,– ... because his got a ...*

– *Just writing for you to let me know...– Please your wait me,*

### **Ph.D.**



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- I would to tell *him (you)* about...
- ... and *he (you)* come back to your hotel.
- . your arrival will be at.... please find attached *my (your)* arrival and departure details...
- ...but *Ask her (you)* to find *you (me)* a suitable place to...
- *I'll my* know address, *I'll* email or ring you, and *we* can to meet *you*,
- *Bacteria* are.... *It* consist of one cell, *So their body* is unicellular.
- *he* is adrem and *he* is a bueitfull. *he* is 4 years old *my* Birthday in 24/1

### **2.3.1.5 Using Compound and Complex Sentences:**

Students tend to express their ideas as they flow in their minds without paying attention to how they express them. In fact, they have some ideas about joining sentences but their ideas are incomplete and inaccurate.

- I am Asking him about the study the types of courses they offer.

- The article every young student join to university.
- Yinan's family move to london he father got a job...
- The article is speak about GPS in use in our life and *to see in* all place, car, airplane, street and space the edia not one lost.
- The parts of the GPS is The first part is the recever *and* the sucand part is a groubs satellite *and* The third part is a net work groun of the earth state.
- She find the place, call me the namber 126654. **Ph.D.**
- I'll my know address, I'll email or ring you, and we can to meet you,
- Iraq's economy depends mainaly on Petrole. *Secondely* on Farming, tourisim.
- they *are containing...* *and are not containing ...*, *and* apparatus *and* have a circular DNA *and missing...*
- Bacteria are very important in our life *and* have damage *and* benefit at the same time *and* attached with us

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in all our life *and* Bacteria are present in the air *and* soil *and* even ...

– *Thought* the Bacteria have many damages for human *and* we can not seeing in the naked eyes *because it is* very small and we can *saying (see)* in the Microscope.

### 2.3.1.6 Using Articles:

Students really have serious problems with articles especially the definite article ‘*the*’. They keep using ‘*the*’ in certain places where it is not required, and sometimes they do not use it at all where necessary. Note the following:

#### –Unnecessary use of articles:

– in **the** studying biological... – in the studying in college – a (the) English

– to *The* locate *Things* – in *the* America (repeated) – in *the* sience, – in *a* kingdom hotel

– is *the a* major all over the world *of the days.* –*a Cairo suburb (Ph.D.)*

#### –Lack of articles (or pronouns):

–*Type* of course they offer – I have *diploma* English. – I want to complet *master study*

– Thank you for *time* – ... in *college* of education, –in *library*

– A groub satellit orbeting *Eerth*  
– very young student University in Oxford.

–Article is Lost ... – I want flat near in Job...

– and kitchen and *near in kindegradin Ph.D.*

– plenary session , – coffee rest,  
– Canada study, – Cairo university study

### 2.3.1.7 Wrong Use of

#### **Prepositions:**

This case includes a variety of instances where students either misuse the appropriate preposition or do not use a preposition at all:

#### –Lack of prepositions:

– in studying the university of – I forward hearing you. – I have diploma English.

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– B.A Geography – Yinan study  
oxford university – group  
satellites...

– ... we need our life –a teacher  
school – Most these bodies  
(repeated)

### –Inappropriate use of prepositions:

– asking *for* the study – I am  
study *of* the University of Baghdad  
– ... interested *for* ..  
– join *to* university – ...because it  
was *near of* London –... orbiting  
*about* Earth.

– My sister is Layla's a teacher *in*  
*at* school – At 2 o'clock to leaves *at*  
home

–... must be *near from* my work, –  
... *at* sunday (...) about 7 **Ph.D.**

– I want flat *near in* Job ..., –  
and *near in* ... – ... *in* 12-14  
pm – *in* every where,

– causing many disease *of* the  
human

### **2.3.2 Spelling Mistakes:**

Students committed a large number  
of spelling mistakes. It seems that

some of the spelling mistakes they  
did resulted from their hastiness or  
little attention as they used the  
correct forms of certain words within  
the same piece of writing.  
Nevertheless, most of their spelling  
mistakes really express their  
ignorance of the correct forms of  
words.

