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Recurring errors in the use of the definite article: Causes and pedagogical responses

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Abstract

Recurring grammatical errors in the use of the definite article ال (*al*) in noun-noun and noun-adjective phrases remain common among learners of Arabic, even at intermediate and advanced levels. This study explores the reasons behind these recurring errors from learners' own perspectives. Using a mixed-method design, the research analyzes 153 learner writing samples from two Lebanese universities and conducts semi-structured interviews with 21 students from universities in the United States, Canada, Europe and the United Kingdom, and Lebanon. Triangulation of these data sources offers a comprehensive perspective of recurring errors. Findings uncover that first-language (L1) interference, the complexity of Arabic grammar, and limited corrective feedback among others are key contributors to recurring errors. The study highlights the need for reinforcing core grammatical structures, experiential learning, building an Arabic cognitive community and timely targeted feedback, offering practical implications for improving Arabic language teaching globally.

Keywords first language (L1), second language (L2), recurring errors, second language acquisition, interlanguage, first-language interference, Arabic as a foreign language

1. Introduction

Foreign language learners of Arabic have long struggled with recurring grammatical errors, which remain key challenges to achieving proficiency. Even at advanced levels, students continue to experience difficulties in understanding and applying key grammatical features such as the definite article ال (*al*). While several research studies have reported these errors

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quantitatively, focusing on their frequency and linguistic patterns, few have identified the main reasons from the learners' own perspectives or considered how learners themselves comprehend and try to solve these challenges.

This research introduces an original, learner-centered approach to understanding persistent grammatical errors in Arabic by combining textual analysis of learner writing with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. By actively involving learners in reflecting on their own errors**,** the research moves beyond surface-level error description to uncover the cognitive, pedagogical, and experiential factors shaping their interlanguage development. This perspective not only reveals *why* such errors persist but also how learners think about potential interventions, an area that has received little attention in the field.

Persistent errors may arise from several sources: first-language influence, the structural and semantic complexity of Arabic, limited exposure, and insufficient feedback during instruction. Examining these reasons through both learners' written output and their self-reflective accounts offers novel and holistic understanding of the challenges they face and the reasoning behind their linguistic choices. This dual focus also helps identify pedagogical responses that align with learners' perceptions and classroom realities.

Accordingly, this study investigates the underlying causes of learners' recurring grammatical errors in Arabic, focusing particularly on their use of the definite article ال (*al*), especially in noun–noun (*idāfa*) constructions and noun–adjective constructions. Utilizing a mixed-method design, it integrates quantitative analysis of 153 learner writing samples from two Lebanese universities with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with 21 students studying Arabic as a foreign or second language across universities in the United States, Canada, Europe and the United Kingdom, and Lebanon.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What difficulties do learners report experiencing in using the definite article ال (*al*)?
2. How do learners explain the sources of their errors?
3. How are these explanations reflected in their written work?
4. What potential corrective measures do learners suggest addressing these errors?

This research is innovative in its triangulation of learner-produced data and learner reflections across multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. It offers a comprehensive, learner-centered understanding of recurring grammatical errors and bridges the gap between interlanguage theory and classroom application. By aligning empirical analysis with learners' own interpretations, the study provides data-based reflections that can inform more responsive pedagogical strategies and enhance the effectiveness of Arabic language instruction worldwide.

1.1. Literature Review

In linguistic typology, languages are compared based on whether and how they mark definiteness. In Arabic, the definite article, ال (*al*), is a morphological prefix that attaches the beginning of a noun to mark it as definite (for example: the book = الكتاب = كتاب + ال "*al-kitaab*", the written =الكتابي ال+كتابي "*al-kitaabi* "). It is unique to nouns and adjectives, and it cannot be

applied as a marker to verbs. Additionally, the pronunciation of ال (*al*) is affected by the initial consonant of the noun it precedes: the ل (*lām*) is assimilated into the following consonant if it belongs to the group of "sun letters," while the ل (*lām*) remains clearly pronounced without assimilation before consonants belonging to the remaining group of "moon letters." (Ryding, 2005, p. 156)

In comparison, English represents definiteness through the definite article *the*. Other languages, such as Russian or Chinese, instead use demonstratives or rely on context to express definiteness. This variation across world languages can have significant pedagogical ramifications for foreign language learners. When learners of Arabic speak a first language which uses definite articles (such as English), they may expect functional similarity between the article *the* and the prefix ال (*al*), leading to transfer errors. On the other hand, learners whose L1 lacks articles often struggle to understand definiteness as a grammatical feature. Hence, this apparent simplicity in making a noun definite in Arabic by simply adding the definite article ال (*al*) is one of the greatest challenges faced by learners of Arabic as a foreign language. "This is a challenge which students often struggle to overcome, preventing them from reaching the desired linguistic and communicative competence" (Alkohlani, 2023, p.216).

Numerous studies have examined the recurring grammatical errors in the written work of learners of Arabic or of Arabic speakers learning other languages. These studies have concluded that the use of definite article ال (*al*) whether in noun-noun phrases (*idāfa*), noun-adjective agreement, or relative pronouns are among the most repeated and challenging errors made by foreign or second language (L2) learners. Such errors particularly occur in areas where learners' first language (L1) lacks direct syntactic or semantic typology to the L2 structure. These errors tend to group around structures that are strongly ingrained in the morphosyntactic system of the L1 and resist easy transfer from learners' existing linguistic background. As explained by Corder (1980), these errors are the result of persistence of mother-tongue habits in the new language.

