Errors in English Writing of ESL/EFL Students: A Systematic Review

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Abstract—**Errors in the English writing of students have been studied in different levels of education and in different genres of writing in different countries. The study of writing errors is considered essential for improving the writing of students. This systematic review studies the research papers which have been conducted in the surrounding countries of Afghanistan to find out the most common errors in the writing of EFL/ESL learners in this region, and to find the gap in the existing literature in this region. The studies were identified through a search in three databases: The Science Direct, the Academy Publications, and the Scopus journals database. The included studies are conducted in EFL/ESL, focused on errors in the writing, and published in one of the three abovementioned journals. The three databases produced 562 articles, from which nine articles were included in the study based on inclusion/exclusion criteria. After an in-depth study of the articles, it was revealed that the EFL/ESL speakers of English in these countries commit errors in writing, and most of these errors are in the grammatical and mechanics category. The most common errors reported in the studies were in articles, prepositions, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. In these countries, a few genres of writing, such as essays and journals, have been studied.**

Indexed Terms—**EFL writing, ESL writing, error analysis, writing errors, causes of errors**

I. INTRODUCTION

English as an international language is widely spoken around the world. It is considered the language of communication, business, trade, diplomacy, and the medium of instruction in higher educations. James (2013) stated that science and technology are two other domains that are dominated by the English language. The English language possesses the first place in the world for second language speakers (Christiansen, 2015). It is spoken as a foreign language in many countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, China, and as a second language in Pakistan, India, and most countries of south-east Asia.

Due to the international use of the English language, it becomes a requirement for employment and education in the countries where it is spoken as a second or foreign language. Most people, including students, teachers, scientists, and the users of social media, feel the need to have the ability to express their feelings and thoughts in the English language. Among the four skills of the English language, writing is of paramount importance because it is widely used in higher educations and occupational fields (Walsh, 2010). This skill of English language is vital for writing assignments, reviews, researches, and many other academic activities, all of which require advanced writing skills, but learning to write without errors in a foreign language seems to be a challenging task (Hyland, 2003). In fact, it is a difficult task even for the adult native speakers of a language (Raimes, 1991). It needs the knowledge of the language system, vocabulary, the skills to put the right words together and create a coherent and cohesive piece of writing, and thinking strategies to let the learner put their ideas effectively on a paper in another language (Erkan & Saban, 2011). Therefore, there is a crucial need for learners to improve their English language writing skills to enable them to achieve achieving the opportunities for employment and education.

In the process of language learning and acquisition, errors may occur (Brown, 2000) as errors are inseparable from the process of learning (Ling & Stapa, 2011). It shows that when errors occur, learning is taking place (Corder, 1982). However, the most important thing is that the errors should be analysed carefully because some essential understandings about second language learning are embedded in learners' errors (Brown, 2000).

Learner's errors in writing have been the centre of debates from a long time ago, among linguists, researchers, English language teachers, curriculum developers, and syllabus designers. Corder (1982) explained that the learners' errors are essential for three purposes. First, it gives the teachers an insight into the progress that students make toward their goals. Second, it helps the researchers to understand the procedures and strategies that the learners use for learning the language. The third advantage is for the learners to help them evaluate their progress in learning the language.

This systematic review is intended to provide essential information about the errors in English writing and the remedial measures for the errors in English language writing of the students in the neighbouring countries of

Afghanistan, such as Pakistan, China, Iran, and other central Asian countries. In some of these countries, English is used as a foreign language, and in some of them, it is used as a second language. In the context where English is used as a foreign language, a lack of exposure to the English language affects English language skills, as stated by Ling and Stapa (2011). Hence, it makes the language learning process challenging for the learners, particularly for those who live in a multilingual context. Among the four skills of English language, the productive skills seem to be affected the most, since there is no direct communication through spoken or written language in the society while the learners have the opportunities to develop their receptive skills through watching news, documentaries, reading books, English newspapers, and magazines. Therefore, English language learners in foreign language context are prone to making different types of errors in their productive skills, mainly writing skills.

