



An Analysis of Turkish EFL Students' Writing Errors

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ABSTRACT

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Various errors come out during writing as it is a highly complicated skill and requires higher-order thinking skills to activate the cognitive processes. Determining these errors is crucial for eliminating them. Mostly preferred way for determining them is performing an Error Analysis (EA). Hence, employing a screening model, the study aimed to reveal types, categories, and sources of errors in Turkish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' writings as well as to explore potential differences in error frequencies based on their departments and genders by performing an EA. The data obtained from the research were analyzed through document analysis. The sample of the study included 42 students studying at English Language Teaching (ELT) and English Language and Literature (ELL) departments of a state university in Türkiye. All of them were in English preparatory classes and at B2 level. They were asked to write an essay in 150-250 words about one of the given topics. The error analysis revealed a total of 962 errors in Turkish EFL students' writings. The errors were gathered under three types: grammatical, semantical, and mechanical errors. Among these, grammatical errors were the most prevalent, encompassing a wide range of categories including verb/tense errors, article errors, preposition errors, and others. Semantical errors, involving word choice, coherence, and ambiguity, followed next in frequency. Mechanical errors namely spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and contractions, were also prominent. The current study sought to explore whether there were statistically significant differences in error frequencies between students studying in the departments of ELT and ELL, as well as between female and male students. The analysis revealed no significant differences between the error frequencies of ELT and ELL students. On the other hand, a statistically significant difference was observed between error frequencies of female and male students. Female students produced less errors compared to the male ones.

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INTRODUCTION

Essentially, across all languages, there exist four fundamental language skills, namely, writing, speaking, listening, and reading. These are the core competencies for healthy communication. Writing is very important for several reasons such as improving vocabulary and grammar, giving students the opportunity to develop their learning about the language, and elaborating communication (Ahamed, 2016). In this digital era, recent technological developments have made writing more important in many areas such as informatics, distant learning, and digital learning. However, this essential skill may be regarded as challenging. It is challenging for not only native but also non-native writers of a language (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018) because it is not just writing symbols. Writing requires higher-order thinking skills to activate cognitive processes. According to Yılmaz and Kadan (2019), writing feelings and thoughts in an explicit way necessitates cognitive ability. Several definitions have been proposed for this difficult skill by different researchers. For instance, Byrne (1996) defines it as ciphering a prompt written through a series of statements sequenced in some ways, which necessitates a few steps, while Galbraith et al. (2005) describes it as an active process including three main cognitive activities which are planning, producing a text, and reviewing.

Writing is a highly complicated skill consisting of several processes. According to Marchisan and Alber (2013), it is a complex competency including some steps such as pre-writing, writing, revising, and publishing (as cited by Cahyaningtyas et al., 2018). Alsamadani (2010) also defines it as a “*complex, challenging and difficult process*” consisting of several phases such as identifying thesis statement, creating supporting details, revising and editing.

Writing in mother tongue or in a foreign language are both crucial. However, writing in a foreign language is more complicated than writing in mother tongue (Borsuk et al., 2009; Gile, 2011; Manik et al., 2017; Muresan & Bardi, 2012; Roig, 2013; Wang, 2012). For foreign language learners, there are some competence levels taken as a reference. These levels are defined as the competence levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). The levels for all language skills including writing are separately identified. The study highlights the writing errors of the students at B2 level, and the type of text is essay. Davies (2004) reports that essays are regarded as a mechanism for evaluating a student’s subjective competencies. Therefore, in this study, essay type was employed for revealing the students’ competencies in writing by evaluating their errors, and B2 level was taken as a reference. According to CEFR, the students writing an essay or a report at B2 level can:

- create an essay or report with significant points and supporting details,
- describe a complex process thoroughly,
- analyze different thoughts or solutions suggested for a problem,
- create an essay or a report that stimulates an argument by giving information about advantages and disadvantages of something,
- gather information from various sources. (Council of Europe, 2020).

Undoubtedly, many writers do not follow the above-mentioned steps while writing (Alsamadani, 2010; Galbraith et al., 2005; Marchisan & Alber, 2013). This may be the reason why they have difficulty in writing. However, Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) claims that there are some factors such as extensive grammar knowledge, sufficient vocabulary, organizational skills, writing mechanics, and style, which make writing more difficult. Regardless of the reasons, it is a notable fact that writing is not an easy process. That is why various errors come out. Especially learners of a new language are liable to make errors while writing in a target language.