### –Hastiness or little attention

– *Oxfor* university, – *Think* for *thank*  
(repeated), *cours* for *courses*, *thik*,  
*presond*,

*Positiones* *Stationes*, *satelites*,  
*sateelite*

### – Incomplete knowledge concerning the correct form of the words used:

*enveronement*, *intersting*, *studing*  
(repeated), *sensierly*, *intersted*,  
*anapllacation* from,

*resturant*, *complet*, *year's*  
*sincelely*,... 14 eary old to engioy...,  
*studed*, *Ingland*, *recever* ,

*sucand*, *scond*, *scount*, *groun*.  
*partable*, *ambert* (important), *in*  
*knownen* (knowing), *aptable*

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resevire (portable receiver), advice  
and a dives (*a device* repeated  
many times)

orbeting Eerth, onother, frend, tow  
(two), scentinsts alsoe use the  
tearm for natueral

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kindegradin, Aslamk university,  
liblery good bay (bye) Denar,  
hopping (hoping),

repeated), folanens and firest,  
inrece (increase), tow (repeated  
many times), tacle (tackle)

abute (about) and scond (repeated),  
canad, headatteed (heart attack)  
and cunser (cancer)

–The *aire plollution* , soures, vohcle,  
volecanes and tres fiair (tree fires),  
studay, ciro (Cairo), hard attickces  
(heart attacks), studed (studied),  
lariq, turky Irain,

### **2.3.3 Punctuation Mistakes:**

This area constitutes a large  
proportion of students' mistakes.  
Though students are instructed to  
use all types of punctuation marks  
appropriately, they keep using

capitals where unnecessary, small  
letters where capitals are required,  
commas without rules, and many  
other instances where punctuation  
marks are largely violated. Note the  
following:

### **–Starting sentences with small letters:**

– *please* can you me take... – at  
the moment I am working in  
library...– the first parts...

– first layla's to gets – *in* the  
morning. she writing plan to study  
the pupils. *fnally* she...

– a personal phone can be portable.  
*ts* make calls phone. *t's* weigh  
about 300–400 g.

– *. your* arrival will be at 16:00 ....  
*please* find attached *my* arrival .....

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– *briefly* the programme is .. . *on*  
the first day... – two studies done  
...

– however, Canada study  
investigated asthama. – *air*  
pollution is the fire and volcanoes...

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– *he* is adrem and he is a bueitfull.  
*he* is 4 years old *my* Birthday in  
 24/1

### –Random use of capital and small

#### letters:

– university of Baghdad College of  
 education – university of  
 Baghdad...  
 – the university of Baghdad/ college  
 of education – the university of  
 oxford  
 – the university of Baghdad. ...in  
 college of education in department  
 Geography.  
 – move to *london*, a *Job* near  
*london*, ...is working *In Bg*  
*Company* called the  
*Middle east... Type* of course... –  
 ... I am *Asking* – ... asked about  
*The* types of ....  
 – Department of *history* in *kufa*  
*university* **Ph.D.**  
 – ... *in a kingdom hotel*, ... a lecture  
 entitle '*science technology*'  
 –... followed by *Return* to the hotel  
 and having *Dinner*, – *kufa university*

– ... the university of west London  
 ph.D., – London university to do my  
 ph.D. IN Arts.

– Cairo university, – *cairo*  
 (repeated) suburb and the second in  
 ottawa, canad (repeated)

### –Inappropriate use of punctuation

#### marks like full stops, commas

#### and question marks:

– Could *have* send me ... *you* like  
 to study. and the start of the new  
 courses.  
 – GPS is a small aptable resevire  
 radio, GPS is a mean advice to  
 knowen located The persons, GPS  
 are parts of *Three* part.  
 – The parts are the first recever The  
 second statite. the third network of  
 GPS.  
 – Phone we need our life It is  
 necessary... –I applaing ...,  
 Because I like...  
 –year 's old – year's sincelely –  
 I'am....– father Yinan's.... –  
 Layla 's is a teacher.

