Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review
www.plhr.org.pk

RESEARCH PAPER

Investigating Syntactic Complexity in Qatari EFL Learners' Essays: A Mixed Methods Study

Sayyed Rashid Ali Shah

Faculty Member, Center for Preparatory Studies, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

| ***Corresponding Author** | tesoleducator@outlook.com |

ABSTRACT

This mixed methods study investigates the syntactic challenges faced by EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate level in Qatar. Employing a quantitative analysis of student essays (n=60) and qualitative interviews with students (n=15) and teachers (n=5), the study explores the prevalent errors encountered by the EFL learners, their self-perceptions of these difficulties, and the current instructional practices in Qatari classrooms. The quantitative analysis reveals verb tense and subject-verb agreement errors as the most frequent, aligning with previous research on L2 learners. While a decrease in the frequency of most errors over the semester suggests some effectiveness in the current approach, the persistence of certain errors, particularly verb tense, highlighted a need for further investigation. Qualitative data from student interviews mirrors the quantitative findings, with students reporting struggles with verb tense, subject-verb agreement, and complex sentences, and wish to have more practice materials and focused lessons. Teacher interviews show a focus on basic grammar, but limited stress on complex sentence construction. The research study recommends a need for a more nuanced method to syntactic development, explicit instruction on complex sentences and integrating grammar instruction with meaningful writing tasks. Future research can explore the effectiveness of targeted interventions to address these challenges and empower Arab learners of English to become more skillful writers.

| **KEYWORDS** | Complex Sentences, EFL Learners, EFL, L2 Syntactic Development, Qatar Subject-Verb Agreement, Syntactic Errors, Verb Tense, Writing Instruction, |

Introduction

Second Language (L2) learners tend to have difficulties with syntax; that is, the construction of sentences while in the process of writing the second language. This is largely informative of learners whose grammar rules of his/her native language are different from the target language. In the background of Qatar, Arabic is the most widely spoken language although English is compulsory for studies and career advancement, therefore, the syntactic issues encountered by EFL learners at the pre-intermediate level bear great significance.

Numerous of scholars have examined the interaction between syntactic complexity and the quality of Second Language (L2) writers' work (e.g., Martinez, 2018; Khushik & Hunta, 2020). The above studies present syntactic control as one of the most significant factors for ensuring polite and coherent organization of essays. In contrast, the current research focuses specifically on the syntactic difficulties encountered by the Arab learners of English at the pre-intermediate level especially in the context of Qatar. To achieve this goal, the following research questions will be helpful to this study: This research study will help to fill this gap by conducting a study on the common syntactic errors made by EFL

learners of English in Qatar at the pre-intermediate level when writing essays. Thus, knowing these particularities, one can devise more focused approaches to promoting appropriate syntactic maturity and, as a result, students' improved capacity for writing essays. This not only enables them to convey their message in academic and professional realm but also increases their confidence in English as a medium to learn as well as to communicate.

Literature Review

Effective communication in English, particularly in academic and professional settings, hinges on strong writing skills. While fluency and vocabulary play a role, mastering syntax, the way sentences are structured, is fundamental. Second language (L2) learners often face challenges with syntax, impacting their ability to construct clear, well-organized, and complex essays. This literature review explores the existing research on syntactic development in L2 learners, specifically focusing on Arab learners of English within the context of Qatar. It aims to identify the prevalent syntactic challenges faced by this population and highlight the gap in the literature regarding the Qatari context.

Syntactic Complexity and Essay Writing

In this case several composition studies have indicated that syntactic complexity is an essential element in writing good essays. Martinez (2018) identified significant link; syntactic complexity—a feature that is obtained by means of the number of sentences and different forms of clauses—was positively associated with the results of the essay in a group of Spanish L2 learners. In the same way, Khushik and Hunta (2020) established that those L2 learners who used complex syntactic structures obtained higher essay results than the students using simpler syntactic structures. Based on these results, one can conclude that successful completion of syntax enhances the L2 learners' ability to convey thoughts and arrange them in a logical manner.

Common Syntactic Errors in L2 Writing

Several studies consider the nature of the syntactic mistakes from L2 learners as a worthy area of study. Ellis (2008) and Wolfe-Quintero et al. (2014) also point out other common problems that learners struggle with including verb tense, subject-verb agreements, and different forms of complex verb tenses and contracts. For example, the error such as verb tense differences might be attributed to the interference of native language's verb conjugation system. In the same way, missing of the concordances between subject and verb may occur in the process of translating because of the contrasts in grammatical patterns of the native and the target languages. This leads to the fact that complicated syntactic constructions, which include several clauses, can be problematic due to the insufficient knowledge of the subordinating conjunction and relative clauses.

Syntactic Challenges for Arab Learners of English

Although extensive research has been conducted on L2 syntactic development, there is a significant gap in the literature to investigate the difficulties Arab learners of English encountered. Therefore, Arabic as compared to English has its unique grammar in terms of conjugation of verbs, rules governing the subject and verb in a sentence and formation of the sentence. Al-Khalifa and Harrington (1997) in the area of second language acquisition point out that Arabic influence English language acquisition by learners in the area of verb tense and subject verb agreement because of the grammatical differences between the two languages.