Errors are mostly confused with mistakes. Therefore, it would be better to clarify the main difference between these two terms. According to Corder (1967), errors are important in the process of

learning, not mistakes. Errors are significant as they help us learn about linguistic knowledge of an individual regarding the target language. For writing in a foreign language, errors stem from inadequate knowledge of the learner about the target language while mistakes result from his/her deficiency in writing performance. Errors about a foreign language may be related to comprehension or production. Comprehension is about how a receiver understands the message; whereas, production is about the way a sender generates it.

According to Ellis (1997), in processing notions, a primary difference between production and comprehension exists. Individuals from different ages can make errors both in their native and target languages. These errors may differ for foreign language learners. Particularly, if there are enormous semantic or syntactic differences between the native and target languages of the speaker, the number of errors can be higher. It should be remembered that making errors is necessary for improving one's learning (Hendrickson, 1978; Garcia et al., 2011). On the other hand, identifying types of errors is crucial for a foreign language teacher to eliminate these errors, too. It is like diagnosing an illness. Unless an illness is diagnosed, it is impossible to heal it. This is the same for writing. A teacher who teaches writing should identify what kind of errors the students make and what their causes are to eliminate these errors so as to improve their writing.

Different types of errors have been discussed in the literature. Wu and Garza (2014) reports that there are two basic error types regarding individual's oral and written performance. They are intralingual/developmental and interlingual/transfer errors. The former is about errors which are caused mostly by overgeneralizations in the target language, while the latter is related to negative interference of the native language. In addition, Smith and Stewart- McKoy (2017) categorize types of errors as lexical, grammatical, discourse, and ambiguous errors. Apart from types of errors, their sources are also important to be explored for finding suitable strategies to cope with them. Hence, Brown (1980) identifies sources of errors namely intralingual transfer, interlingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies. Contextual learning errors pertain to the adverse impact stemming from elements within the learning environment, encompassing factors like the classroom setting, instructional delivery, and curriculum design (Dehham, 2015). Communication strategies are employed by language learners to surmount communication obstacles stemming from an insufficiency or incapacity to access their second language (L2) proficiency (Ellis, 2003). Both contextual learning and communication strategies may also be involved in interlingual and intralingual transfer, and it is really difficult to determine whether an error stems from these two sources. Thus, just interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer were handled as the sources of errors in the current study. By determining the sources of errors, we can better understand the processes prompted in language learning.

The most preferred way of determining writing errors is performing an Error Analysis (EA). According to Gass and Selinker (2008), error analysis focuses on the errors learners produce. The study of errors is conducted via EA, and EA became familiar in applied linguistics only after the 1970s thanks to Corder (Ellis, 1997). Performing an EA is considered one of the best methods to define and describe errors, including writing errors, made by foreign language learners. According to Fang and Xue-mei (2007), teachers can obtain a general knowledge about students' errors through EA. It can also reveal error sources and reasons of these errors (Sompong, 2013). From this viewpoint, it can be suggested that conducting an EA is crucial for determining writing errors and their causes.

There have been several studies about writing errors in the literature. For instance, Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) analyzed 40 EFL students' writings in three different genres and categorized the first language interference writing errors under 16 categories. Errors in different genres were also different. Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) investigated writing errors of 90 students and suggested four error categories which were grammar, lexis, semantics, and mechanics. Wu and Garza (2014) found in their study in which they analyzed writings of EFL learners and followed a taxonomy including error types of grammatical, lexical, semantics, mechanics and word order that the learners

made more interlingual/transfer errors than intralingual/developmental errors. Kırkgöz (2010), in another study, examined errors in 120 essays written by 86 Turkish students and concluded that a vast majority of the errors stemmed from the interlingual transfer of the native language. Sürüç Şen and Şimşek (2020) also carried out a study on writing errors with 17 English preparatory students and found that the students made grammatical errors more than lexical and mechanical errors while writing. In another study conducted with ELT students, Taşçı and Aksu Ataç (2018) reported that errors of preposition were the most frequent grammatical errors among the students, and others were errors of verb, article, word class, pronoun and others.

