

# AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' L2 ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING

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## ABSTRACT

Learning a second or foreign language (L2/FL) involves mastering basic language skills, with writing being the most challenging and often problematic for L2 learners. Despite its importance, writing has historically been overlooked in L2 instruction (Carter & Nunan, 2001), even though it is regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of L2 learning (Hyland, 2004). Errors are considered inevitable and important in L2 learning (James, 2001), providing insight into what learners have or have not yet mastered. L2 learners often make errors in writing due to various factors, including negative transfer or interference from their first language (L1), which are classified as interlingual errors. In contrast, errors arising from a lack of knowledge of L2 rules are referred to as intralingual errors (Saville-Troike, 2008). This study aimed to identify errors in L2 English essay writing among students. Fifty-three students from a higher education institution training primary school teachers, who had taken English as a Foreign Language classes as part of their study programme, participated in the research. The students were tasked with writing a 350-word opinion essay on a specified topic. Quantitative and qualitative error analysis has revealed that the students made more interlingual than intralingual errors, with the most frequent errors involving articles, prepositions, spelling, and capitalisation. The study also found that although the first language was not the only source of errors, it still influenced the L2 English writing process. These findings align with other studies (e.g., Phuket & Othman, 2015; Patekar, 2017; Shakir, Rasool & Khan, 2020). The study results suggest that more practice in explicit L2 teaching and targeted instruction is needed to enhance students' writing skills at the higher education level.

## KEYWORDS:

*L2 essay writing, error analysis, L2  
writing errors, university students,  
EFL*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing in a foreign language, as a complex productive skill, requires thinking and expressing ideas and thoughts by translating and shaping them into readable and understandable text (Choudhury, 2013). To acquire writing skills and write successfully in a foreign language, it is necessary to adopt the linguistic rules and norms of the language (Pavličević - Franić, 2005). If the language rules are not sufficiently acquired, the creation of shorter, unclear, and disconnected texts full of errors will occur. (Hyland, 2004). Since the 1980s, numerous textbooks and scholarly works (e.g., Jolly, 1984; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Carter & Nunan, 2001) have highlighted the significant challenges learners face in developing writing skills in a second or foreign language (Hyland, 2004). Different individual and contextual factors could influence a level of L2 writing proficiency including, for instance, learners' first language, the onset and exposure to L2 learning, and the learning environment, as well, according to some authors (e.g., Myles, 2002), cultural background as a key factor in L2 writing process.

In the global digital age, a high level of writing proficiency, particularly in English, is essential for effective communication. Teaching students how to write well and creatively should be an integral part of English writing instruction at all levels of EFL learning. L2 teachers should assign tasks that motivate students to produce effective texts that draw on various types of knowledge. Hyland (2004) argues that L2 learners need to acquire five distinct knowledge domains: content knowledge (comprehension of subject matter), system knowledge (mastery of linguistic systems), process knowledge (awareness of the writing process), genre knowledge (familiarity with genre conventions), and context knowledge (understanding of the sociocultural context of writing). The emphasis in our study is put on system knowledge, that is, on the sources of students' errors in grammar, lexis, and orthography.

The field of error analysis (EA), established by S. Pit Corder (1967), is founded on the description and analysis of errors made by L2 learners. Corder (ibid.) argued that errors could show a learner's language at a specific point in L2 development, i.e., analysis of learner errors could reveal learners' transitional competence in second language acquisition. James (1998) describes EA as the study of "linguistic ignorance" of what L2 learners do not know and how they cope with ignorance. In attempting to explain possible causes of errors, two basic types are distinguished: *interlingual* (negative transfer or interference from the L1) or *in-*