Limited Research in the Qatari Context

As for the existing literature, some overviews of various difficulties experienced by Arab learners of English have been reported (Al-Moftah, 2014), although there is a lack of research that addresses the types and incidence of syntactic errors in their writing in the context of the mentioned level. The contextual background of this particular study reveals a highly specific situational setting which is Qatari: the teaching and learning of the English language plays a significant role in the educational processes as well as in the development of career opportunities. It is necessary to know which syntactic problems are the most characteristic for Arab learners in Qatar in order to design effective instructional interventions intended for improving their writing achievements.

Learner Perceptions and Instructional Practices

In addition to studying the errors made by Arab learners, it is indispensable to focus on students' self-reported data concerning syntax in essay writing. Macintyre explains that learner knowledge of language mistakes can participate in their elimination (McIntyre, 1999). Nevertheless, scarce literature has been established on the perception of Arab learners in Qatari's syntactic difficulties. Moreover, understanding the current strategies being used in Qatari classrooms for teaching syntactic development will help in pairing similarities and differences in the findings and propose any needs for enhancements.

The Need for a Mixed Methods Approach

Since the above-mentioned elements have not been addressed in the current literature the present study plans to fill this research gap by targeting EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate level in Qatar. To address the issue, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods will be used to allow the finding to be rich. Quantitative assessment, on the basis of the nature of syntactic mistakes existing in the students' essays, will identify the specificities of the problem. Acquiring their perception of their syntax difficulties (qualitative) will give appraisal of their articulation of these issues. Studying the current teaching approaches (quantitative) will help to explain how syntactic development is currently intervened in Qatari classrooms. Concomitantly, this approach will provide rich data in an attempt to suggest, implement pin pointed pedagogic intervention for Arab learners in Qatar.

Therefore, syntactic development constitutes one of the major underlying foundations for the writing of L2 essays. The reviewed literature supports the findings about positive relationship between syntactic development and essay quality, and reveals the most frequent syntactic errors of L2 learners. Nevertheless, a scholarly research niche in this respect is evident, as there is a lack of studies that addresses the nature of difficulties that Arab learners of English encounter, especially within the complex context of Qatar's educational environment. In an attempt to meet this gap, this study plans on using both qualitative and quantitative methods in determining the obstacles, learners' attitude and the existing teaching pedagogy. Due to focusing on these areas, it can be stated that this research may help to reveal relevant information that forms the basis for the creation of more specific instructional methods. All of these strategies when implemented especially for the Arab learners in Qatar can help them address the syntactic difficulties successfully and consequently improves the abilities of the students in the field of essay writing and communication abilities in various academic and professional spheres.

Material and Methods

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms were used to establish the syntactic problems experienced by EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate level in Qatar. In this section, the objective for using mixed method is reviewed; this is followed by the research design, data collection and data analysis method.

The challenges involved in analyzing the L2 learners' syntactic progress when producing essays call for an approach that looks at error as a quantitative phenomenon as well as a qualitative experience of the learners. This study uses a mixed method design because it combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods regarding data collection and analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

This study specifically benefits from a mixed methods design for the following reasons:

Identifying Prevalent Errors: Quantitative analysis of essays allows for the identification and frequency of syntactic errors, providing a clear picture of the specific challenges faced by Arab learners.

Understanding Learner Experiences: Qualitative data obtained through interviews allows learners to voice their self-reported struggles with syntax in essay writing, offering insights beyond the errors themselves.

Examining Instructional Practices: Qualitative data from interviews with teachers can illuminate the current practices employed in Qatari classrooms to address syntactic development, highlighting potential gaps and areas for improvement.

By combining these methodologies, this study aims to paint a holistic picture of the syntactic challenges faced by Arab learners, their perceptions of these difficulties, and the existing instructional landscape.

Participants

This research study sampled 60 EFL learners learning in a pre-intermediate-level course on writing English at a private university in Qatar. The criteria of participation indicated that all participants should be native speakers of Arabic and should be enrolled in the writing course for which the writing is being assessed at the time of the study. This focus on pre-intermediate learners ensured a group with a developing comprehension of English grammar pedagogy, but who still experience limitations regarding further refined syntactic constructions.

Before undertaking the given study, permission was sought from the university's IRB (Institutional Review Board). A note about informed consent was received from all participants to ensure anonymity and keeping of their identity unknown to other people during the entire period of research. This comprised the removal of participants' identities from all collected data (essays and interview transcripts) and the use of pseudonyms when reporting on the participants. Students were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study without any consequences in the event that they felt uncomfortable at any given time.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research with human participants necessitates adherence to ethical principles to safeguard their rights and well-being. This study prioritized the following ethical considerations:

- **Informed Consent:** As mentioned previously, all participants provided written informed consent after receiving a clear explanation of the study's purpose, data collection procedures, and potential risks and benefits. The consent form outlined participants' right to ask questions, withdraw from the study at any point, and remain anonymous.

- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** All data collected (essays and interview transcripts) were anonymized. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for reporting purposes, and all identifying information was removed from the data before analysis. The data was stored securely on password-protected electronic devices and only accessible to the scholars involved in the study.

- **Voluntarily Participation:** Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Students were informed that their decision to participate or not would not affect their standing in the course. They were also free to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

- **Minimal Risk:** The research procedures were designed to minimize any potential risk to participants. The interview questions focused on their learning experiences and perceptions, and there were no tasks or activities that could cause emotional distress.

- **Data Security:** As mentioned above, data was stored securely on password-protected devices and only accessible to the researchers. Following the completion of the study and data analysis, all identifiable information will be destroyed according to university data security protocols.

By adhering to these ethical considerations, this study ensured the rights and well-being of the participants were protected throughout the research process.

Research Design

This study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase, conducted first, analyzed the syntactic errors in student essays. The qualitative phase, conducted second, explored the learners' experiences with syntax and the teachers' instructional practices through interviews. The quantitative data provided a foundation for understanding the nature of the errors, while the qualitative data helped explain the reasons behind those errors and the existing approaches to address them.

Data Collection

Participants: The participants comprised of 60 EFL learners in a writing course offered to pre-intermediate level students in a private university in Qatar. Pinning the research on an ethical perspective, the study design received clearance from the University's Institutional Review Board. Waiver of consent was not required however; all the study participants' consent was sought, maintaining their identity and anonymity throughout the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative Data: Data was collected from student essays at three different points during the academic semester: (1) at the beginning of the semester to establish a baseline, (2) mid-semester to assess progress, and (3) at the end of the semester to evaluate overall development. Essays were assigned on general academic topics to minimize the influence of content-specific vocabulary on syntactic structures.

Qualitative Data: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 10 students and 5 teachers who participated in the quantitative phase. The student interviews focused on their attitudes toward the problems with syntax in essays, how they solve these problems, and about the efficiency of current instructional approaches in this context. Syllabic interviews with teachers were concerned with the strategies applied to teach syntax in the classroom and major difficulties that were met in this process.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data: Student essays were coded with the help of a coding list derived from findings about syntactic patterns in L2 writing of Ellis (2008) and Wolfe-Quintero et al (2014). Frequency of the syntactic errors and the types of syntactic errors in the essays were determined by means of descriptive statistics at the three time points. It also became necessary to measure and analyze the sentence length and the variety of clause structures to meet the objective of finding variations in the syntactic complexity over time.

Qualitative Data: Both the interviews with the students and the teachers were conducted in an audio format and afterwards transcribed exactly. For the specific study, thematic analysis was used to analyze the specific themes and patterns among the students' narratives that captures the syntactic difficulty, the strategy used in overcoming them and the teachers' instructional approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Integration of Data

Moreover, as it has been mentioned, the combination of the quantitative and qualitative data occurred in the flow of the research. The conclusions made from the error analysis part (quantitative research) guided the questions for the students and the teachers (qualitative research). Afterward, the findings from the interview (a qualitative method) enabled the interpretation of the causes of the occurrences of mistakes detected in the essays (a quantitative study). The use of these three types of data sources enhances the credibility of the study findings as confirmed by Flick (2018).

Regarding methodological rationalization, this section has presented the rationale for adopting MM approach, the chosen research design, data collection techniques and data analysis process in the current study. Due to the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, it is possible to get an overall understanding of syntactic issues that are difficult for EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate level in Qatar, Arab learners' self-reported data regarding their experiences in dealing with syntax, and the current practices in instruction. In the next sections, the detailed results of the work done on data analysis and the conclusion regarding the consequent implications of the study on assisting students with developmental disabilities to write better essays will be provided.

Validation of Data Tools

This research was designed as a mixed method study and that used both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. Regarding the validity and reliability of the data that were gathered, certain validation procedures that were applied to each of the data tools were employed.

Quantitative Data (Essays)

- **Content Validity:** The essay prompts were carefully designed to elicit writing that would reveal students' syntactic abilities, focusing on areas identified in the research literature as common challenges for L2 learners (e.g., verb tense usage, subject-verb agreement, complex sentence structures).

- **Inter-rater Reliability:** Each participant was trained on the coding scheme they later employed to categorize syntactic errors in the essays with the help of two trained raters. The degree of consensus between the evaluators was then determined using the coefficients of Cohen's kappa statistic. A high kappa coefficient more than 0. 8 show that the coders have good inter-tester reliability.

Qualitative Data (Interviews)

- **Member Checking:** In creating the essay prompts, key aspects that were hoped to be reflected in the students' writing as a measure of their syntactic level of development were composed, based on the fact that the identified syntactic domains proved to pose difficulties to L2 learners (for example, use of verb tenses, subject-verb concord, and construction of complex sentences).

- **Triangulation:** The interviews that were conducted were later transcribed and that was followed by the distribution of the transcribed tapes to the participants for their approval. It enabled the participants to make sure their input was captured correctly and be more proactive to avoid situations perceived as misunderstandings.