On the other hand, writing accuracy rate by gender is still a controversial issue. Some studies investigating gender differences on writing errors have been carried out, but they have pointed out different results. For instance, Almusharraf and Alotaibi (2021) found no statistically significant difference between the total number of writing errors detected for the male and female students. Boroomand and Rostami Abusaeedi (2013); however, reported that female EFL students made more writing errors than the male students did. Lahuerta (2017) asserted that the number of errors made by the male students in the non-CLIL (content and language integrated learning) group was higher than the female students did, yet there was not a significant difference by gender in the CLIL group.

Related studies have shown that writing is an important and complicated skill to be gained by foreign language learners (Kadan & Arı, 2021; Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Othman, 2015; Shahhoseiny, 2015; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). This is also true for students studying English Language and Literature (ELL) or English Language Teaching (ELT). In Türkiye, ELT and ELL major students have to pass an English exam conducted by the university they are enrolled in before starting their tertiary education, and they have to take one year of English preparatory education if they are not able to pass it. They are generally expected to create proper and excellent essays by their teachers, and their writing errors are mostly regarded as problematic. This case is the same for all learners of a language as a foreign language. However, it should be considered that writing errors are important elements for teachers and researchers in that they give clues about writing progress and current knowledge of the learners. They give teachers a great opportunity to track improvement in their students' writings and to make changes where necessary. This study is regarded as significant since it provides teachers with comprehensive information about errors, writing errors, types of errors, and sources of errors. It also shows how to conduct an EA and to reveal error types as well as suggesting some treatment ways for eliminating recurrent errors. Moreover, it is significant as it questions whether department, and gender have an impact on students' writing errors. In this respect, it seems to pioneer in the field.

The main purpose of the research was to reveal types, categories, and sources of errors in Turkish EFL students' writings as well as to explore potential differences in error frequencies based on their departments and genders. Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

1. What types and categories of errors are found in Turkish EFL students' writings?
2. What is the frequency of errors?
3. What are the sources of errors in their writings?
4. Is there a statistically significant difference between the frequency of errors made by the students in ELT and in ELL?
5. Is there a statistically significant difference between the frequency of errors made by the female and male students?

METHOD

This research employed a document analysis, one of the qualitative research methods. Document analysis is a systematic process employed to examine or assess documents, which include both

physically and digitally printed materials (Bowen, 2009). Following the document analysis, the data were transferred into numerical data for quantitative analysis. The research design, study group, data collection and analysis were presented below.

Research Design

The survey method was employed in the current study. This method aims to identify the existing situation as it is (Büyüköztürk et al., 2016). The data were analyzed through document analysis. Written materials covering information about the facts to be probed are analyzed via document analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The data of the study were obtained through essays written by ELT and ELL students. Through document analysis, the errors in the essays were identified, classified, quantified, and their sources were revealed.

Participants

42 students studying at a state university in Türkiye, 21 of whom were in the department of English Language and Literature and 21 of whom were in the department of English Language Teaching, were included in the study. All of them were in English preparatory classes and at B2 level according to CEFR. The data regarding gender of the students are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of students in the departments of ELT and ELL by gender

ELT		ELL		Total	
Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
8	13	14	7	22	20

As shown in Table 1, almost half of the students are male, and the number of female and male students is very close (f=22; f=20, respectively).

Data Collection and Analysis

For obtaining the necessary data, the participants were asked to write an essay in 150-250 words in one hour about one of the topics below:

- one of your best summer holidays,
- causes of laziness,
- living alone and living with a family,
- positive or negative effects of playing with tablets.

Almost half of the students preferred to write about one of their best holidays (f=19). Some of them wrote about positive or negative effects of playing with tablets (f=11), and living alone and living with a family (f=7). On the other hand, a few of them wrote about causes of laziness (f=5). The researcher followed several steps of error analysis identified by Gass and Selinker (2008) as follows: first, data were collected through students' essays. Second, the errors were detected by scrutinizing the erroneous sentences. Then, these errors were classified and sorted into several types. Finally, results were deduced from the data analyzed. The process of error analysis is illustrated in Figure 1.