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– ...Her work 's so, she open 's usually... – ... object which *orbite's* another...

– They air pollution is There are tow They mad-humaen inrece car in city. (*Ph.D.*)

– They study in cairo study headatteed and cunser *the scond* study the astame.

– They are volcanoes and forest fires. Athans, Mosco and mobed, the studied first in cairo, But studend soucnd in Canada, each studies ...

*Notes:*

– *The words 'mistakes' and 'errors' are mutually used to indicate the same meaning.*

–*All the samples given under the different specified headings start with those taken from M.A. students' papers followed by those taken from Ph. D. students' papers. This is indicated by the use of the abbreviation Ph.D. in front of the first sentence of their samples.*

*–The chosen samples include a variety of mistakes not only those specified by the type of heading.*

*–Few chosen samples have been repeated under different headings because certain mistakes may be categorized differently in terms of what is missing, added or deleted.*

### **3.1 Introduction**

The main aim of teaching a foreign language is to help students learn the main language skills including speaking, reading, writing and understanding. One of the most important skills postgraduate students need to master is writing. Most of them, especially those in the scientific departments, need to write papers, summaries, discussions and sometimes their theses in English. They usually have most of their mainstream subjects in English. When they use English in discussing or writing these subjects, their (and even their teachers') focus is actually not on the correct use of

English in writing, but rather on the ideas expressed even if the language used is poor. In fact, writing in English is not an easy mission as it requires good knowledge of the language linguistic rules. Rules related to sentence formation, word arrangement, spelling, style, punctuation... and many other areas of language that need to be learned and mastered.

We have noted the great number of mistakes committed by both M.A. and Ph.D. students. Their mistakes have been categorized into many types to show what areas that cause students more problems. In this section, we are going to present some explanations and illustrations for the possible causes that make them commit such mistakes in an attempt to make the process of teaching postgraduates successful and fruitful.

### ***3.2 Explanation of Students' Errors***

The data for the analysis, as shown, have been chosen from students' assignments and examination papers. Concerning the assignments, students were asked to write about general as well as specific topics which are part of the activities given in their textbooks. The aim of such activities is to encourage students to express their ideas about the given topics taking into consideration the items being taught and the techniques they learned to write properly. The other source for the chosen data was students' examination papers. Their exams included different types of questions on both the recognition and production levels. Different types of errors have been identified, classified, analyzed and arranged into several groups showing the variety of mistakes they committed.

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Committing mistakes by language learners is something inevitable in the process of learning a foreign language (Corder, 1967). Some of the students' errors are not only syntactically ill-formed but also semantically unacceptable. They have some ideas when they are asked to write about certain topics, but they do not know how to express them correctly using the appropriate rules of language and its vocabulary. The following pieces of writing (for PhD students in the Arabic and Geography departments), which include a variety of mistakes (grammar, spelling, punctuation and unclear denotations), really convey nothing but unclear and irrelevant ideas. Anyone who has no idea about the topic finds it difficult to understand what they mean. They are completely vague and confusing.

– Air is pollution incross fors wood caused by problem. Thereare for air pollution two enteral and human for

examples mining, foster solid wood poor, mining.there are any studies Reserch gorup uy is Astma. Cario (London). each study investigate cerand.

–I am very love my mother, Because It's making life and staying her, she is brings the health and Alsada, It's same to content where to live in her people. It's cost her to bring sad and sik, I write this letter, or article of my mother, But it isnot broder her ward, my mother is end life her Because it was very sik, that sik dangrouse wher sodua Ae die and her. I love my mother

It is difficult to specify the type of most of the mistakes in such pieces and others like them. Corder (ibid:167) points out that "learner's errors ... provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using (i.e. has learned) at a particular point in the course (and it must be repeated that he is using



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some system, although it is not yet the right system)". So students learn something about the English language and its rules, but their learning is incomplete and inaccurate. Here comes the teacher's role to complete what is missing and correct the faulty and inaccurate ideas.