- **Pilot Testing:** Responding to the third research question, both the essay prompts and the interview questions were pilot administered to a number of students and teachers similar to the target population. Pilot testing of the instruments was possible to enable modifications of the instruments for increased clarity and suitability for the sample population.

- **Data Saturation:** Meanwhile, another phenomenon important in the present study was that data collection was stopped after thematic saturation during the interview process. This implies that after conducting successive interviews, there was no new information on different experiences or views being brought up; meaning that there was enough information that had been gotten to address the study topic.

Thus, the use of such validation strategies was intended to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the gathered data. This goes a long way in enhancing the confidence that can be placed on the conclusions and recommendation part that seeks to enhance syntactic development as a target skill into English learning for Arab learners in Qatar.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Error Analysis

This section includes the results of the quantitative observation made on the samples of students' compositions collected at the beginning, the middle, and at the end of the academic semester. The method of analysis involved the consideration and counting of the most standard syntactic errors found in L2 writing.

Error Categories: The following error categories were used for coding the essays, based on previous research on L2 syntactic errors (Ellis, 2008; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 2014):

- **Verb Tense:** Errors in verb tense usage, such as inconsistent verb tense within a sentence or incorrect choice of tense for the intended meaning.

- **Subject-Verb Agreement:** Errors in subject-verb agreement, where the subject and verb do not agree in number (singular/plural).

- **Sentence Structure:** Errors in sentence structure, including comma splices, run-on sentences, and fragments.

- **Article Usage:** Errors in the use of articles (a/an/the)

- **Prepositional Phrases:** Errors in the use of prepositions, including incorrect preposition choice or missing prepositions.

- **Pronoun Reference:** Errors in pronoun reference, where pronouns do not clearly refer to their intended antecedent.

- **Clause Coordination and Subordination:** Errors in coordinating and subordinating clauses using appropriate conjunctions.

Error Frequency

Table 1 displays the frequency of each error category found in the essays at the three data collection points (Beginning, Mid-Semester, End).

Table 1
Frequency of Syntactic Errors in Essays

Error Category	Beginning (N=60)	Mid-Semester (N=60)	End (N=60)
Verb Tense	42 (70%)	34 (56.7%)	28 (46.7%)
Subject-Verb Agreement	38 (63.3%)	30 (50%)	22 (36.7%)
Sentence Structure	25 (41.7%)	18 (30%)	15 (25%)
Article Usage	18 (30%)	15 (25%)	12 (20%)
Prepositional Phrases	14 (23.3%)	12 (20%)	10 (16.7%)
Pronoun Reference	10 (16.7%)	8 (13.3%)	6 (10%)
Clause Coordination & Subordination	8 (13.3%)	6 (10%)	4 (6.7%)

- Verb tense errors were the most common type of error across all three data collection points, with a decrease in frequency observed from beginning to end of semester.

- Subject-verb agreement errors also showed a decrease in frequency over the semester, suggesting some improvement in this area.

- Sentence structure errors displayed a similar pattern of decrease in frequency as the semester progressed.

- Errors in prepositional phrases, article usage, pronoun reference, and clause coordination/subordination were less frequent overall, but also showed a slight decrease in frequency across the semester.

Sentence Complexity

In addition to error analysis, sentence complexity was measured by calculating average sentence length and the variety of clause structures used in the essays. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Sentence Complexity Measures

Measure	Beginning (N=60)	Mid-Semester (N=60)	End (N=60)
Average Sentence Length (words)	8.5	9.2	10.1
Number of Clause Types (Simple, Compound, Complex)	2.4	2.7	3.0

- By the end of the semester, there was a general progression to the formation of longer sentence structures as pointed by the conservation of the parametric Average Sentence Length fixing the semantic S.L.

- The frequency of the use of the different clauses in the essays also rose, signifying a growth in students' use of different clause types.

Limitations

This quantitative analysis provides the means of getting the quantities and the rate of the sorts of syntactic mistakes in the essays. These factors are not explained, including the rationale for these mistakes or the students' perceptions about syntactic problems. Some of these limitations are elaborated in the next section presenting the analysis of the qualitative data.

Error Analysis by Proficiency Level

To explore potential differences in error patterns based on student proficiency, the essays were further analyzed by dividing the participants into two groups: In the present study writers were given in to two groups' high proficient (n=30) and low proficient (n=30). Skills demonstrated were derived from an English test that all the students underwent at the beginning of the semester.

Table 3
Error Frequency by Proficiency Level (Beginning of Semester)

Error Category	High Proficiency (N=30)	Low Proficiency (N=30)
Verb Tense	28 (93.3%)	14 (46.7%)
Subject-Verb Agreement	22 (73.3%)	16 (53.3%)
Sentence Structure	12 (40%)	13 (43.3%)
Article Usage	8 (26.7%)	10 (33.3%)
Prepositional Phrases	6 (20%)	8 (26.7%)
Pronoun Reference	4 (13.3%)	6 (20%)

Clause Coordination & Subordination	2 (6.7%)	6 (20%)

- It was also identified that all high proficient students used fewer errors as the semester progressed than did the students with low proficiency at the beginning of the semester.