For instance, Alkohlani (2023), utilizing the Arabic Learner Corpus, evaluated the performance of advanced Arabic learners and discovered that even at higher proficiency levels, misuse of the definite article ال (*al*) persisted and was resistant to correction. The study focused on how learners often overgeneralize (apply the rules too broadly) or oversimplify (make the rules simpler) the definite article. These misuses reflect learners' challenges in aligning the rules of definiteness in Arabic, which involve specificity, genericity, and discourse prominence, onto their L1 syntactic framework. Structural and semantic mismatches play a significant role: when learners try to transfer article usage rules from their L1, and these rules do not correlate with Arabic usage, systematic errors emerge and persist. This aligns with what Corder (1967, 1974) described as "competence errors…from which we are able to reconstruct [the learners'] knowledge of the language; his transitional competence" (p. 10).

Similar findings have been reported by other researchers, such as Hanem El-Farahaty (2017) who used the error analysis method to examine the written work of advanced students of Arabic. El-Farahaty categorized the

errors into four types: grammatical, typographical, discourse-level, and lexical-level errors. Grammatical errors accounted for the highest proportion (60%) of all errors, particularly errors in agreement. She attributed the persistence of these grammatical errors to mismatches between L1 and L2 grammatical structures. Therefore, the high frequency of agreement errors highlights the significant challenge students face when transferring their L1 grammatical repertoire to Arabic, implying that similar cognitive and structural constraints may account for the recurring misapplications of the definite article ال (*al*) explored in this study.

Along the same lines, Al-Hawary (2003, 2009, 2019) examined how learners of Standard Arabic whose first languages are English, Chinese, Japanese, French, and Russian use both verbal and nominal gender-agreement morphology. Al-Hawary reported that L2 and L3 (third language) learners whose L1 does not have nominal agreement forms similar to Arabic found difficulty with these forms (English, Chinese and Japanese), unlike L2 and L3 learners whose L1 is similar to Arabic with respect to nominal agreement morphology (French and Russian).

Analogous investigations have been documented in opposite contexts where Arabic speakers learn other languages. Tryzna, Ivanov, and AlBader (2025), for instance, assessed Kuwaiti Arabic speakers learning English focusing on relative clause contexts. Their research found that while learners acquired the English definite article with relatively greater accuracy, consistent difficulties appeared with the indefinite article *a/an*. They related this discrepancy to the syntax-semantics overlap. Whereas definiteness is highly encoded in Arabic, indefiniteness is often not, leading learners to skip or misapply indefinite articles in English. This emphasizes the importance of how definiteness and indefiniteness are marked (or unmarked) in the L1 and how these cross-linguistic contrasts shape interlanguage development.

Moreover, the challenge of error fossilization further hinders the process of transfer from L1 to L2. Fossilization, interpreted as the fixation of non-target-like forms despite continued exposure and instruction, has been widely discussed in L2 acquisition research (Selinker, 1972; Han, 2004). For instance, in the Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, a recent study (Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2024) revealed that article misapplication and other fixated error types often remain entrenched over time, even in classrooms where corrective feedback is a key strategy. Unless instruction is highly targeted and reinforced with ongoing, high-frequency input, these stable errors resist change. This suggests that fossilization is not merely a matter of limited exposure but may include cognitive and processing constraints, such as learners' reliance on embedded interlanguage rules, shallow parsing strategies, or decreased attentional resources for function words.

In sum, these studies demonstrate that for learners of Arabic, as well as Arabic-speaking learners of other languages, grammatical errors remain stable mostly when there is no equivalent structure in the L1 that learners can align with the L2. This is particularly clear in the use (and misuse) of articles, restrictive relative clauses, and nominal constructions such as the *idāfa*, where the syntactic and semantic foundations are intrinsically distinct from English or other Indo-European languages. In these cases, learners must

reformulate entirely new grammatical associations, mostly without adequate input frequency, explicit instruction, or corrective feedback to support restructuring. Therefore, this indicates the need for research that not only catalogs error types but also investigates the causes and conditions such as L1 interference, pedagogical input, the nature of the Arabic language, active and timely feedback, and the degree of attention to form versus meaning during communication that affect whether these errors become fossilized or can be successfully treated.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Persistent errors theories have been explained by several researchers in the field including Selinker (1972), Richard (1971, 1974) and Crystal (1981).

Selinker's interlanguage theory states that "learners formulate an evolving linguistic system namely '*interlanguage*'. This system is different from both their first language (L1) and the target second language (L2). It is dynamic yet systematic, characterized by patterns of errors that uncover the learner's internalized structures" (1972). Richard's main idea is that "errors are not random, but systematic and meaningful (interlingual & intralingual)" (1971). As for Crystal, he believed that "errors are deviations from the target language rules which result from incomplete knowledge or gaps in competence" (1988). All three researchers agreed that errors are dynamic, systematic, meaningful, distinct from L1 and L2, and that they are mainly caused by L1 interference.