*trilingual* (developmental errors within a language). The latter could be seen as the result of incomplete learning of L2 rules or by over-generalising rules. James (ibid.) distinguishes the following sources of intralingual errors: 1. False analogy; 2. Misanalysis; 3. Incomplete rule application; 4. Exploiting redundancy; 5. Overlooking co-occurrence restrictions; 6. Hypercorrection; 7. Overgeneralization. We might conclude that intralingual errors are related to the lack of L2 system knowledge. The negative L1 transfer is seen as a crucial cause of L2 learners' interlingual errors because of one's unconscious attempt to transfer L1 structures to the L2 as a lack of necessary information in the learner's L2 knowledge. Committing errors is an inevitable and essential part of L2 learning (James, 2001). It provides valuable information about learners' "difficulties" and serves as a device that learners use to learn (ibid.). Teachers need to view learners' errors positively, and by error analysis, they could reveal what is lacking in learners' competence. Error analysis is also "a process used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learners' language, identifying errors and classifying them according to their nature and causes and evaluating their seriousness" (Keshavarz, 1999:168). Moreover, it is the process of observing, analysing, and classifying the deviations in the rules of a second language that should be regularly performed to improve language competence in learners (Brown, 2000). The present study investigates, classifies, and analyses the different types of errors university students make in their L2 English essay writing to obtain information on the causes of errors, that is, whether students make more interlingual or intralingual errors in their writing performance.

## **2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ERROR ANALYSIS IN STUDENTS' L2 ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING**

Numerous studies with different social and cultural L1 backgrounds have been carried out on students' errors in EFL writing, focusing on identifying and classifying the most common errors committed in L2 English essay writing and their sources. Most of the research findings revealed that students' errors in L2 English writing were linked to their first language as a lack of mastery in the target language (Sarasua, 2021). Abisamra (2003) conducted a study among primary school Arabic learners of English and found that one-third of errors were transfer errors from students' L1 in the categories of semantics and vocabulary. Ridha (2012)

also found that most of the errors committed by EFL college students in their essay writing could be related to L1 transfer since students relied on their mother tongue in expressing their ideas. Furthermore, in his research conducted among Saudi EFL learners at the university level, Sawalmeh (2013) found that most students' L2 writing errors were linked to their L1. In addition, Phuket & Othman (2015) attempted to explore sources of errors committed by Thai L1 students in L2 English essay writing. Most of the errors were found in the literal translation of words (Thai to English), word choice, verb tense, prepositions, and commas. They concluded that interlingual interference was the dominant source of errors. The author concluded that language teachers must pay more attention to negative L1 transfer in students' spoken or written production. Shakir, Rasool, & Khan (2020) investigated the most common types of errors in students' L2 English essay writing committed by Pakistan L1 students of English language and literature. They found that students made spelling and grammatical errors, including articles, subject-verb agreement, and singular/plural forms. The sources of errors were attributed to L1 interference, intralingual interference, and individual variation in monitor use and performance (ibid.). As seen from the abovementioned studies, we might conclude that most errors in L2 writing are linked to interlingual errors that include transfer, interference, and translation of L1 structures in students' L2 written production. However, Duygun & Karabacak (2022) conducted a study among EFL Turkish students and concluded that most errors were due to "intralingual inference, limited English grammar knowledge, and carelessness" (Duygun & Karabacak, 2022:136). Like the previously mentioned studies, they found that the most committed error type in essay writing was grammatical errors, followed by spelling errors. In their research on language-related errors in EFL students' writing, conducted among Myanmar and Hungarian students, Thi, Vo, & Nikolov (2023) found that the most frequent errors were in punctuation and spelling, word choice (collocation), and noun endings. It might be concluded that EFL students, although with different L1 backgrounds, face similar errors in writing tasks.

Recent research on error analysis in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing in the Croatian academic context includes studies by Croatian authors focused on common grammatical and syntactical errors made by Croatian EFL learners. For instance, Zergollern-Miletić (2007) tested the writing proficiency of Croatian primary and secondary school students to determine whether students had attained the proficiency required by the national curriculum (level A2 in primary school and level B1 in secondary school). The research showed that students acquired the