Learners' errors can be attributed to two main sources interlingual and intralingual errors. Richards (1970:2) define interlingual errors as "errors caused by the interference of the learner's mother tongue". They occur when "the characteristics of one language (usually the mother language) are being carried over into another" (ibid:3). A number of studies investigated the effect of learners' first language on learning English as a second or foreign language. Ngangbam (2016:2) makes reference to such studies that emphasize the influence of the first

language on learning English. She states that "the context of English in the Arab countries does also have its impact on the type of English learned, due to the Arabic language interference". She suggests that understanding the influence the first language has on learning English as a foreign language highly helps teachers diagnose students' difficulties when learning (ibid).

When students are asked to write about a specific topic in English, the first thing they do is composing their ideas in Arabic as it is easier for them to find suitable words to express what they want to convey. Then they start translating them into English using their simple vocabulary about the topic and the rules they learned about forming sentences. Consequently, what they know about Arabic language rules affects in one way or another the type of sentences they produce in English as in the cases of the wrong word order errors, lack of

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verb to *be* in sentences requiring its use or the selection of certain words which do not actually convey the meanings in English but they are used in Arabic to convey certain meanings, like *take a lecture* and *take information*.

Intralingual errors and developmental errors, on the other hand, are those errors reflecting—the learner's inability to separate two languages, intralingual and developmental errors reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage, and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition.

Their origins are found within the structure of English itself, and through reference to the strategy by which a second language is acquired and taught (Richards, 1970:2) In his paper, Richards (ibid: 6–21) discusses intralingual

(developmental) errors in terms of four sources: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized. Most of students' errors can be attributed to one of these sources or another. These errors reflect the difficulties which students face when learning English. Corder (1973:265) points out that error analysis aims at achieving both theoretical and practical aims. The first has significance to linguistic studies, while the second is mainly significant for the teacher. He states that

Errors provide feedback, they tell the teacher something about the effectiveness of

his teaching materials and his teaching techniques, and show him what parts of the

syllabus he has been following have been inadequately learned or taught and need

further attention. They enable him to decide whether he can move on to the next item

on the syllabus or whether he must devote more time to the item he has been working on.

So error analysis plays a very important role in the process of teaching and learning English. They are significant for both teachers and students and they are used to achieve a variety of goals.

Furthermore, it has been noted and illustrated that many errors committed by Ph.D. students are almost the same as those committed by M.A. students. This proves that students, regardless of their levels, have the same problems when writing in English. Improving students' writings requires too much work on the part of the teacher as students are unaware of their mistakes otherwise they do not commit them.

### ***3.3 Description of Students'***

#### ***Textbooks:***

Postgraduate students have English in the two courses of their first preparatory year. The time allocated for teaching in the two courses is two class hours per week. In their courses, they have prescribed textbooks to follow represented by the series of *"New Headway. Academic Skills: Reading, Writing and Study Skills"*. M.A students are supposed to be given the second level of this series which is actually a copy of the first level but in a different form, while the Ph.D. students are given the third level which includes complicated teaching materials that do not actually suit students' levels and background knowledge.

The textbooks prescribed for postgraduate students are considered as the main knowledge base for teaching. This consideration is not surprising due to the global marketing of textbooks

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(Thombury, 2011:194. in J. Simpson (ed.)). In relation to this point, Kumaravadivelu (2003) states that “Because of the global spread of English, ELT has become a global industry with high economic stakes, and textbook production has become one of the engines that drives the industry’ (ibid: 255 cited in Thombury,2011: 194). This series has been adopted to unify the type of materials used in teaching postgraduate students. But does the choice of this series help to meet the course objectives and requirements, satisfy students’ needs and take into consideration their different levels and knowledge backgrounds?

The chosen books aim at developing a number of study skills including writing, reading and listening. Richards et al. (1992:359 cited in Hyland: 2006: 19–18) define study skills as follows:

Abilities, techniques and strategies which are used when reading, writing, or listening for study purposes. For example, study skills needed by university students studying from English language textbooks include: adjusting reading speeds according to the type of material being read, using the dictionary, guessing word meanings from context, interpreting graphs, diagrams, and symbols, note taking and summarising.