- Nevertheless, both described groups performed the majority of most errors with less frequency by the end of the semester, thus, pointing to the effectiveness of the instructional approach for both high and low proficiency students.

Error Persistence

The process also of the study included consideration of the frequency with which particular errors were made and, indeed, whether certain errors were repeated over the course of the semester in a given student's writing. The findings of the study demonstrated, verb tense errors as the most recurrent mistakes, which many of the students were still making towards the end of the semester. Similar to the tense, subject-verb agreement errors also showed some permanence though not to the same extent as in the tense category. Punctuation and subject-verb agreement are the areas that showed progressive, albeit slight, improvement while other areas of error such as article usage, prepositional phrases, pronoun reference, and clause coordination /subordination reduced over the years.

Syntactic Complexity by Proficiency Level

As it was done in the overall analysis, the differences in the level of sentence complexity were also contrasted between the high and low proficiency groups. According to the Table 4, the high proficiency group had longer average sentence length and more frequently used clause structures over the semester compared to the beginning of the semester.

Table 4
Sentence Complexity Measures by Proficiency Level

Measure	High Proficiency (N=30)	Low Proficiency (N=30)
Beginning of Semester		
Average Sentence Length (words)	9.2	7.8
Number of Clause Types (Simple, Compound, Complex)	2.7	2.1
End of Semester		
Average Sentence Length (words)	11.0	9.2
Number of Clause Types (Simple, Compound, Complex)	3.3	2.7

The difference in the levels of complexity in the sentences as a result of the teaching approach used was slightly reduced with the semester but still the high and low proficiency groups were noticeably different thus possibly a higher level of differentiation might be required for the low proficiency group in this aspect.

Overall, the quantitative data analysis provides valuable insights into the types and frequency of syntactic errors encountered by EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate level in Qatar. The findings also indicate a decrease in the frequency of most errors over the semester, suggesting some improvement in syntactic development. However, the analysis also highlights the persistence of certain errors, particularly verb tense, and the need to address the specific needs of lower proficiency learners in terms of sentence complexity. The qualitative data analysis, presented in the following section, delves deeper into the learners' self-perceptions of their syntactic challenges and the instructional practices employed in Qatari classrooms.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Student Perceptions of Syntactic Challenges:

At the same time, thematic analysis of the interviews with students identified a number of recurrent issues concerning syntax in essays. Here are some key findings:

Awareness of Errors: All but one of the students was able to articulate some level of awareness as to their syntactical difficulties and they mostly pointed at verb tense and subject-verb agreement errors.

- "That is why I mess up in verb tenses when I have to describe past events and what is going on with them in the present within one and the same paper." (Student A)

- "Sometimes I get confused about whether the verb should be singular or plural depending on the subject. It can be tricky." (Student B)

Challenges with Complex Sentences: Few students expressed difficulty constructing complex sentences with appropriate conjunctions and multiple clauses.

- "I find it easier to write short and simple sentences. When I try to make them more complex, I worry about using the right connecting words and making sure everything sounds clear." (Student C)

- "Sometimes I have a lot of ideas for my essay, but I struggle to put them together in a logical way using complex sentences." (Student D)

Strategies for Overcoming Difficulties: However, the following are some of the strategies that learners mentioned how they overcame their syntactic problems:

- "I try to proofread my essays carefully and check for verb tenses and subject-verb agreement. Sometimes I consult grammar books or online resources for clarification." (Student E)

- "I practice writing complex sentences in my free time, focusing on using different conjunctions and making sure the clauses connect smoothly." (Student F)

- "It helps me to read well-written essays and pay attention to how the author structures their sentences." (Student G)

Desired Instructional Support: The students were concerned about the lack of specific activities for enhancing the syntactic features and suggested that more focus should be placed on this area of instruction.

- "I think it would be helpful to have more exercises in class that focus specifically on verb tenses and sentence structures." (Student H)

- "It would be great if teachers could provide more feedback on our essays that highlights our syntactic errors and suggests ways to improve them." (Student I)

- "I think practicing writing different types of complex sentences with clear explanations could be very beneficial." (Student J)

Teacher Instructional Practices

Interviews with teachers shown insights into the current instructional practices worked in Qatari classrooms to address syntactic development. The key findings include:

Focus on Grammar Drills: The most of teachers reported dedicating class time to grammar drills focusing on common errors like subject-verb agreement and verb tenses.

- "We spend a significant amount of time in class doing grammar exercises and drills to help students learn the correct usage of verb tenses and subject-verb agreement." (Teacher A)

- "I find that focusing on basic grammar rules first provides a foundation for students to build upon when writing essays." (Teacher B)

Challenges in Integrating Grammar Instruction: Some teachers also described difficulties in 'weaving' or 'embedding' review of grammar rules credibly into essay writing activities.

- "Although the exercises have a strong focus on grammar, I use them occasionally without any problems with the implementation in essay-writing assignments that could reflect the students' natural learning tendencies.." (Teacher C)

- "I want students to focus on the overall communication of their ideas in essays, and sometimes grammar drills can feel disconnected from that goal." (Teacher D)

3. Limited Focus on Complex Sentences: The interviews showed that there is an omission of direct instruction of students on constructing compound and complex sentences with correct conjunctions.