given proficiency levels, but their writing proficiency is at the lowest level compared to other linguistic skills. Similar results were found in the European Survey on Language Competences in Croatia (Buljan Culej, 2013), conducted among Croatian primary school students (school year 2010/2011), and showed that writing proficiency was lower than other linguistic skills. The analysis of students' errors was excluded from both studies. Pavić (2013) delved into word order errors in Croatian high school students' EFL essays. The author analysed how Croatian students apply English word order rules, highlighting common mistakes and underlying causes rooted in cross-linguistic influence, such as Croatian flexible syntax versus English stricter structure. The research results showed that the first language was the major source of Croatian learners' word order errors, addressing syntactic issues and emphasising the importance of clear instruction on English syntax for Croatian learners. Bel (2016) analysed longitudinal data from Croatian students, identifying typical errors in English verb usage across an academic year. This study focused on first-year English language students, tracking improvement over time and assessing persistent "fossilized" errors that remain despite instruction. These findings contribute to understanding typical developmental challenges Croatian learners face with English grammar structures and provide insights for instructional improvements. Patekar (2017) conducted a study involving Croatian eighth-grade primary school students learning English from the first grade. The study aimed to examine the influence of Croatian (L1) on students' written production in L2 English. The findings showed that students made more intralingual errors than interlingual ones. The most frequent errors involved spelling, articles, vocabulary, and prepositions. Patekar concluded that while the native language was not a major source of errors, it was the primary cause of lexical, prepositional, and syntactic errors in students' EFL writing. Vickov & Jakupčević (2020) analysed thesis abstracts written by Croatian university students in L2 English. They found that most were grammatical errors (mainly involving articles and word order), followed by lexical errors, such as incorrect word choices and collocations. Miščin (2020) conducted a study on error analysis in presentations of medical English students and found that most errors on the slides were related to poor spelling (or lack of spellcheck) and grammatical problems (e.g., articles, verb tenses, prepositions, and collocations). Considering that there is a lack of studies on error analysis of university students' EFL essay writing in the Croatian context, we have decided to conduct research focusing on types and sources of students' errors in L2 English essay writing at the university level.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Aim

The study aims to identify errors in students' L2 English essay writing at the university level and to gain insight into the types and sources of errors committed in L2 writing.

#### 3.2. Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. What L2 errors do students make in essay writing?
2. Do students tend to make more interlingual than intralingual errors?
3. Does the students' first language play a role in committing L2 errors?

#### 3.3. Participants and Corpus

The corpus included 53<sup>1</sup> L2 English essays of students from a higher education institution that trains primary school teachers, taking EFL classes as part of their study programme during the first two years of university, and being at B1/B2 proficiency level according to the CEFR (Common Framework for Languages) scale. They attended a three-hour English course each week and voluntarily and anonymously participated in the study at the end of the 2020/2021 academic year. The students were asked to write an opinion essay, approximately 350 words in length, on the topic "The Position of the Croatian and/or English Language in Global Processes" within one academic hour. They were also given instructions on essay writing in advance and practised writing during the English language course at the university. The students were advised on self-correction and checking after writing to avoid slips/ mistakes.

<sup>1</sup> A total number included 103 students involved in larger research on self-regulated learning in L1/L2 essay writing (see more in Nikčević-Milković, Balenović & Brala-Mudrovčić (2022); Nikčević-Milković & Balenović (2024)). A part (53) of L2 essays was taken for error analysis.

### 3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The data processing procedure included different stages of error analysis suggested by Ellis (1997), which is based on Corder's (1967) method. Essays were collected from 53 participants. Two English language teachers marked the errors, which were counted, classified, described, and explained. Errors were first divided into two groups according to their sources and then into three groups according to their types. Both quantitative and qualitative error analysis was conducted. Quantitative analysis involved the percentage ratio of (sub) groups over the total percentage/ number of errors, while the focus of qualitative analysis was on the error sources divided into three categories (grammar, orthography, lexis).

## 4. Results and Discussion

To answer the first and second research questions, errors were analysed under two main categories regarding their sources (Brown, 2000) – interlingual (L1 interference) and intralingual (developmental), then divided into subcategories of grammar, orthography, and lexis. Data related to the types of errors and some examples are presented in the following section.