This study adopts Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory as its primary framework, because it explains the persistence of errors and accounts for their foundational causes. In other words, the Selinker's model guides the analysis by connecting identified errors to learners' internal reasonings.

According to this theory, errors emerge from the evolving nature of interlanguage, shaped by factors such as L1 transfer, over-generalization, simplification, and incomplete rule formation. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to English-speaking learners of Arabic, who often struggle with structures absent from their L1, including the use of the definite article ال (*al)*. By contextualizing errors as meaningful markers of interlanguage development, the study examines what errors occur, why they persist, and how learners reflect on them, correlating with the mixed-methods design of 153 writing samples and 21 semi-structured interviews across multiple countries. To sum up, Selinker's theory situates this analysis within a dynamic and systematic framework, to bridge theory and classroom practice.

2. Methodology

1.1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to identify and analyze recurring grammatical inaccuracies, explore their underlying causes, and propose strategies to address them among learners of Arabic. Combining these approaches enables a more comprehensive understanding of error patterns while incorporating the perspectives of learners.

1.2. Quantitative Component

The researcher collected a total of 153 writing samples from placement tests administered at two Lebanese universities (Lebanese University 1 and Lebanese University 2), including both intermediate and advanced Arabic classes. These placement tests are used to assign students to the appropriate Arabic language level. While each university utilizes a distinct test, all include a writing component.

At Lebanese University 1, the writing prompt was:
"Do you like to travel? Why?" (هل تحب السفر؟ لماذا؟/ Hal tuḥibbu assafar? Limādhā?)

At Lebanese University 2**,** the writing prompt was:
"Describe your favorite city." (صف مدينتك المفضلة/ *Ṣif madīnataka al-mufaḍḍalah*)

The samples were collected after grading, and students' proficiency levels were confirmed. Analysis of these writing samples identified six primary categories of recurring grammatical errors:

1. The use of the definite article ال (*al*)
2. Noun-noun phrases
3. Noun-adjective phrases
4. Relative pronouns
5. Prepositions
6. Subject-verb agreement.

The above list was observed across both institutions. To ensure confidentiality, all participants' names and personal information were anonymized; only the writing assignments were shared with the researcher. It is essential to note that, for the specific goals of this analysis, the authors will focus exclusively on the use of the definite article ال *(al)* focusing particularly on their use of the definite article ال (*al*), especially in noun-noun (*idāfa*) constructions and noun-adjective constructions**.**

1.3. Qualitative Component

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 learners of Arabic as a foreign or second language from different universities. These learners were not included among the 153 students from whom the researcher collected writing samples. These interviews served to support the validity of the researcher's analysis by providing additional insight into learners' difficulties and their perceptions of recurring grammatical errors, reasons, and possible solutions. The qualitative data complemented the quantitative findings by offering contextual understanding of students' error patterns.

1.4. Triangulation of Data

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study implemented data triangulation. Multiple sources of evidence were integrated, including:

1. Writing samples from placement tests (LU1 and LU2)
2. Semi-structured interviews with learners.

By combining quantitative analysis of writing samples with qualitative input from interviews and incorporating perspectives from multiple participants and institutions, the study utilizes methodological triangulation.

This approach ensures a robust and comprehensive understanding of the persistent grammatical errors observed in learners of Arabic, as well as the reasons for these occurrences and suggesting pedagogical strategies.

1.5. Profile of Interview Participants

Students came from various universities in Lebanon, Europe and the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Table 1 shows the names of the universities the students attended, the number of participants from each university, and the percentage they represent in the overall study. Table 2 gives the number of students at each level of experience measured by the number of semesters they have studied Arabic, along with the percentage they represent in the overall study. Table 3 gives the number of students learning a combination of Fusha (Modern Standard Arabic) and colloquial Arabic versus students who study only a colloquial dialect of Arabic, along with the percentage they represent in the overall study.

Table 1
Number of participants from each university

University Name	Number of students per university	Percentage
American University of Beirut	5	23.8%
Brown University	1	4.8%
City University of London	1	4.8%
Columbia University	1	4.8%
Harvard University	1	4.8%
McGill University	1	4.8%
Northwestern University	1	4.8%
Portland University	1	4.8%
Science Po Paris	3	14.3%
Trinity College	2	9.5%
University College London	1	4.8%
University of Cambridge	1	4.8%
University of Glasgow UK	1	4.8%
University of Strasbourg	1	4.8%

Table 2
Number of participants at each experience level measured by the numbers of semesters they have studied Arabic

Number of semesters studying Arabic	Number of students	Percentage
Three Semesters	1	4.8%
Four Semesters	8	38.1%
Five Semesters	5	23.8%

Six Semesters	4	19.0%
Seven Semesters	1	4.8%
Eight Semesters	1	4.8%
Ten Semesters	1	4.8%

Table 3
Number of students studying a combination of Fusha (Modern Standard Arabic) and colloquial Arabic vs. students who study only a colloquial dialect of Arabic

Variety of Arabic studied	Number of students	Percentage
Fusha and Colloquial	20	95.20%
Colloquial	1	4.80%

1.6. Quantitative Statistical Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS version 30. Descriptive analyses included frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and means and standard deviations for continuous variables to summarize sample characteristics. The frequencies of six types of grammar errors (misuse of the definite article, noun-noun phrase (*idāfa*), noun-adjective phrase, relative pronoun, preposition, and subject-verb agreement) were categorized into four ordinal groups: no errors (0 errors), low frequency (1 error), moderate frequency (2 errors), and high frequency (3 or more errors). It is relevant to note that, for the specific goals of this study, the researcher will focus exclusively on the definite article, particularly in its use within noun-noun phrases (*idāfa*) and noun-adjective phrases.