Ample studies have been conducted in different countries on different aspects of errors in English language writing, for instance, Ling and Stapa (2011) conducted a study on the writing skill of non-English major Chinese undergraduate students in Malaysia. Demailly Tulldahl (2005) conducted a study on the written production of adolescent learners of English in Sweden. Murad and Khalil (2015) researched the writing of first-year Arab students majoring in the English language. However, in Afghanistan and the countries surrounding Afghanistan, the issue of error analysis has not been given enough attention due to two reasons. First, in most of these countries, English is learned as a foreign language in secondary and tertiary educations. It is taught merely as a subject in schools and universities, but not used in the context. Second, the English language has only recently gained importance in the region due to its extensive use in technology, politics, and economics. Only in Pakistan, which was a part of British India before 1947 (Channa, 2017), English is learned as the second language. In the surrounding countries of Afghanistan, only a few studies on errors analysis in English writing are available in online databases; this is because in most of the countries surrounding Afghanistan, Russian is widely used rather than the English language or the national languages of these countries such as Persian is used. The researcher would like to study the researches on error analysis in English language writing in this region to find out the common errors committed by EFL/ESL learners and the gap in the existing literature.

To achieve the aim of this study, the researcher examines the studies on learners' errors in English language writing in a foreign language or second language settings in the countries surrounding Afghanistan such as Pakistan, Iran, and China. The researcher has searched the Scopus journals database, the Academy Publications database, and the Science Direct journals database to find out researches on error analysis in this region. These three databases have been selected because all three of them are widely known in the region. The Scopus and Science Direct have the biggest database of articles, and the Academy Publications has journals for language studies that are open access. Besides, based on the knowledge of the researcher, most of the articles produced in this region are published in these three journals. The study is aimed to fulfil the following objectives:

1. To find out the most common errors in English language writing committed by learners in the region.
2. To find out the gap in the existing literature in the region.

Figure 1. The map of Afghanistan and the surrounding countries.

II. METHODOLOGY

For this review, the articles in three online databases were searched: The Science Direct journals database, the Academy Publications journals database, and the Scopus journals database. The Science Direct database was selected because they have the biggest database of articles, and also the researcher had open access to the articles in this database. It produced 562 related research papers from the earliest date to 19 September 2019, from which the only one was included based on the inclusion criteria. The Academy Publications database was chosen because most of the articles

related to language teaching and research and language studies from the region are published in the journals of this database. Also, the Academy Publications has open access articles, which made it easy for the researcher to get the articles. The Academy Publications database produced ten related articles, from which five articles were included based on the inclusion criteria. The Scopus database was also selected due to its availability of open access. The search in this database produced 38 related articles whereby the initial six were selected, but after careful study of the articles, only three were included in the study based on the inclusion criteria.

Overall, the three databases produced a total number of 562 articles from which only nine articles met the inclusion/exclusion criteria and were included in the study. For all the three databases, the search terms used were 'Errors Analysis in English language writing, Errors in EFL writing, errors in ESL writing, and errors in English language writing.' The researcher did not include specific terms such as lexical errors, grammatical errors, or syntactical errors; since the purpose of the researcher was to investigate the studies which have been conducted generally on errors in English language writing. At the screening stage, the titles of the papers were searched for the terms Errors and EFL/ESL writing. Later, both the titles and the abstracts of the studies were investigated to find out the studies related to the errors in EFL/ESL writing in the countries surrounding Afghanistan. A total number of 9 articles on errors in English language writing were selected after a long process of filtration.
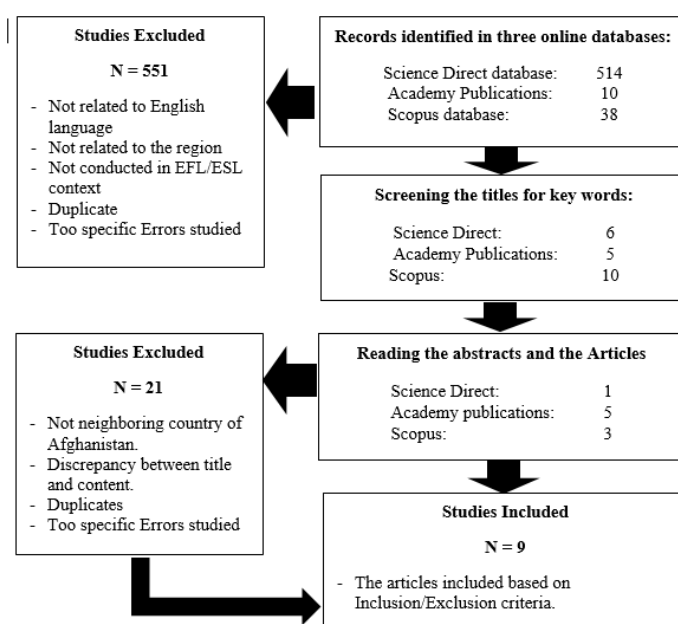

Figure 2.   Flow chart showing the process articles selection.