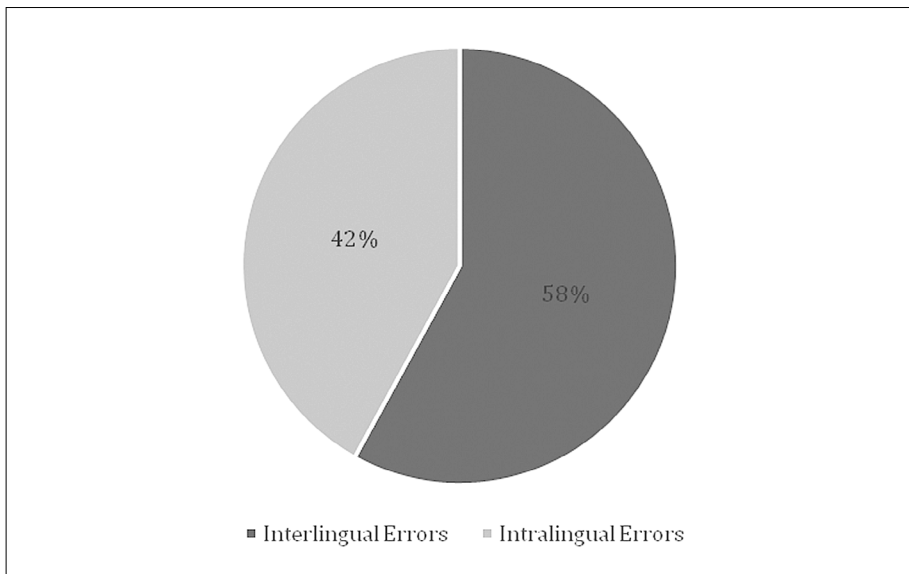


FIGURE 1. The Sources of Errors

Findings showed that the students made more interlingual (58%) than intralingual (42%) errors (Figure 1), which was also found in other studies (e.g., Shakir, Rasool, & Khan, 2020) and is mainly related to L1 interference.