The placement test was completed by $N = 153$ students from two private universities in Lebanon; Lebanese University 1 (LU1) ($n = 103$, 67.3%) and the Lebanese University 2 (LU2) ($n = 50$; 32.7%). The students were distributed across two levels; intermediate ($n = 90$; 58.8%) and advanced (n = 63, 41.2%).

1.7. Qualitative Analysis

In addition to quantitative analysis, this study involves a qualitative component to provide a broader and more comprehensive study of the issue of recurring errors in Arabic language learners. The researcher conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with intermediate and advanced students of Arabic from different universities to further comprehend the reasons behind their errors and how they understand them. Students were asked the following questions:

1. How many classes of Arabic have you taken?
2. How do you rate your Arabic speaking and writing skills?
3. As a learner of Arabic, what kind of Arabic grammar concepts do you find hard to understand and apply? Why?
4. In your opinion, what is the most effective solution for helping learners minimize the influence of L1 on L2?
5. Do you recommend explicit grammar instructions and experiential learning?

To analyze the data emerged from the interviews, the researcher followed the six guidelines from the Braun and Clarke (2006) framework for thematic analysis. According to the Braun and Clarke framework, the researcher should go through six different stages as follows to analyze interviews:

1. Familiarization: Familiarizing the researcher with the breadth and depth of the data.
2. Generation Initial Codes: All data extracts are divided into codes. They are collated and labeled under different groups or categories to be used later under broader themes.
3. Thematization: Stage three "refocuses the analysis at the broader level of themes rather than codes" (p.19). Thematization entails sorting the collated and relevant codes into theme(s).
4. Themes Revision: In this phase, the researcher conducts a thorough and iterative reading of the data to review, refine, and validate each theme.
5. Themes Definition and Naming: At this stage, the researcher engages in a detailed analysis of each theme to determine its core meaning and scope.
6. Report Production: The researcher writes up the final report of the analyzed data in which it is divided into themes, sub-themes, codes, and quotations.

Finally, it is notable to mention that participants will be identified using alphabetical letters corresponding to the sequence in which the interviews were conducted. For example, the first interview corresponds to the first letter of the alphabet, A. Accordingly, the participant of this interview is referred to as SA.

3. Findings

3.1. Quantitative Findings

3.1.1. Frequency Distribution of Six Grammar Error Types

The frequency of errors across six types of grammatical errors (the misuse of the definite article, noun-noun phrase (*idāfa*), noun-adjective phrase, relative pronoun, preposition, and subject-verb agreement) were calculated and categorized into four categories; no errors, low frequency errors, moderate frequency errors, and high frequency errors, as per Table 4 below.

Table 4
Categorization of the Frequency of Errors Across Six Types of Grammatical Errors

Frequency of Errors	Group	Explanation
0	No errors	Accurate use
1	Low frequency	Minor slip, likely not systematic
2	Moderate frequency	Frequent errors, emerging pattern
3 and above	High frequency	Systematic issues, lack of control

Table 5
Frequency Distribution of Six Grammatical Error Types by Placement Level

	Overall Sample (n = 153)	Intermediate (n = 90)	Advanced (n = 63)
Definite Article			
No Errors	40 (26.1%)	21 (23.3%)	19 (30.2%)
Low Frequency	64 (41.8%)	36 (40.0%)	28 (44.4%)
Moderate Frequency	30 (19.6%)	23 (25.6%)	7 (11.1%)
High Frequency	19 (12.4%)	10 (11.1%)	9 (14.3%)
Noun-Noun			
No Errors	77 (50.3%)	42 (46.7%)	35 (55.6%)
Low Frequency	49 (32.0%)	32 (35.6%)	17 (27.0%)
Moderate Frequency	18 (11.8%)	12 (13.3%)	6 (9.5%)
High Frequency	9 (5.9%)	4 (4.4%)	5 (7.9%)
Noun-Adjective			
No Errors	55 (35.9%)	37 (41.1%)	18 (28.6%)
Low Frequency	51 (33.3%)	34 (37.8%)	17 (27.0%)
Moderate Frequency	25 (16.3%)	13 (14.4%)	12 (19.0%)
High Frequency	22 (14.4%)	6 (6.7%)	16 (25.4%)
Relative Pronoun			
No Errors	125 (81.7%)	73 (81.1%)	52 (82.5%)
Low Frequency	20 (13.1%)	13 (14.4%)	7 (11.1%)
Moderate Frequency	3 (2.0%)	3 (3.3%)	0 (0%)
High Frequency	5 (3.3%)	1 (1.1%)	4 (6.3%)
Preposition			
No Errors	96 (62.7%)	50 (55.6%)	46 (73.0%)
Low Frequency	40 (26.1%)	26 (28.9%)	14 (22.2%)
Moderate Frequency	13 (8.5%)	12 (13.3%)	1 (1.6%)
High Frequency	4 (2.6%)	2 (2.2%)	2 (3.2%)
Subject-Verb			
No Errors	70 (45.8%)	34 (37.8%)	36 (57.1%)
Low Frequency	48 (31.4%)	29 (32.2%)	19 (30.2%)
Moderate Frequency	21 (13.7%)	17 (18.9%)	4 (6.3%)
High Frequency	14 (9.2%)	10 (11.1%)	4 (6.3%)