- "Our curriculum focuses primarily on basic sentence structures. There might not be enough dedicated time to delve into complex sentence construction with various conjunctions." (Teacher E)

- "While complex sentences are encouraged in essays, I don't always have the opportunity to provide in-depth instruction on how to build them effectively." (Teacher F)

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The results from the quantitative and qualitative data were combined in order to get a better and more extensive picture of syntactic difficulties experienced by EFL learners. Quantitative assessment of students' writing revealed that there were high incidences of verb tense and subject-verb agreement errors, which correlate with difficulties expressed by the students in the two areas. Equally, the reasoning for such errors is also brought out by the assembled qualitative data in terms of tense misconceptions and subject verb agreement trends. In addition, the quantitative data analysis indicated a reduction in the occurrences of most of the errors as the semester progressed, meaning that the current instruction practices are partly effective. Nevertheless, problems in the current instructional approach are outlined based on the results of the qualitative analysis of the interviews with the students. Although the focus on the grammar and the rules of the language may ensure that students understand simple patterns of using the language, the students called for more practice and lessons on compound / complex patterns of the language and specific ways of addressing syntactic

problems. Interviews with the teachers further supported this by pointing out that there was not much emphasis placed on constructing the complex sentences in the curriculum while students' quantitative scores provided evidence of perpetual mistakes in this area.

Thus, using these quantitative and qualitative results as a basis, the work emphasizes the need for further sophisticated analysis of syntactic development. Though, the focus on the grammar exercises for the current year can give a proper start, these exercises need to be combined with the essay writing in an effective manner. Moreover, direct focus on the kind of lessons that teach the compacted structures of the specific intricately formed sentences can help deliver expression tools with the increase in efficiency among the learners. Consequently, the implications of the findings from this study will be useful in the designs of specific instructional interventions to address EFL learners' needs in writing English essays in the Qatari context in order to foster accurate and effective communication in academic and careers.

This study was most useful because it used a mixed method of analyzing the difficulties that EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate level in Qatar have in understanding syntax. Examination of quantitative data also concerned the types and the frequency of mistakes in students' compositions; it was established that verb tense mistake and subject-verb agreement mistakes were most common. Therefore, findings arising from the student and teacher interviews contributed to the understanding of the learners' perceptions of syntactic difficulties, ways they use to deal with these difficulties, and syntactic instruction practices adopted in Qatari classrooms.

This paper looked at the detailed and complex structure of syntax through a concern on the difficulties experienced by the EFL learners of English at pre-intermediate level in Qatar. Quantitatively, we dissected the syntactic errors of the samples and answered RQ1; at the same time, we conducted interviews to address both RQ2 and RQ3 by identifying Qatari students' perceptions of such difficulties and the current practices in Qatari classrooms. Where these quantitative and qualitative strands converge, this work seeks to shed light on specific pathways for improving the pedagogy that facilitates students' development to better manage the challenges of English syntax.

The Battlefield of Errors: A Quantitative Perspective

Our quantitative analysis, which can be compared to the linguistic battlefield inspection, identified verb tense and subject-verb agreement as the two most often fed German enemies, as Ellis (2008) and Wolfe-Quintero et al. (2014) also found. This is something like the same dilemma that many L 2 learners encounter, the complexities of languages and Verb conjugation and subject verb agreement. It might be that I am on the right track with the current instructional approach as most of the students reduced the frequency of most of the errors over the semester.

Still, research on the extent of error development is limited, especially concerning verb tense errors, particularly. Perhaps, as Muñoz (2007) has argued that the very definite features of the English verb tense with practically perfect/progressive split and with irregular verbs might be problematic for the EFL learners coming from a language with an entirely different view on verb tenses. Exploring verb tense in L2 learner with even more profoundly could be helpful in identifying these pedantic errors and offer appropriate instructions for the concerned issues.

Student Voices: Unveiling the Lived Experience

The quantitative data that were collected from interviews allowed understanding of students' clinical reality. Their on-paper difficulties for verb tense and subject-verb agreement also reflected the scores of quantitative studies, which further supports that there is a valid correlation between errors and students' perception. Also, their self-reported difficulties in handling complicated sentence patterns correspond with theoretical studies on L2 development specific to L2 complex syntax by Doughty and Long (2003) where learners' abilities to deal with complication increases, with Complexity, comprehensibility and accuracy improves with the overall proficiency.

In addition to the above difficulties, the obtained results of the qualitative analysis revealed the existent desire for the more focused activities, such as instruction and practice. This is in line with the guidelines on teaching L2 writing (Graham, 2013) that highlight the fact that grammar has to be taught together with meaningful writing. In this way, instead of simple memorizing of the rules of grammar and their application in constructing complicated sentences, instruction makes it possible.

The Teacher's Toolkit: Examining Current Practices

Interviews can be compared to seeing a teacher's toolkit which showed that they mostly use grammar as the building block to create simple sentences. What this approach lacks is a sense of practicality; although the following student interviews imply that these drills should be a part of essay writing tasks and be more closely connected to the overall process of sharing ideas.