A.   The Inclusion Criteria for the Study

This study comprises the papers which meet the following criteria.
1. The studies are conducted only in the countries surrounding Afghanistan.
2. The studies conducted in EFL/ESL contexts.
3. The studies focused on errors in English language writing.
4. The articles are taken from Science Direct Journals database, Academy Publications database, and Scopus journals database.

B.   The Exclusion Criteria for the Studies

The study excluded the papers which did not meet the following criteria.
1. The articles not conducted in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan.
2. The articles were not conducted in EFL/ESL context.
3. The articles which have focused on errors other than the writing skills of the English language.

III.   RESULTS

The search in three online databases produced a total number of 562 articles. From this vast number, nine articles were included in this review based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. From the nine articles, four of them were conducted in Iran, in which three are quantitative studies, and one is a mixed-method study. One paper was conducted in two countries; Iran and India. The method of this article was mixed-method. Three of the included articles are conducted in China, in which two are qualitative, and one is a mixed-method study. Only one study is from Pakistan, which has applied the mixed-method design. All of the selected articles were published between 2013 and 2019.

TABLE I
THE TABLE BELOW SHOWS THE OVERVIEW OF THE NINE SELECTED ARTICLES.

No.	Author/Year	Location	Research Design
1	Momenzade, Khojasteh, and Kafipour (2018)	Iran	Quantitative
2	Salehi and Bahrami (2018)	Iran	Quantitative
3	Nezami and Najafi (2012)	Iran	Quantitative
4	Khansir (2013)	Iran/India	Mixed method
5	Marzoughi and Ghanbari (2015)	Iran	Mixed method
6	Zafar (2016)	Pakistan	Mixed method
7	Cheng (2015)	China	Qualitative
8	Liu (2015)	China	Mixed-Method
9	Yang (2019)	China	Qualitative

Many researchers have studied the errors in the writing of students, but a few numbers of studies are available in Afghanistan and the countries surrounding Afghanistan. In Iran, Nezami and Najafi (2012) studied the essays of 103 Iranian undergraduate students majoring in the English language. The students of two universities of Iran participated in the study, Tehran University, and the Islamic Azad University. This study had two parts. The first part was a reading comprehension task, and the second part required the students to write an essay in 60 minutes on a given topic. After the analysis of the essays, 4019 errors were detected in the essays. The ten most frequent errors in students' writing were listed as punctuation errors, lexical errors, spelling, article, verb formation, the use of singular & plural forms, prepositions, verb tense, clause structure, and S/V agreement. Also, Khansir (2013) conducted a study on EFL and EFL undergraduate students, but the difference is that Khansir's (2013) study compares the errors between Iranian EFL learners and Indian ESL learners. Two hundred ESL and EFL students from the Mysore state of India and Bushehr city of Iran participated in the study. The results of the study indicated that the Indian ESL learners committed 3274 errors in their writing, while the Iranian EFL learners committed 3045 errors in their writing. The errors were divided into five categories: paragraph, conjunction, article, punctuation, and spelling. The results showed that most of the errors were committed in the realm of punctuation (1387), in which 718 were committed by Indian students, and 669 errors were committed by Iranian students. The least errors were committed in the realm of spelling with a total number of 1050, in which 578 spelling errors were committed by Iranian students, and 472 were committed by Indian students. Also, the results indicated that Indian students had committed more errors than the Iranian students, but according to the researcher, since the difference is not significant, so it is negligible. The study also showed that the students did not have enough knowledge of the rules of English language writing. Moreover, the researcher stated that there are systematic errors in the writing of the students which could be the result of English teaching and the strategies of learning. Several other causes, such as interference of the mother tongue, the complexity of the English language, and lack of students' knowledge of English language writing have been identified as other causes of weak writing.