Table 5 presents the frequency distribution of six major grammatical errors found in students' writing samples (intermediate and advanced levels). For the purpose of this study, the researcher will focus on three key types: the definite article, noun-noun phrases, and noun-adjective phrases. For the definite article, low-frequency errors occurred most often (41.8%), while high-frequency errors were minimal (12.4%). Errors in noun-noun phrases occurred most often with low frequency (32.0%) while 5.9% of students displayed high-frequency errors for this error type. As for noun-adjective phrases, low frequency errors occurred most often (33.3%), along with high frequency errors occurring at 14.4%, the greatest among these three types of

errors. However, when looking at which error type was most frequent among the writing samples by combining low frequency, moderate frequency, and high frequency errors, the data indicates that definite article errors occurred most often. The combined error frequency (low-frequency errors (41.8%) + moderate-frequency errors (19.6%) + high-frequency errors (12.4%)) totals 73.8%, the highest of any error type.

This highlights the significant challenges students face in mastering the use of the definite article ال (*al*) within noun-noun (*idāfa*) and noun-adjective constructions. As Al-Kuhlani (2023) explains, "The recurrence of these errors suggests that while learners are generally aware of the structural restrictions on the use of the definite article in these constructions, they struggle to consistently apply them. Instead, they alternate between overgeneralizing the *idāfa* construction and the adjectival construction, often applying the rules of one in contexts that require the other" (p. 216).

These findings are especially relevant to the present study, as they illustrate how persistent grammatical errors stem not merely from lack of exposure but from deeper structural mismatches between learners' L1 and Arabic. Consequently, special attention must be given to these areas in both teaching and feedback to ensure learners develop not only theoretical understanding but also accurate and consistent application. As Corder (1967) observed, "the simple fact of presenting a certain linguistic form to a learner in the classroom does not necessarily qualify it for the status of input, for the reason that input is 'what goes in' not what is available for going in" (p. 9). This highlights the need for carefully designed pedagogical interventions that transform mere exposure into authentic intake.

3.1.2. Sample Errors

Referring back to Selinker's Interlanguage theory, it is crucial to present some sample errors related to the definite article, with particular focus on noun-noun (*idāfa*) constructions and noun-adjective phrases, which will be illustrated in the following table:

Table 6
Sample errors from student writing samples

Student Sentence	Target Sentence	Arabic Transliteration	English Translation	Error Type
أنا أدرس اللغة العربية لأن ***لغات مفيدات***.	أنا أدرس اللغة العربية لأن ***اللغات مفيدة***.	ʾanā ʾadrusu al-lughata al-ʿarabiyyata liʾanna al-lughāt mufīdah.	I study the Arabic language because languages are useful.	Definite Article Noun-Adjective Agreement

في الكتاب يحكي النص عن ***النظام*** التعليم.	في الكتاب يحكي النص عن ***نظام*** التعليم.	fī al-kitāb yaḥkī al-naṣṣ ʿan niẓām al-taʿlīm.	In the book, the text talks about the education system.	Noun-Noun Construction
السنة ***الماضي***.	السنة ***الماضية***.	al-sanal-māḍiyah.	Last year.	Noun-Adjective Agreement

In the first sentence of Table 6, there are a few errors. For one, the learner writes "لغات مفيدات" instead of "لغات مفيدة" . This is likely due to over-application of learned Arabic grammar rules: the student knows that Arabic adjectives agree with the nouns they modify and therefore overapplies this rule to all nouns. However, in Arabic, non-human plurals take singular feminine agreement in adjectives. The learner has not fully internalized the Arabic agreement system, particularly the asymmetry between human vs. non-human plurals. This error illustrates how the learner's developing interlanguage system operates somewhere between English and Arabic: the learner applies a logical but incomplete rule (plural noun → plural adjective), creating a systematic, persistent error that reflects transitional competence.

There is another error in the first sentence. The learner fails to apply the definite article to the noun لغات. In Arabic, unlike English, generalization about the whole class of things is made by adding the definite article ال (*al*). The sentence اللغات مفيدة – *languages (in general) are useful* – needs the definite article ال (*al*) in order to communicate that a broad statement is being made about languages, rather than simply referring to some unspecified group of languages (لغات).

In the second sentence of Table 6, the learner wrote "النظام التعليم" instead of "نظام التعليم". The student is mixing English noun-noun patterns with Arabic *idāfa* rules. In English, we say *"the education system"* (article + noun + noun), so the learner directly transfers this structure into Arabic. The learner has correctly internalized that the definite article in Arabic is added as a prefix to the noun; however, they have not internalized proper usage of the *idāfa* construction. The learner overapplies the use of the definite article ال (*al*) with both nouns, which is common among English-speaking learners of Arabic. It also reflects incomplete rule formation: the learner has not yet fully internalized the syntactic constraints of *idāfa*, where definiteness is only marked on the second element.