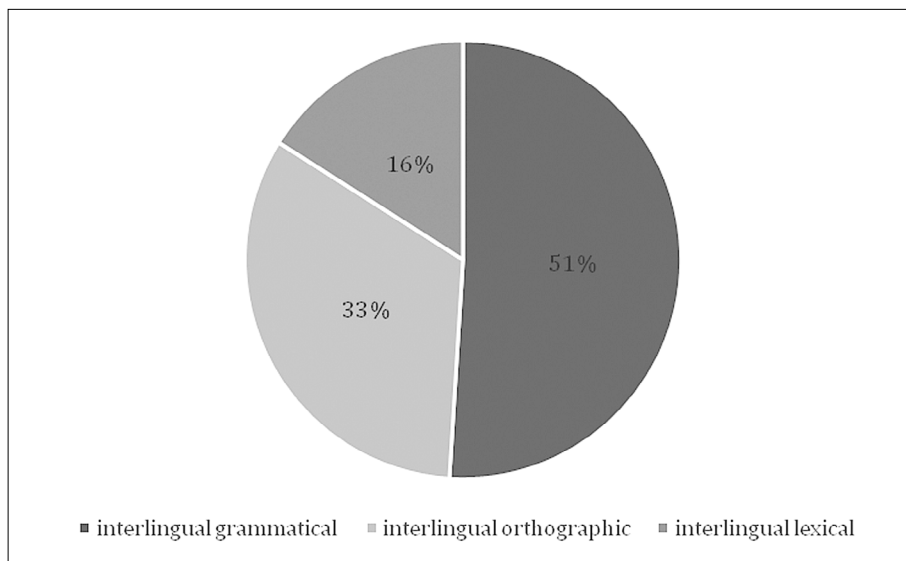


FIGURE 2. Interlingual Errors

As indicated in Figure 2, most of the interlingual errors students tend to make are in grammar (51%), followed by deviations in orthography (33%), but the least number in lexis (16%). The highest percentage of interlingual grammatical errors was found in using prepositions (70%) and omitting articles (28%). Such results were found in most of the previously mentioned studies (e.g., Phuket & Othman, 2015; Patekar, 2017) that could be attributed to L1 interference since students showed a tendency to refer to their first language in writing and to translate prepositions directly. Proroković & Balenović (2023), when researching the effects of classroom-based teaching about the acquisition of English prepositions, also found L1 interference in students' choices of some prepositions (e.g., *in* instead of *on*). Moreover, Sharma (2021) also found that the highest frequency of errors committed by Nepalese students studying English as a foreign language was in the use of prepositions, resulting from negative transfer from their first language. When it comes to the use of articles, the students mostly omit them since the Croatian language lacks them. Because of the omission of articles in most cases and with very few wrong article usages (article substitution), such an error is classified as an

interlingual grammatical error. Students also tend to make errors in using masculine gender pronouns instead of neuter gender ones, or in subject-verb agreement and word order because of negative transfer from their first language. Some of the interlingual grammatical errors found in students' essays are as follows:

- (1) preposition "*When we buy a mobile phone, it is programmed on\* English.*"
- (2) preposition "*Whenever you go in\* some foreign country...*"
- (3) indefinite article omission "*We are small\* country.*"
- (4) definite article omission "*We all know that UK\* has...*"
- (5) gender pronoun "*English is very important because he\* is the first language we learn.*"
- (6) gender pronoun "*English kept his\* position as one of the official languages*"
- (7) subject-verb agreement; preposition "*Many\* news are\* on\* English*".
- (8) word order "It doesn't matter where are\* you from".

Regarding deviations in orthography, most interlingual errors were found in capitalisation since the Croatian capitalisation rules differ from those in English, and students transferred them to L2 English essay writing. Some examples of deviations in orthography (capitalisation) are given here:

- (9) "*Today almost everyone knows english\*, not german\*, spanish\**
- (10) "*Not many people know croatian.\**

The students make most interlingual lexical errors by directly translating words (nouns) from Croatian to English when combining collocations (e.g., "*Students have two o'clocks\* of English per week.*"). Most students, when writing about their first/native language, combine "mother" with "language" (mother language\*) instead of "tongue" (mother tongue).<sup>2</sup> The wrong collocation use because of direct translation was also seen in L2 English thesis abstracts of Croatian university students (Vickov & Jakupčević, 2020). Moreover, students are not aware of the fact that collocations are single units of L2 lexical relations, which are different from L1 lexical relations (Balenović & Balić Motušić, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> In the context of the writing topic and following the Standard BE rules, the collocation "mother language" is classified as an error, although acceptable in some cases (e.g., International Mother Language Day - AE).