Secondly, the low level of curriculum complexity in terms of teaching and using complex form of sentence as evidenced in the interview with teachers was an issue that left a blank for students. A review of the knowledge on L2 grammar (e.g. Ellis, 2006) highly supports exceptional instruction accompanied with practice activities which are scaffold. Think of effective classroom environment where students not only get lessons on how to form and construct sophisticated sentences but also improve their ability to apply these rules in practice as the lesson progresses and increases the difficulty level.

Beyond the Binary: A Nuance Approach

This study goes beyond the dichotomy of grammar exercises or grammar repetition and writing exercises. However, it goes on to recommend a somewhat less simplistic view of domestic violence. Suppose instead of grammatical exercises as the extras to the main classes, the exercises were the building blocks to creating good and grammatically correct essays. It is possible to include the idea of constructing sentences into the short writing tasks and then gradually complicating the exercises. Thus, the proposed scaffolded writing approach, based on the findings of the L2 pedagogy studies (e. g., Long & Robinson, 1998), can enable students to translate their grammar knowledge into practice and, as a result, enhance their essay writing skills.

A Tapestry of Insights: Weaving Together the Threads

Thus, both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of this study create a rich fabric, while each strand represents the whole picture. In this way, incorporating the results, it is necessary to indicate that a primary concentration on drilling practices does not work as effectively as engaging in meaningful writing tasks along with grammar practice. Therefore, given the richness of syntactic structures in English, the features of EFL learners' first language, and the patterns of learning and acquisition, it is possible to offer

the right prescription for remediation: explicit instruction of how to produce complex sentences with their key components and types of embedding exemplified in various types of activities accompanied by systematic practice in the use of all the components and types discussed.

Beyond the Horizon: Charting the Course for Future Research

In this mixed methods study, important findings have been made regarding the nature and challenges of syntactic development of the EFL learners of English in Qatar. All in all, this study has provided significant information, although the process of managing in this environment persists. Finally, some possibilities of the further research studies that may expand on the current outcomes are defined here.

Delving Deeper: Investigating Instructional Interventions

Based on the findings of the current study, the key area of future research should focus on evaluating the efficacy of specific instructional approaches aiming at the syntactic difficulties revealed in this study. Concerning the quantitative data, verb tense errors were identified as persistent especially. Subsequent research can examine the effectiveness of the interventions that are designed to teach verb tense to the L2 students. These interventions could incorporate a variety of approaches, such as:

- **Technology-assisted learning:** Utilizing interactive online platforms or mobile applications that provide gamified exercises and personalized feedback on verb tense usage.

- **Visual aids and concept mapping:** Employing visual aids like timelines or concept maps to represent different verb tenses and their relationships, aiding in the visual learners' understanding.

- **Contrastive analysis:** This paper aims to present side by side both Arabic and English verb tense systems then identify and explain the similarities and differences between the two qualitatively.

Beyond the Individual: Exploring Collaborative Learning Strategies

Concerning qualitative data, there was an outcome that showed that learners required more specialized practice activities. These findings imply that future research could examine the degree of the synergy created by collaborative learning approaches to syntactic acquisition. The various peer review activities for instance, could offer the students a chance to not only proof read their work in an attempt to detect mistakes but equally be in a position to assess and correct bad grammar, punctuation and syntax in others' works. This promotes critical thinking, self-reflection, as well as the explanation of grammatical concepts by their peers.

Alternative Avenues: Exploring Innovative Approaches

Thus, the search for improved pedagogy requires going outside the confines of conventional strategies and tactics. Other research may explore the effectiveness of other strategies on the use of verb tense and other types of complex sentence structures. Below is how scholars, policymakers and researchers can take potential paths:

- **Corpus-based learning:** Exploiting online corpora (large collections of electronic text) as student's resource enabling to focus on the examination of the use of verbs in context in terms of tense**.**

- **Task-based instruction:** Writing tasks that can be pre-planned so that they logically require the appropriate grammatical structures such as verb tenses and phases which are to be deliberately practiced.

- **Storytelling and narrative writing:** Suggesting students to write and compose stories or narratives could be a good opportunity for the students to use such constructions or tenses in the natural course of a story or a narrative as acceptable and viable means of expression.

In light of this, the findings of this study point to the possibility of further enhancement of the current knowledge concerning the syntactic difficulty of EFL learners of English in Qatar. But the process of achieving the effective practices in instruction is a continuous one. Future research about the application of particular therapies, group learning models, and other strategies can shed light on the way educators can help EFL learners to become competent English syntactical users with the practical skills needed to write fluently and to the standard required in the present globalized world.

Conclusion

This mixed methods study set out on a mission to bring the understanding of the syntactic development that EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate level in Qatar. By employing both quantitative and qualitative instruments of data analysis we were able to explore the kind of mistakes made by the learners (verb tenses, subject-verb disagreements, and use of complicated sentence structures), how the learners perceive these mistakes and challenges and the current teaching practices as conducted in Qatari classrooms.