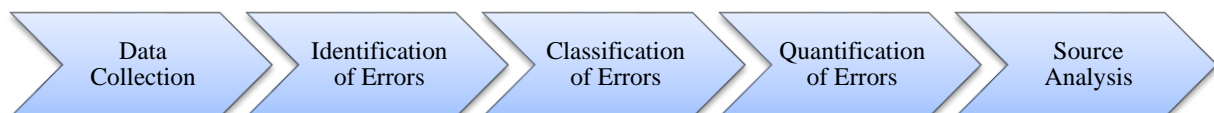


Figure 1. The process of error analysis

The data source consisted of 42 essays written about four separate topics. The essays were written in 150-250 words. Data were collected in writing classes given by the researcher in 2021-2022 academic year, and all of the students voluntarily took part in the study. The data collection started in the middle of March 2022 and ended at the end of the same month. Thus, it lasted for two weeks. The

classification of the errors was also checked by a different language expert giving writing classes. Then, the rate of agreement was checked by using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula, and it was found to be 91%. In qualitative research studies, the agreement rate between the researcher and the expert should be 90% and over for enhancing reliability (Saban, 2009). Hence, the current study was considered to be reliable.

Ethic

It is ensured that scientific ethical principles and rules were followed at all stages of the study. All data and information about the sources were included in references. In addition, it is ensured that all the terms and conditions of the Publication Ethics Committee (COPE) were obeyed and ethical duties and responsibilities were carried out.

FINDINGS

The results deduced from the data through quantitative analyses were presented in tables and graphics. The findings with regards to the first research question are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *The types and categories of errors found in Turkish EFL students' writings*

<i>Types of Errors</i>	<i>Categories of Errors</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean*</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Grammatical	Verb / tense	84	2	8.73
	Sentence structure	3	0.07	0.31
	Article	72	1.71	7.48
	Preposition	60	1.43	6.24
	Singular – plural form	71	1.69	7.38
	Fragment	27	0.64	2.81
	Infinitive / Gerund	43	1.02	4.47
	Subject-verb agreement	25	0.60	2.60
	Comparison structure	2	0.05	0.21
	Word order	20	0.48	2.08
	Word form	32	0.76	3.33
	Pronoun	27	0.64	2.81
	Subtotal		466	11.09
Semantical	Word choice	91	2.17	9.46
	Run-on sentence	33	0.79	3.43
	Transition	13	0.31	1.35
	Unnecessary word	59	1.40	6.13
	Coherence	14	0.33	1.46
	Ambiguity	26	0.62	2.70
	Subtotal		236	5.62
Mechanical	Spelling	49	1.17	5.09
	Capitalization	62	1.48	6.44
	Punctuation	117	2.79	12.16
	Contraction	32	0.76	3.33
	Subtotal		260	6.2
Total	22	962	22.90	100

* To calculate means, total number of errors under each error category was divided by total number of students/essays (42).

As shown in Table 2, total number of errors made by Turkish EFL students was 962. Grammatical errors (f=466) seemed to be the most common type of error. It was followed by mechanical errors (f=260) and semantical errors (f=236). Punctuation (f=117) was the most common error category, while comparison structure was the least one (f=2). Word choice errors (91), verb/tense errors (f=84), article errors (f=72), singular-plural form (f=71), capitalization (f=62), preposition (f=60), unnecessary word (f=59) followed them. The other categories of errors were spelling (f=49), infinitive/gerund (f=43), run-on sentence (f=33), word form (f=32), contraction (f=32), fragment (f=27), pronoun (f=27),

ambiguity (f=26), subject-verb agreement (f=25), word order (f=20), coherence (f=14), transition (f=13), and sentence structure (f=3). The error sources revealed from the EFL students' writings are quantified in Table 3.

Table 3. *The sources of errors found in Turkish EFL students' writings*

Source of Errors	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Interlingual Transfer	316	32.85
Intralingual Transfer	646	67.15

It can be revealed from Table 3 that most of the errors made by the students (f=646) stemmed from intralingual transfer. The rest of the errors (f=316) resulted from L1 interference. To provide a better understanding, the sources of errors are also illustrated in Figure 2:

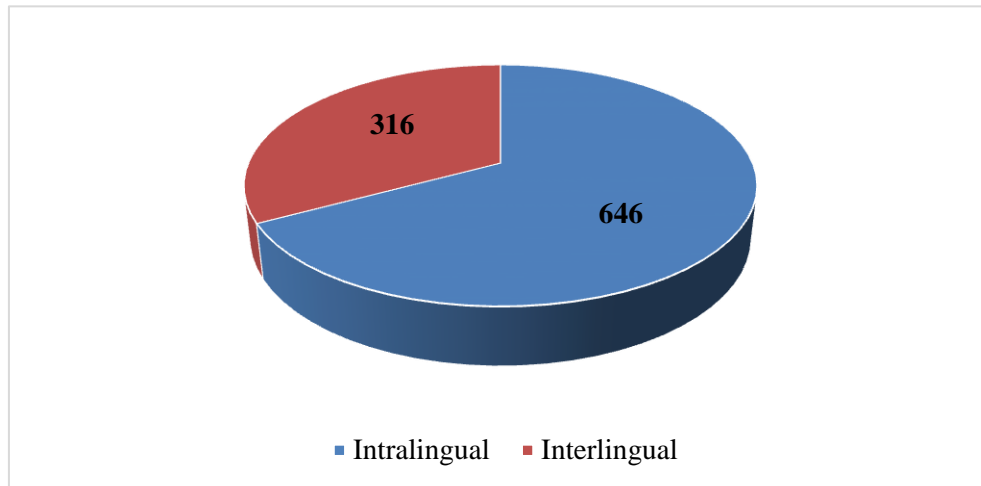


Figure 2. *The sources of errors found in Turkish EFL students' writings*

Independent samples t-test results of the analysis conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the frequency of errors made by ELT and ELL students are quantified in Table 4.

Table 4. *Independent samples t-test results for department*

Department	N	\bar{X}	SD	df	t	p
ELT	21	21.09	12.13	40	-.846	.403
ELL	21	24.71	15.40			

It was concluded from the results shown in Table 4 that there were not any statistically significant differences between the frequency of errors performed by ELT students and the frequency of errors made by ELL students [$t_{(42)} = -.846$; $p > .05$].

In addition, independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the frequency of errors made by female and male students (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Independent samples t-test results for gender*

Gender	N	\bar{X}	SD	df	t	p
Female	22	17.27	11.04	40	-3.035	.004
Male	20	29.10	14.14			

As shown in Table 5, a statistically significant difference emerged between the number of errors made by the female students and the male students [$t_{(42)} = -3.035$; $p < .05$]. It was in favor of the former group. The mean of the errors made by the male students ($\bar{x}=29.10$) was higher than of the errors produced by the female ones ($\bar{x}=17.27$), and this means that the female students were more successful in writing.

DISCUSSION

The study had the aim of investigating the types, categories, and sources of errors in Turkish EFL students' essays, as well as exploring potential differences in error frequencies based on their departments and genders. For this purpose, error analysis was performed. The error analysis revealed a total of 962 errors in Turkish EFL students' writings. The errors were gathered under three types: grammatical errors, semantical errors, and mechanical errors. Among these, grammatical errors were the most prevalent, encompassing a wide range of categories including article errors, preposition errors, verb/tense errors, and others. Semantical errors, involving word choice, coherence, and ambiguity, followed next in frequency. Mechanical errors namely spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and contractions, were also prominent.

When the relevant literature was searched, similar findings were reported in some other studies. For instance, Sürüç Şen and Şimşek (2020) pointed out that the most frequent type of error observed in the English preparatory students' essays was grammatical. They also claimed that the students' lexical and mechanical errors were less. Similarly, Nuruzzaman, Islam and Shuchi (2018) revealed that grammatical error was the most common error type in non-English major students' English paragraphs. Olsen (1999), in another study, emphasized that more incompetent pupils made more grammatical errors. Grammatical error was highlighted as the most frequent type of error in some other studies, too (Altameemy & Daradkeh, 2019; Marzoughi & Ghanbari, 2015; Wu & Garza, 2014).

On the other hand, among grammatical errors, the least frequent errors were comparison structure errors. The same result was obtained in a previous study (Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013). Whereas, verb/tense errors, article errors, and singular – plural form errors were the main errors in students' writings. Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) revealed in their study that verb/tense errors were at the highest in students' narrative writings. Similarly, Khatter (2019) stated that article errors and verb-tense errors were prevalent in students' writings. According to Kırkgöz (2010), the students made verb/tense errors more than other types of errors. Furthermore, Bensen Bostancı (2019) claimed that the students primarily made tense errors under the category of syntactic errors. Michaeldes (1990) also sorted errors into eight categories and expressed that wrong tense, and wrong use of articles were among these categories (as cited by Sompong, 2014). It was also concluded by Patarapongsanti et al. (2022) that Thai EFL undergraduates made more errors of article, punctuation and plurality than other types of errors. Another study conducted by Taşçı and Aksu Ataç (2018) indicated that, among Turkish EFL learners' grammatical errors, preposition errors were the most common followed by other types of errors (verb, article, word class, pronoun, etc.). Wu and Garza's (2014) finding that subject-verb agreement error was the most frequent error type under the category of grammatical errors varied from the finding obtained in the present study. Likewise, Sürüç Şen and Şimşek (2020) expressed that the most common errors under the heading of grammatical were errors preposition errors.