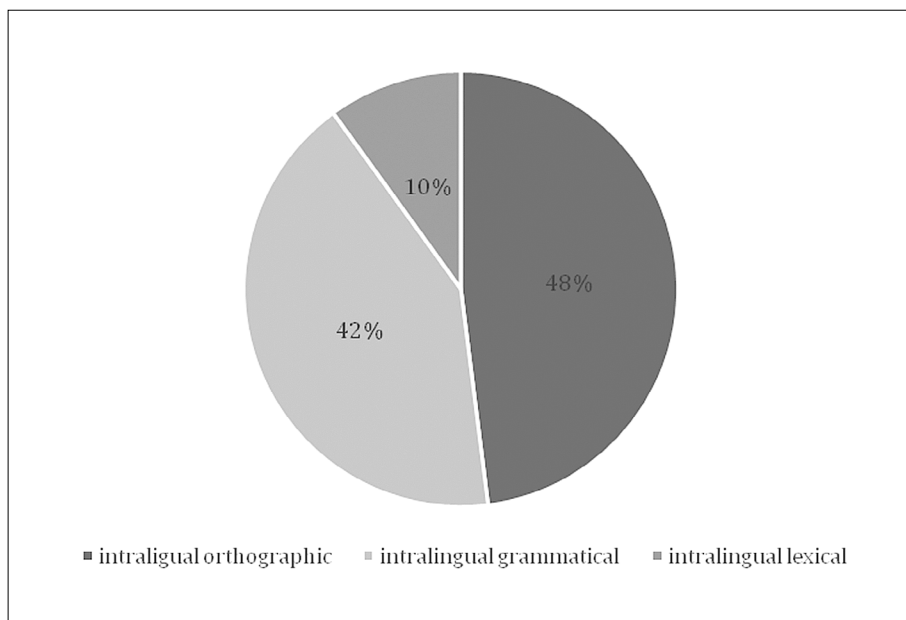


FIGURE 3. Intralingual Errors

The above graph shows that most intralingual errors were found in orthography (48%) due to ignorance or confusion with homophones (e.g., see/sea) in errors involving double letters. Regarding intralingual grammatical errors (42%), most are linked to incorrect verb tense usage or plural rule due to students' ignorance or confusion with L2 grammar rules, incomplete rule application, or redundancy. Such results were also found in other studies. For instance, Sarasua (2021) claimed that Filipino EFL students committed most errors in the subject-verb agreement, verb tense, and prepositions because of the insufficient mastery of different grammar concepts. Intralingual lexical errors (10%) were mainly found in collocation use. Some of the intralingual errors are as follows:

- (11) spelling "As I allready\* said...."
- (12) spelling "You can travel and leave\* in another country."
- (13) verb tense „English become\* the main language...."
- (14) verb tense "English is\* become a part of...."
- (15) plural "Children already learn two language\* "
- (16) subject-verb agreement "Most students knows\* English".

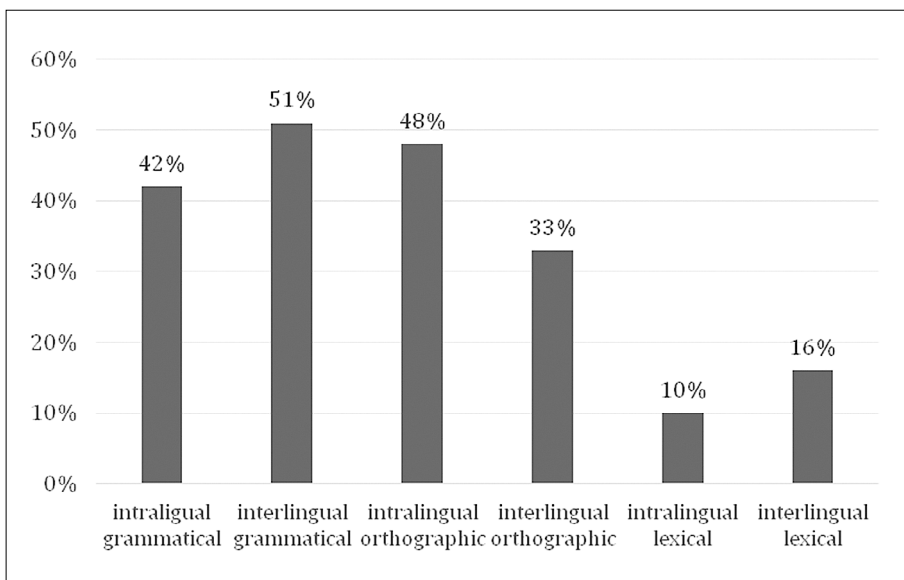


FIGURE 4. Total Distribution of Errors

As can be seen in Figure 4, students made most interlingual grammatical errors (51%). This indicates that the influence of L1 in L2 writing is stronger in grammar than in orthography or vocabulary (lexis). Since interlingual grammatical errors were mostly related to prepositions, it might be concluded that students tend to transfer a given word from Croatian to English. In addition, when it comes to articles, students omitted them in most cases, which could be linked to the lack of articles in their first language. Overall, such results could positively answer the third research question of whether students' L1 plays a role in committing L2 errors, that is, L1 interference impacts L2 English essay writing. The frequency of errors shows that the students had the lowest percentage of interlingual and intralingual lexical errors, because they produced simple sentences by combining familiar words.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to analyse errors in L2 student essay writing in English at the university level. Its primary objective was to investigate the sources and the types of the participants' errors, so the errors in 53 essays were identified,