In the final sample sentence provided in Table 6, the learner writes "السنة الماضي" (*al-sanal-māḍi*) instead of the correct "السنة الماضية" *(al-sanal-māḍiyah*). Possible causes in interlanguage theory are L1 transfer, simplification, and incomplete rule formation. Regarding the first cause, if the learner's first language doesn't mark gender or adjective agreement, such as is the case in English, he/she doesn't instinctively think about agreement ("last year" in English doesn't require any agreement from "last"). Additionally, by dropping the *ta marbouta* (ة) to reduce the form to الماضي, they are simplifying the form. Finally, it is obvious that the learner has not fully internalized the rule of noun-adjective agreement yet.

In all three examples and according to Selinker's (1972) theory, the learners attempt to develop a transitional grammar system where some rules

of the target language are present, but others are absent. This reveals the potential for errors to fossilize. Indeed, many of these errors are common and persistent for Arabic as a foreign language learners.

3.2. Qualitative Findings

Analysis of the data revealed three overarching themes: grammar-related challenges in learning Arabic, the underlying causes of these challenges, and the proposed pedagogical remedies.

3.2.1. Grammar-Related Challenges in Learning Arabic

A main theme that emerged from the data concerns the grammar-related difficulties encountered by learners of Arabic as a second or foreign language. It focuses on the cognitive and structural challenges encountered by students when learning grammatical concepts in Arabic that are absent in their first languages.

In his own words, student SA reported, "The grammar concepts that pose more difficulty are those that are not intuitive for English speakers."

This feedback culminates the recurring references to the difficulty of acquiring grammatical forms that are unfamiliar or counter-intuitive from the learners' linguistic standpoint. Participants repeatedly noted challenges in comprehending the use of the definite article ال (*al*). One of the students mentioned that "concepts like when to use the definite article can be more confusing because it gets harder to relate to English. For example, making the connection that when we speak about a noun in general, we need to use ال (*al*) can be difficult to understand and apply" (SD).

In general, syntactic structures that are unfamiliar to students often result in conceptual gaps, particularly when they are first presented through the lens of English grammar. "I received grammar instruction and did not find it particularly challenging; however, applying the rules is quite difficult. For instance, the *idāfa* construction is not intuitive for English speakers and this makes it more challenging for me" (SC). Given the students' input, it is obvious that when introduced to a new concept, they try to cross-linguistically compare it to their first language. As stated by one student "the way possession works in Arabic is different from the way it works in any Indo-European languages" (SG). This kind of comparison is often incomplete, especially when the similarities between two grammatical concepts are minimal or non-existent. Comparing syntactic structures from two typologically different languages such as English and Arabic can lead to conceptual ambiguity rather than clarity. As a result, learners may struggle to transfer existing grammatical knowledge effectively to Arabic.

3.2.2. Underlying Causes of Recurring Grammatical Errors

3.2.2.1. L1 Interference

First language interference is one of the major factors which affect students' performance in writing. Learners usually rely on the linguistic conventions of their first language and try to apply it to the second language or L2. This reliance sometimes leads to what is called negative transfer, where learners apply the grammatical rules of their L1 to the target language inappropriately (Lado, 1957; Odlin, 1989). This can be explained in SA's

opinion as follows: "What I find hard is translating and thinking in one language and applying it to a different language [Arabic]… So I will use English or Dutch grammar concepts, because this is what I am familiar with" (SA). This idea was confirmed by Student D. He claimed that "some of these concepts can be hard when you're thinking in English versus when you get into the rhythm or the flow with Arabic and you are thinking in Arabic because thinking about some of that in English, it is so different in English grammar" (SD).

As for Student M, the first language (L1) hinders learners' understanding of the target language (L2) and shakes their confidence. According to her, "Because students are not accustomed to the language, they are still unsure if they understand its logic due to L1 interference. It is this L1 interference that prevents them from being completely confident" (SM). In other words, conceptual confusion arises when students are caught in a cognitive limbo between their first language (L1) and their target language (L2).

3.2.2.2. The Effect of Linguistic, Grammatical, and Syntactic Background on Students' Learning

The data revealed an additional major reason behind the recurring grammatical errors: the students' diverse linguistic, grammatical, and syntactic backgrounds. Some students come from Indo-European languages, such as English, Dutch, German, Swedish, and French. These languages differ greatly from Arabic in their grammar and sentence structure, especially in regard to definiteness, noun-noun (*idāfa*) constructions, noun-adjective agreement, prepositions, and relative pronouns. This is obvious in Student A's statement "The grammar in Arabic, such as [the] *idāfa* concept, is different from the grammar concepts that I am familiar with, so, it just takes a lot more thinking and consideration, and I think it is difficult to practice" (SA).

Student K echoed this sentiment "This [recurring errors] happens because of the impact of my first language, of course. In English, we don't think that way. It's one of those things where, if you're not making a strong effort to stay aware of it, it slips. For me, it's often a matter of not thinking about it enough and needing more practice, especially in writing" (SK).