And this is, in fact, what is presented in the series used in teaching postgraduates. Hyland (ibid:18) argues that the study skills approach requires students to have more than just linguistic knowledge to succeed. He adds that “The main idea of the study skills approach is that there are common reasoning and interpreting processes underlying communication which help us to understand discourse.

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Rather than focusing on linguistic form, it is seen as being more productive to focus on interpretative strategies and other competences". But if students' linguistic knowledge and interpretive abilities are really poor, how will they be able to handle and master such skills?

'*New Headway Academic Skills*' series is more concerned with improving students' abilities in reading, writing and study than grammar. Some simple spots have been assigned in the books of the series to shed light on some grammatical points here and there related to the given topics to be read or written. These grammatical points are explained but they are not given serious attention and explanation supposing that students at this stage have sufficient knowledge concerning the given points. Most of them do have such knowledge but applying these grammatical points in large pieces of writing is what really troubles

them. The type of teaching materials presented in this series does not meet our students' needs as they need more focus to be put on certain grammatical areas. Besides, the authors of this series use the skimming and scanning strategies as a method of communicative teaching enabling students deduce information from the reading passages with a quick reading. This is quite good but does it really suit Iraqi students who consider the English lesson as the most difficult lesson in their curriculum since the primary stage? Students usually need to read a specific simple passage many times to understand it and they usually ask their teachers to summarize the passage in a form of wh/ questions to make it easier for them. So, how does it come that students with such abilities can induce rules, write paragraphs and understand passages by quick reading?

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In spite of the fact that the series, especially the first level, presents some information about good writing in terms of style, punctuation marks and arranging ideas, it really overlooks the fact that students have greater trouble with the language rules and vocabulary than with the requirements for good writing. We have noted that many mistakes are related to grammar or vocabulary and others are related either to the style used, the spelling of words or the punctuation marks applied. Other problems related to learning reading or understanding something still exist as there is not enough time to cover everything, to give students opportunities to take part in the lesson or to add what is necessary. Another important problem is that most postgraduate students are not interested in English (they study just to pass). They need to be motivated to study, participate and have some interest in the English lesson by using

methods and techniques that make them eager and enthusiastic to learn and develop.

### ***3.4 Teaching Materials and Writing:***

By teaching English in the two courses, students are expected to be proficient at a number of skills in English such as writing, reading and speaking. In his paper, Corder (1967) makes reference to an interesting statement said by Von Humboldt in which he states that “we cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind (of a learner) in its own way”. Corder adds that this cannot be achieved unless we, as teachers, know how a learner learns the new language and what his built-in syllabus is, and by knowing this, with the aid of errors committed by learners, “We may be able to allow the learner’s innate strategies to dictate our practice and determine our syllabus; we may learn to adapt

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ourselves to *his* needs rather than impose upon him *our* preconceptions of *how* he ought to learn, *what* he ought to learn and *when* he ought to learn it” (ibid:169).

In Saad (2014:16–17), we suggested a number of areas to be included and covered in the M.A. academic course. They include lesson presentation, note-taking, academic writing, seminars, reading comprehension and others. At that time, there was no specific textbook to be used in teaching postgraduate students. So, teachers used to choose whatever they liked to present in the English lesson. They usually taught students some language rules which were randomly chosen and texts in students’ specializations. Hence students in different departments used to study different types of English in terms of the materials they had been given. Using a prescribed textbook in teaching is a good idea but what is

the right textbook that suits students with different levels and knowledge backgrounds in English? The textbook has been chosen but teachers should not completely stick to it. They can add, prepose and postpone materials, delete what is unnecessary and useless, substitute some difficult passages and topics with what they find more relevant, intelligible, interesting and beneficial for students.