Two years later, Marzoughi and Ghanbari (2015) studied the essays of 80 undergraduate students of Medical Science University of Bushehr, Iran. The students were asked to participate in an essay writing test. The test had three parts, errors in recognizing different parts of an essay, errors in recognition of the main idea of the essay, and grammatical errors. The grammatical part of the test included articles, tense, preposition, and spelling. The total number of grammatical errors produced in the test was 199. Articles (62) were highly frequent, and prepositions (42) were the least frequent errors committed in writing. Momenzade, Khojasteh, and Kafipour (2018) studied the expository essays of 49 medical students studying the EFL writing course at Sheraz University of Medical Science. Students' writings were collected at the start of the course, and after a few weeks of training, another set of compositions was collected from the students. The study focused on four types of errors omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. The results of the study showed that in both pre-test and post-test all the four types of errors occurred: omission, misformation, addition, and misordering. The omission errors have been the most consistent error both in pre-test and post-test. Although the number had been dramatically decreased in the post-test comparing to the pre-test, it was still one of the most consistent errors in the writing. The results of the study showed that despite attending the grammar and writing skills course, students' writing did not show a significant improvement in misformation, addition, and misordering errors. However, the total number of errors had decreased in the post-test, but this reduction was significant (0.000<.05) only in omission errors; in other types of errors such as misformation (0.588>.05), addition (0.135>.05), and misordering (0.695>.05) the reduction was not significant. In the same year, Salehi and Bahrami (2018) conducted a study on the writing of Persian authors. The study investigated 40 articles written by Iranian masters and Ph.D. students. The results of the study indicated that the students committed most errors in the usage of words (36.2%) followed by other types of errors such as articles (26.8%), prepositions (16.6%), conjunctions (11.6%), words order (3.5%), active & passive voice (2.4%), tense (2.2%), and S/V agreement (0.7%).

The issue of error analysis has been studied in Pakistan too. English is spoken as a second language in Pakistan. Zafar (2016) examined the errors of 37 students of BBA in Mohammad Ali Jinnah University. This study was focused on verb tense errors in students' writing, but other types of errors were also recorded by the researchers. The students participated in a four months English language course, and a pre-test was administered at the beginning of the course. During the first two months of the course, students' errors were collected from their written assignments, and for the following two months of the course, the students were coached by giving them grammar exercises on the errors recorded earlier. Finally, the students were given a final assignment to check whether the writings have improved after

two months of coaching. The results of the pre-test and post-test showed that the past tense and present tense carried the most frequent errors in the writing of Pakistani ESL students. The results also indicated that inter-lingual errors were the majority, whereby it occurred 232 times. The first language interference or intra-lingual errors were 154 in number, which comes in second place. The errors from the transfer of the structure were 41, and the overextension of analogy errors were13, but the number of these errors decreased after a two-month coaching session. The results of the post-test showed that inter-lingual errors decreased to 169, intra-lingual errors decreased to 94, structure transfer errors decreased to 22, and the overextension analogy errors decreased to five. The results also showed that writing activities could improve the writing of the students.

China is the country where the English language is used as a foreign language. In China, Cheng (2015) analysed inter-language errors in the writings of higher vocational and technological college students. In his study, Cheng (2015) explained the causes of interlanguage based errors, and also he pointed out some implications for the educationists. Liu (2015) also conducted a study on non-English major students in China. He analysed 68 students' compositions to find out the spelling errors in their writings. He divided the errors into three categories; local syntactic errors (32), global syntactic errors (6), and semantic errors (17). These error types were later divided into sub-types. Local syntactic errors included grammatically misspelled errors (13), errors in word class (8), and errors in lexical collocation (11). Also, Liu (2015) pointed out the causes of the errors in students' composition. The interference of the students' L1 and the lack of second language knowledge have been mentioned as the major causes of students' errors.

Moreover, Yang (2019) reviewed the negative language transfer regarding the errors in English writing of Chinese college students. His review study indicated that negative transfer exists from Chinese to the English language in terms of phonological, lexical, syntactical, semantic, and discourse levels. In the study, it was pointed out that most errors in the writing of Chinese students are the result of L1 thinking. These errors, such as inappropriate use of English articles, words, sentence structures, and Chinese discourse level, word choice, derivation, and collocation errors, made it difficult for Chinese students to convey their ideas in formal English. The study suggested that the Chinese English teachers should provide more input such as writing and reading to the students, encourage the learners to think in native ways, build up a good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, raise awareness of language transfer in students, make contrastive analysis of English and Chinese language, increase comprehensible input and cultural input, and correct inter-lingual errors.