3.2.2.3. Nature and Uniqueness of the Arabic Language

The Arabic language's systematic morphology and complex grammatical system make it linguistically rich but also uniquely challenging for second language learners, especially those from Indo-European language backgrounds. This is evident in the students' responses. For instance, Student K found Arabic grammar to be "intimidating". According to SK "In English, you often know what sounds right or wrong, but you don't always know why. We tend to rely on the musicality of the language" (SK). In other words, some students, especially those from the United States or the United Kingdom, are not used to studying grammar rules to advance with the language but rather they are accustomed to relying on the musicality of the language to identify whether a sentence is correct or not. This approach is not suitable when learning the Arabic language, especially at beginner levels, as students don't have enough exposure to the language to have an instinctive feel for correctness, to say nothing of the richness and complexity of Arabic grammar

in the first place. Therefore, many learners can find themselves intimidated by the task of learning Arabic grammar.

Student B emphasized this idea and pointed out how much he struggled with "grammatical correctness." He explained, "While in Spanish lessons I did not struggle with grammatical correctness all that much with limited instruction, I struggle a lot with it in Arabic despite being a noticeably more competent speaker in Arabic" (SB). This student also stressed the fact how "trying to process the structure of the sentence is going to take [him] longer than it is going to take [him] to speak which is not the case in English or French" (SB).

Additionally, students pointed out the difference between understanding grammatical structures in theory versus being able to apply them correctly. Student J responded, "Grammar concepts are not challenging to learn, but they are challenging to use" (SJ). As for Student U, the distinct features of the Arabic language make it demanding to learn. "Learning Arabic is difficult. You have complex grammar, a new writing system, new vocalizations, new non-Indo-European vocabulary. And I think that presenting all of those at once is a very significant challenge to the student" (SU).

3.2.2.4. Limited Writing Assignments and Limited Practice Opportunities Due to Time Constraints

Students confirmed that their speaking skills are much better than their writing skills. According to them, this occurs because they don't practice writing enough, and certainly not as much as they practice speaking. As one student claimed "Personally, I'm a good speaker of Arabic, and people are often impressed. However, my writing has declined. I feel that I make more errors in writing than in speaking. This is due to a lack of practice and because I speak mostly in the Jordanian dialect, so my [F]usha writing skills have weakened" (SJ). Another student, SL, expressed a similar feeling stating, "I consider myself a fluent speaker and my writing is intermediate or advanced because I don't write very much." Additionally, Student F spoke to the disparity between his reading skills in comparison to their writing skills, highlighting that the issue is not merely a matter of literacy, but a matter of written language production. "I think my reading is advanced, I can read books, news articles and understand most of the things I read in Arabic: social media, colloquial, my writing is at a lower level than my reading. This is because of the fact that I don't write as much as I speak in Arabic" (SF).

3.2.2.5. Passive or Insufficient Feedback

Analysis of student responses revealed that insufficient or absent feedback from instructors impedes language development. Without targeted guidance, learners are often left uncertain about their performance and the specific areas that require improvement. This concern was expressed by Student B, who noted: "The corrections on the assessment, what I need to practice are absent […]. This was honestly disappointing; it feels like the focus on a grade distracts from providing a clear assessment of strengths and weaknesses in the language."

Student D echoed this sentiment, stating that "he didn't get a lot of feedback, which isn't very helpful." Another participant elaborated on the limitations of written feedback alone: "If the correction is just written down and handed to me, it doesn't register, and I completely forget about it. Basically, I need to actively think about the corrections for them to stick. Also, because I speak a lot and my message usually gets across without anyone correcting me, I think that has affected my writing skills" (SS).

3.3. Pedagogical Responses to Overcome Recurring Grammatical Errors

3.3.1. Oriented and Organized Feedback for Accuracy and Active Thinking

Summarizing participants' responses, the data revealed that most students favored receiving detailed, grammar-focused corrections and active feedback that allowed them to identify, reflect on, and correct their errors. For instance, one student explained: "I find it useful to receive more detailed, grammar-focused feedback on my assignments, because I am desperate for it. I need help to know what is and isn't grammatical" (SR). Similarly, another student emphasized the importance of reflective correction, noting that "it would be good if [teachers] made me think about my errors and asked me why they're wrong and how I would correct them" (SJ).

In addition, some participants proposed that errors be systematically grouped for clarity. As one student put it: "I think what would be more helpful is to organize the feedback into categories to focus on. Homing in on one particular item would make the feedback more manageable and targeted" (SS).

Peer review also emerged as a valued strategy. One student highlighted: "Peer review is especially valuable. I enjoy reviewing others' writing because it gives me hints about how I should improve my own" (SK).

Finally, several students clarified that general or surface-level feedback was inadequate. As one stated, "General feedback is not useful" (SR), while another remarked, "Just writing the corrections on the paper will not register" (SS).

3.3.2. Adopting an Experiential Teaching Approach

Students emphasized the importance of connecting grammar instruction to practical, meaningful use. Participants reported that experiential learning helped them apply grammar in real-life contexts, reinforcing their understanding and making rules more second nature (SB, SD, SQ). They stressed the need for repetition and active engagement with authentic Arabic contexts.