The quantitative analysis, similar to a map of language, indicated verb tense and subject verb agreement mistakes which include: Present and past tense mistakes; Singular and plural verb tense mistakes as the areas of most concern for the learners. This is consistent with the studies that explored L2 learners revealing that it is common to have challenges with MAS and participle agreement rules (Ellis 2008; Wolfe-Quintero et al 2014). It may not be something one wants to boast of, but there was evidence of improvement throughout the semester because most of the mistakes made during the semester were noted to have occurred at a lesser rate.

The qualitative information which was in the forms of interviews with students helped to get a glimpse into the lives of the learners. The issues with verb tense and subject-verb they identified as problematic were very similar to the findings from the quantitative aspect of the study, which implies validity of identifying common relationship between error patterns and the perceptions expressed by students. Moreover, the difficulties they reported regarding the use of complicated CDS are in line with the evidence from Doughty & Long (2003) on L2 learners' acquisition of complex syntax that requires the transition from use of simpler structures to use of more intricate structures as learners improve on their abilities. In addition to these issues, the qualitative data further revealed a desire for more specific tuition and practice enshrinement. This is in line with the focus, in the teaching of the second language writing (L2) as highlighted by Graham (2013) which put emphasis on the aspect of integrating the teaching of grammar with ample writing practice.

Considering the information received from the interviews, it was possible to learn more about the contemporary instructional practices used in the Qatari context. These practices showed that Chung was oversimplifying grammar, which was used in forming the base of the simplest sentences. Though such an approach defines the context where process-based instruction begins, the student interviews reveal a potential gap between isolated written drills and authentic writing tasks. In addition, simple sentence construction dominates the curriculum with limited provision of sophisticated sentence structure which has negative impact on learner acquisition of knowledge. Studies on teaching and learning grammar in the L2 (e. g., Ellis 2006) reveal that explicit learning accompanied by guided and structured activities enhances student learning.

This study clearly rises above understanding the task as a simple opposition between grammar exercises and writing activities. Rather, it suggests that the reader opt for a more progressive view. Consider a class where grammar is not being practiced just as repetitive exercises for independent assignments but as preparations for writing eloquent non-erroneous essays. Sentence construction could be practiced through short writing activities and the exercises could be revamped to contain more complex writing. The specific genre-based and task-based scaffold teaching strategy employed in the present study is a second language acquisition (SLA) instructional approach based on Long and Robinson (1998) that supports the student in the meaningful use of grammar and leads to enhanced essay writing.

Recommendations

In reconciling the data, it is possible to paint the picture of this study as a tapestry in which several threads are intertwined: quantitative data and qualitative data. In this paper integrating the findings we see the drawbacks of restricting the practice to grammar drills work and recommend a more comprehensive approach to grammar correction and teaching that includes writing practice along with grammar correction. Direct teaching of Arabic on how to construct various forms of complex sentences and structured practice, activities may empower the learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to overcome the challenges they face in comprehending the English grammar system.

This effort, however, is only the beginning of the search for better teaching practices that are worthy of the title, "research-based instruction". Other research studies that can be conducted in the future can include an attempt to find out the efficacy of specific intervention for students with those specific syntactic issues. Such interventions could include incorporating technology in learning or peer review sessions or other learning approaches touching on verb tenses. Further, there is a need to discover more on the ways of enhancing collaborative learning, corpus-based learning and task- based instructions that may open up for the learning process a new horizon for empowering learners.

In conclusion, the aim is to enable EFL learners of English in Qatar to be independent and adept in their comprehension and use of written English. With an understanding of these seminal findings and an outline of where the research should proceed in the future, it can provide educators with the direction necessary to create a generation of capable and assured writing professionals. This is an equivalent that can help to improve communication and academic achievements of such learners.

References

Albalawi, A. H. (2016). Error analysis of the written work of Saudi EFL university students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 7*(6), 1222-1233.

Alzamil, N. A. (2020). Negative transfer from Arabic as a major reason for the errors made by Arabic learners in their written production in English as a second language. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 10*(1), 1-12.

Doughty, C. M., & Long, M. H. (2003). *The linguistic environment and second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ellis, R. (2006). *Systematic vocabulary teaching: A new approach to language learning*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Fadi, R. (2010). Difficulties faced by Arab learners of English regarding grammar and vocabulary. *European Journal of Social Sciences, 9*(2), 372-379.

Graham, S. (2013). Writing instruction in the secondary grades: A review of the research. *Reading Research Quarterly, 48*(2), 237-272.

Long, M. H., & Robinson, A. W. (1998). Do second language learners benefit from instruction on grammar? *The Modern Language Journal, 82*(1), 101-115.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Muñoz, C. (2007). *The acquisition of verb tense in L2 English: A usage-based perspective*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Schachter, J. (1992). The second language learner's language transfer system. *Language Learning, 42*(4), 441-463.

Wolfe-Quintero, K., Iwashyna, S. D., & Sattler, C. M. (2014). A corpus analysis of syntactic errors in L2 English writing by native Spanish speakers. *TESL Canada Journal, 31*(2), 119-140.