classified, and explained. Regarding the sources, this study has shown that the participating students commit more interlingual than intralingual errors, most of them being grammatical, followed by some deviations in orthography and lexis. The interlingual grammatical errors mainly refer to prepositions and articles. Regarding the types of errors, the omission of articles was indicated as a crucial problem for most Croatian L1 students in L2 English writing since the Croatian language lacks articles, and there is a lack of students' awareness of the definiteness/indefiniteness notion as a universal linguistic category (Chomsky, 2000; Silić, 2000). The obtained results suggest that, when writing in a second/ foreign/ target language, students generally rely on their first/native language and use it as a "writing strategy" to express their thoughts and ideas, which consequently results in errors. They actually "carry over the existing knowledge of their native language to the performance of the target language" (Ellis, 1997:28). Moreover, when linguistic principles between two languages significantly differ, students find it difficult to express themselves in a non-native language, thus committing errors in L2 writing. This is the reason why students should be taught how to process their thoughts in L2 and employ L2 writing strategies/skills, e.g., planning, making a draft, composing, and checking/correcting a text according to L2 grammar/vocabulary rules. The present research suggests that EFL teachers should pay more attention to those grammatical/lexical structures in which students make the most errors (e.g., prepositions, articles, collocations). Finally, students should be exposed to much more EFL academic writing practice in the immediate classroom environment and given explicit teacher feedback on the types and sources (nature) of errors. An interesting follow-up study could be conducted on a more diverse sample, including students from different study programmes, for gaining a better insight into L2 writing errors.

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## POGREŠKE STUDENATA U PISANJU ESEJA NA ENGLESKOM KAO STRANOM JEZIKU

### SAŽETAK

Usvajanje drugog/stranog jezika podrazumijeva usvajanje temeljnih jezičnih vještina, među kojima je najzahtjevnija vještina pisanje, što predstavlja značajan problem govornicima drugog jezika. U procesu poučavanja drugog jezika, jezična vještina pisanja dugo je bila zanemarena (Carter & Nunan, 2001), iako se smatra najizazovnijom u učenju drugog jezika (Hyland, 2004). U ovladavanju drugim jezikom, učeničke pogreške promatraju se kao nezaobilazne i (sasvim) prirodne (James, 2001), dajući informaciju o tome što (ni)je učenik naučio. Učenici drugog jezika čine pogreške pri pisanju, od kojih je negativan jezični transfer ili interferencija jedan od njihovih ishodišta. Takve se pogreške mogu svrstati u međujezične, za razliku od onih unutarjezičnih koje podrazumijevaju nedovoljno poznavanje pravila drugog jezika (Saville- Troike, 2008). Cilj je istraživanja utvrditi pogreške studenata u pisanju eseja na engleskom kao stranom jeziku. U istraživanju su sudjelovali studenti učiteljskog studija (N = 53) koji uče engleski jezik kao dio obaveznog programa. Imali su zadatak napisati esej na zadanu temu. Nakon provedene kvantitativne i kvalitativne analize, rezultati su ukazali više na njihove međujezične nego unutarjezične pogreške, a najčešće su grijehili pri uporabi člana, odabiru prijedloga i primjeni pravopisnih pravila. Istraživanje je također pokazalo da materinski jezik, iako nije jedini izvor pogrešaka, utječe na pisanje na engleskom kao stranom jeziku. Slične su rezultate potvrdila i prethodna istraživanja (npr. Phuket & Norman, 2015; Patekar, 2017; Shakir, Rasool & Khan, 2020). Rezultati istraživanja sugeriraju da je potrebno više jezičnih vježbi u neposrednom razrednom okruženju da bi se ovladalo vještinom pisanja na stranom jeziku na sveučilišnoj razini.

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

*pisanje na drugom jeziku, analiza pogrešaka, pogreške u pisanju, studenti, engleski kao strani jezik*