Blue (1996:88) divides the area of writing for academic purposes (WAP) into two main divisions: Writing for General Academic Purposes (WGAP) and Writing for Specific Academic Purposes (WSAP). Actually, dividing English, as well as writing, in this way is quite proper as teachers of English will be aware of what to teach, whom and how. Kroll (2001:224 in Celce–Murcia eds.) suggests a number of devices, which she refers to as “heuristic devices”, which provide students with a number of

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techniques that may enable them produce ideas when writing. These include brainstorming, listing, clustering and freewriting. Each one of these techniques helps students in one way or another form and arrange their ideas concerning certain topics they are asked to write about, but students need more than these. They need to learn proper ways to express their ideas correctly. Kroll further suggests the use of readings to help learners improve their writings. She (ibid: 225) points out that “close reading exercises can be done to draw students’ attention to particular stylistic choices, grammatical features, methods of development, markers of cohesion and coherence, and so on”. She clarifies that students who are asked by their professors to write summaries or analyses concerning certain topics in their fields of specializations really need such a practice before they start writing. So, teachers need to

incorporate certain reading exercises as part of their plan to develop students’ writings.

Hinkel (2004: x), in the preface of his book, points out that to decide “what a L2 writing course has to address and what L2 writers must know is based on the findings of research into academic text and the text produced by L2 writers”. So, the findings of this study make it quite necessary to reconsider the material used to teach postgraduate students. This does not mean that we need to make radical changes but we need to add what we find essential and useful for our students to satisfy their needs. We may focus on specific areas which students find difficult or unclear and those which they need in their fields of specialization. Hinkel (ibid:8) states that many previous studies have shown that learning to write appropriately “requires the development of an advanced linguistic foundation, without which



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learners simply do not have the range of lexical and grammar skills required in academic writing". Accordingly, they need to be taught some important grammatical rules, especially those specified here, necessary vocabulary, some notes about how to read well, and some instructions about the proper ways to present and arrange a well-organized piece of writing. If these are simply and neatly presented, a teacher can guarantee students' progress and success.

### ***3.5 Suggestions***

–After identifying errors in students' assignments and examination papers, teachers should discuss the most important types of errors in their papers and make reference to the reasons lying behind committing them. By doing this, they will draw students' attention to their mistakes and possibly they will be avoided in the future. What is important is that students should be made active participants in the process of

correcting their mistakes. This, definitely, has a positive effect on students as they will keep in memory those mistakes specified by their teachers and corrected by them.

–Students need to be guided when writing as teachers' notes and instructions may help them specify their mistakes and thus evoke their interest to know the correct forms. They should be asked to avoid thinking in Arabic or use word for word translation when they start writing something in English. In fact, this is one of the main causes making students commit mistakes.

– The high frequency of errors shown by the analysis implicates that certain types of programs are needed to ensure that students will not commit such mistakes in their future writings.

–To decide what type of teaching materials postgraduate students need in the two courses of their preparatory year of study, we need

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to examine and explain the errors committed by their colleagues in the preceding years. The different types of mistakes committed by postgraduate students in their writings urge us to find out the reasons lying behind such mistakes among which, which is of primary importance for us, is the type of teaching materials to be used in teaching.

–A teacher should not restrict himself to the materials presented in textbooks or their order. They have to teach what they feel important and choose whatever techniques they find interesting and fruitful.

– Since students committed a large number of spelling mistakes, as it has been noticed, it becomes quite necessary and important to give them certain spelling exercises to help them, at least, decrease the number of spelling mistakes they commit when they write.

–Since students in the scientific departments and colleges use

English more than those in the literary ones and they are actually cleverer and more skillful than students in the literary departments, as it has been noted through teaching them, it will be better to use ESAP in their teaching and of course reference will automatically be made to the general teaching of English. But are factors like teachers, facilities and materials used for teaching English for specific purposes available to make this suggestion work?

–EGAP, on the other hand, is preferred for students in the literary departments as the main aim of teaching them is to improve their skills in English as a foreign language. They usually have some humble general knowledge about English, but this knowledge may be improved to a certain degree by intensive courses including the teaching materials and techniques that suit their abilities and levels.