TABLE II
THE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDIES REVIEWED

No.	Authors/Year	Students' Level of Education	Writing Genre	Field of Study	Article type
1	Momenzade, Khojasteh, & Kafipour (2018)	Undergraduates	Expository Essay	Medical	Research
2	Salehi and Bahrami (2018)	Master/Ph.D.	Journal papers	Different majors	Research
3	Nezami and Najafi (2012)	Undergraduate/BA	Essay	English major	Research
4	Khansir (2013)	Undergraduate	None	English major	Research
5	Marzoughi and Ghanbari (2015)	Undergraduate	Essay	Medical	Research
6	Zafar (2016)	Undergraduate	Essay	Business	Research
7	Cheng (2015)	None	None	None	Review Paper
8	Liu (2015)	University level	Essay	Non-English major	Research
9	Yang (2019)	None	None	None	Review Paper

IV. DISCUSSION

The study of nine articles from three different journal databases, Science Direct database, Academy Publications, and Scopus database, revealed that there are a few studies on the issue of error analysis in the countries surrounding Afghanistan. Also, this review showed that the issue of error analysis had not been studied from different aspects in terms of the level of the students and writing genres. Since the English language is used as a foreign language in Afghanistan and the surrounding countries, most of the error analysis studies in this region are conducted at the university level. The researcher could not find any research conducted at the school level. Besides, most of the papers reviewed showed that only a few genres of writing had been studied for error analysis in this region. Findings showed that five articles had studied errors in essays, and one article has studied the errors in journals. Two studies were article reviews, and one paper had conducted the study through a proficiency test. It shows that there are still other genres of writing, and the writing of students at a different level of education needs to be studied.

The analysis of the studies showed that the EFL writing errors are almost the same in all EFL contexts, for example, in most of these studies errors in the use of article, preposition, conjunction, S/V agreement, lexical errors such as word choice, mechanics or writing errors such as spelling and punctuation were noticed. Based on the results from the nine articles conducted in the EFL context, the English writing of the students included both inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors. It was also revealed that the most common errors in the writing of the students in these countries are articles, prepositions, word choice, spelling, and punctuation errors. In the articles, the causes of errors have also been pointed out.   The influence of first language, overgeneralization of the rules, the lack of article and preposition system in some of the languages, lack of students' vocabulary knowledge, lack of students' second language knowledge, complexity of English language, and students' lack of English writing practice have been mentioned as the major causes of errors in

both ESL and EFL context. The studies have also suggested some remedial measures for improving the writing of students. Providing reading and writing input, encouraging the students to think like a native speaker, building up students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, raising student's awareness of language transfer, increasing comprehensible and cultural input, and correcting inter-lingual errors are suggested to improve the writing of the students better.

TABLE III
THE TOP FIVE ERRORS IN THE WRITING OF THE STUDENTS IN THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES OF AFGHANISTAN.

No.	Errors Committed by EFL/ESL Learners	Research Article
1	Omission, Misformation, Addition Misordering	Momenzade, Khojasteh, and Kafipour (2018)
2	Word Usage, Article, Preposition, Conjunction, Word Order	Salehi and Bahrami (2018)
3	Punctuation, Lexical Errors, Spelling, Article, Verb Formation	Nezami and Najafi (2012)
4	Conjunction, Article, Punctuation Spelling	Khansir (2013)
5	Article, Tense, Spelling, Preposition	Marzoughi and Ghanbari (2015)
6	Past Tense, Present Tense	Zafar (2016)
7	REVIEW PAPER	Cheng (2015)
8	S/V Agreement, Singular/Plural Form, Word Form, Word Choice	Liu (2015)
9	Articles, sentence structures, word choice, derivation, and collocation errors	Yang (2019)

V. CONCLUSION

The English language is not widely used in the surrounding countries of Afghanistan, especially in the Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and some other countries which had been a part of the Soviet Union previously. In most of the countries surrounding Afghanistan, Russian and Persian languages are the dominant languages, and English is spoken as a foreign language. Therefore, the English language is not given enough attention, and not many studies have been conducted on the English language. The review of nine articles indicated that both EFL and ESL speakers of the English language commit errors in their writing. It also indicated that some types of errors are common in English writing in most of these countries, which are surrounding Afghanistan, such as errors in the article, prepositions, conjunctions, spelling, punctuation, and S/V agreement. The review also revealed that except for a few genres of writing such as expository writing, journal papers, and assignments, other types of writing had not been studied in the region. In addition, error analysis studies have not been conducted on students other than university students in this region. To conclude, the EFL and ESL learners in this region commit both inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors in their writing.

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