For semantical errors, word choice had more frequencies. The results obtained by Rattanadilok Na Phuket and Othman (2015) was compatible with this result. They found that verb/tense, word choice, comma, and preposition were the most prevalent error types. In addition, Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) suggested that word choice errors were very common in students' writings in separate genres (comparison-contrast, narrative, descriptive).

For mechanical errors, the most frequent category of error was punctuation. This result is compatible with the result of Altameemy and Daradkeh (2019). They also revealed that the most prevalent type of error was punctuation followed by spelling. Furthermore, Wu and Garza (2014) asserted that the most common error category under the error type of mechanics was punctuation.

The current study investigated the sources of errors which were intralingual transfer and

interlingual transfer. The findings indicated that a substantial proportion of errors stemmed from intralingual transfer, suggesting that many errors were likely due to language-specific developmental patterns within the target language (L2). This result aligns with previous studies (Abdelmohsen, 2022; Bensen Bostancı, 2019; Hourani, 2008; Nayernia, 2011). Nevertheless, results of some studies contradict this finding (Kırkgöz, 2010; Malmir, 2014; Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Othman, 2015; Shiva & Navidinia, 2021; Wu & Garza, 2014). In addition, a study revealed that majority of students whose language proficiency levels were high made more intralingual errors than interlingual errors while the ones whose language proficiency levels were low produced more interlingual errors because of the L1 interference (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018).

The present study sought to explore whether there was a statistically significant difference in error frequencies between the students in English Language and Literature (ELL), and the ones in English Language Teaching (ELT), as well as between male and female students. According to the analysis, no statistically significant differences between the error frequencies of ELL and ELT students were found. This suggests that students' departments did not play a substantial role in the frequency of errors committed in their writing. No studies examining the difference between error frequencies of ELT and ELL departments have been found in the related literature. Thus, it can be claimed that the present study contributes to the literature in this respect. However, a statistically significant difference was found between error frequencies of female and male students. Female students produced less errors compared to the male ones. Since Ellis (1997) describes errors as spaces in a student's knowledge, the Turkish female EFL students may be interpreted as more successful than the male students in writing. Likewise, in a study done by Pouladian et al. (2017) to examine writing errors made by Iranian EFL learners, it was asserted that the male students made more speaking and writing errors than the female ones. Contrarily, in another study (Almusharraf & Alotaibi, 2021), no statistically significant difference was found between the total number of writing errors detected for the male and female students.

IMPLICATIONS

The results carry several implications for writing in a target language. The predominance of grammatical errors highlights the importance of targeted instruction in grammar and syntax. Knowing students' incapability in grammar may help teachers overcome this by employing necessary instructional methods, techniques, and materials. Moreover, the prevalence of semantical errors underscores the need for enhancing students' vocabulary and semantic awareness. It may contribute to students' vocabulary if teachers show them how to improve it and provide them authentic situations. The observed gender-related differences suggest the value of investigating teaching strategies that could benefit male students in particular, promoting a more balanced distribution of writing skills across genders.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study. The research was conducted in a specific educational context and focused solely on Turkish EFL students. Therefore, generalizability to other contexts and populations should be approached with caution. Future research could consider incorporating qualitative analyses to gain deeper insights into the underlying factors contributing to error production. Additionally, exploring other variables such as language proficiency levels and cultural influences could provide a more comprehensive understanding of error patterns.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of errors in Turkish EFL students' writings provided valuable insights into the prevalent types of errors, their sources, and potential differences based on department and gender. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of error production in foreign language writing and underscore the importance of tailored instructional strategies to address these challenges effectively. Teachers should never forget that errors are normal while learning a new language, and they

should benefit from them by eliminating problematic areas they realize. They should be trained for performing an error analysis to detect and eliminate the common errors made by their students. Further research is encouraged to expand on these findings and delve into additional dimensions of error analysis in diverse linguistic and educational contexts.

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