### ***4. Conclusions:***

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From the data presented and analyzed, it can be concluded that students have serious problems in learning English in general and in expressing their ideas on papers in particular. They mainly have serious problems in forming sentences, ordering elements within a sentence and cross sentences, using verbs (in terms of their forms and tenses), spelling words, using punctuation marks and even organizing their ideas. Students' problems can be attributed to the interference of their first language, misunderstanding the correct sentence structures, the incorrect application of the grammatical rules they are learning and sometimes inadequate teaching. This is partly due to the fact that English is given to postgraduate students as a secondary lesson with the load of the mainstream subjects in their courses. Students actually pay little attention to what is given to them in the English lesson as their focus is

on those main subjects which overload their courses. Besides, the short time of the English lesson and the type of materials presented in their English textbooks are among the factors which impede their learning. Postgraduates need intensive courses in English language to help them master some of the important skills of English.

On the other hand, the large number of mistakes identified in students' papers urges us to reconsider the teaching materials and methods we are using in the non-departmental teaching of English. Teachers should put more emphasis on those errors which cause students more problems when writing to draw their attention to such mistakes in an attempt to make them avoid doing them in the future. Their students' needs must be the first goal they try to attain. Diagnosing the different types of errors committed by postgraduate students facilitates the mission of

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language teachers as the areas that cause students problems have been specified and described and thus teachers become aware of them and try to focus on them more in their teaching. Errors in students' writings can be lessened with accurate and proper teaching.

It is important to mention here that it is impossible for learners of English as a foreign language, whether as a major or a secondary subject, to master the language completely. In this respect, Larsen–Freeman (1991: 337) states that “for most adult learners, complete mastery of

the L2 may be impossible,” and that the purpose of L2 teaching and learning is to enable “learners to go as far as they are capable of going in the L2, but...teachers should be realistic in their expectations” (Cited in Hinkel, 2004: 38). It is the teacher, not the student, who can make the teaching process successful and fruitful. He can be creative in using the teaching methods and materials, enthusiastic to teach the language, patient with his students and skillful in making his students interested in the language and eager to learn it.

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## المشاكل التي يواجهها طلبة الدراسات العليا في تطوير مهاراتهم الكتابية

### الخلاصة:

يهدف البحث بصورة رئيسة إلى توضيح المشكلات الأساسية التي يواجهها طلبة الدراسات العليا (طلبة الماجستير والدكتوراه) في الأقسام المختلفة بكلية التربية للبنات (الأقسام العلمية والأدبية) عند استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية في الكتابة. تُدرس اللغة الإنجليزية لهم كدرس ثانوي في الفصليين الدراسيين للسنة التحضيرية من دراستهم. من المفترض أن يساعد تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية الطلبة في تطوير مهاراتهم في القراءة والكتابة، وبالتالي سيكونون قادرين على فهم موادهم الأساسية التي تُدرس باللغة الإنجليزية. تم شرح مشاكل الطلبة وتوضيحها من خلال تحديد وتحليل الأنواع المختلفة من الأخطاء التي قاموا بعملها في أوراق الامتحانات والواجبات الخاصة بهم

لتحديد الأسباب الكامنة وراء القيام بها.

تم في البداية تحديد وشرح الأنواع المختلفة من الأخطاء التي استخرجت من الأوراق الامتحانية للطلبة وواجباتهم. حيث تم تصنيف الأخطاء إلى أنواع مختلفة ورتبت في مجاميع من أجل توضيح أهم الجوانب التي تسبب مشاكل للطلبة. بعدها تمت الإشارة إلى الأسباب المحتملة لهذه المشكلات، مثل تدخل اللغة الأولى للطلبة، والمعرفة غير الكاملة فيما يتعلق بالقواعد الأساسية للكتابة وقواعد اللغة الإنجليزية، ومدة الفصل الدراسي، واهتمام الطلبة، والمواد التعليمية والأساليب المستخدمة. وكذلك تم تقديم بعض الاقتراحات لمساعدة الطلبة في التغلب على هذه المشكلات في كتاباتهم المستقبلية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأخطاء، تحليل الأخطاء، مهارات الكتابة، تدخل اللغة الأم، طرق التدريس.