3.3.3. Building an Arabic Cognitive Community

Students emphasized the essentiality of creating an immersive Arabic cognitive environment, which helps them understand the language without relying on their first language (L1). They noted that when learners stop translating and start thinking directly in Arabic, essentially "starting from a blank slate," it becomes easier to grasp grammatical rules. One student explained, "It's easier when someone is learning from scratch and is asked to forget their first language… When it's a blank slate, it's easier to hold on to the rules. It's best to explain the rules on their own, without comparing them

to English" (SP). Another learner highlighted the role of immersion in facilitating cognitive transition: "When I was in Lebanon and constantly listening to Arabic, it helped my brain transition into Arabic mode" (SE).

Participants also insisted on the significance of constantly partaking in communicative settings. One reflected that the best way to internalize grammar is to be in a setting where learners are "constantly working, thinking, speaking, communicating, in Arabic and continually forced to think about these grammar concepts" (SI). Additionally, some marked the consequence of experiencing the musicality of the language, as one student recalled, "One professor once said that instead of focusing solely on grammar, students should try to feel the musicality of the language… Ultimately, consistent practice and increased exposure are key" (SN).

In general, the students' standpoints suggest that avoiding reliance on L1, promoting immersion, and providing repeated, context-based exposure are essential strategies for developing cognitive fluency in Arabic. Such approaches help learners internalize rules more naturally, think directly in the target language, and engage with the language as it is used in authentic contexts.

3.3.4. Recognizing and Identifying Grammar Errors

The data collected indicates that students learn more effectively when their errors are explicitly identified and accompanied by clear instructions for correction. As Student O stated, "It is important to be shown [by the teacher] where I made an error and to be corrected, because this is how you learn" (SO). Similarly, Student T affirmed the usefulness of this strategy, responding, "[…] my teachers would identify grammar errors precisely and tell me what I needed to fix, and this was very helpful" (ST).

3.3.5. Repetition of Key Grammar Structures

Students stressed the value of repetition, recycling, and consistent practice in solidifying grammatical knowledge. These strategies help learners improve retention and develop accuracy over time. As one student explained, "It will be helpful if provided a clear framework that one can revisit easily" (SA). This highlights the value of presenting grammar in a structured way that learners can refer to for reinforcement.

3.3.6. Reducing L1 Dependence through Immersion and Cognitive Shifts

While teachers play a central role in facilitating grammar instruction, students themselves also carry responsibility in reducing the influence of their first language (L1) on their Arabic learning. Several practitioners acknowledged that overcoming L1 interference requires active self-effort, particularly for those who do not live in Arabic-speaking communities. In such cases, learners must create their own immersion opportunities by listening to Arabic podcasts, watching films, listening to songs, and exposing themselves to authentic materials. These practices help them attune their ears to the musicality, structure, and linguistic patterns of Arabic, thereby facilitating a cognitive shift away from reliance on their L1.

As one student explained, "[To overcome the impact of L1] one should be put on the spot, speaking every day, immersion, time, insistence of not

being able to translate but to describe the word, media, listening to podcasts. Practice, more exposure to the language" (SE). Another added, "I think one has to disconnect between Arabic and English or Arabic and Dutch—one should break the link between them" (SL). A third learner highlighted the value of consistent exposure beyond the classroom: "Outside the classroom, you can still listen to and read Arabic as much as possible and try to think in Arabic throughout your day. The more you practice, the more natural it becomes to 'play' your thoughts in the language" (SQ).

In general, learners recognize their own agency in reducing L1 dependence. By deliberately practicing immersion strategies, they contribute to grammar accuracy and overall proficiency, showing that responsibility for language development lies not only with teachers but equally with learners themselves.

4. Overall Findings

Across all data sources (writing samples and student interviews), the results confirmed the persistence of six major grammatical errors across the intermediate and advanced levels. The definite article ال (*al*), which is the focus of this study, recorded the highest frequency among the errors.

1. Definite article (M = 1.25, SD = 1.15)
2. Noun-noun (*idāfa*) phrase (M = 0.75, SD = 0.93),
3. Noun-adjective phrase M = 1.20, SD = 1.31
4. Preposition (M = 0.52, SD = 0.81)
5. Relative pronoun (M = 0.33, SD = 1.01)
6. Subject-verb agreement (M = 0.89, SD = 1.04)

Analysis of the writing samples, together with the qualitative data, highlighted several underlying reasons for these errors including: the influence of learners' first language (L1) over the target language (L2); the effect of linguistic, grammatical and syntactic background on students' learning; the nature and uniqueness of Arabic grammar; instructional practices and pedagogical gaps; and insufficient feedback.

In terms of pedagogical interventions, the data suggested five promising strategies to reduce the influence of L1 and address persistent grammatical errors:

1. Develop oriented and organized feedback for accuracy and active thinking.
2. Build an Arabic cognitive community.
3. Adopt an experiential teaching approach.
4. Recognize and identify grammar errors.
5. Review, recycle, and reinforce strategies for grammar accuracy.

This set of remedies can be organized into three interrelated aspects: cognitive, pedagogical, and sociocultural.

Table 7
Educational strategies for persistent error correction organized by category

Category	Strategies / Items	Rationale
Cognitive	1. Recognize and identify grammar errors. 2. Organize and guide feedback for accuracy and active thinking.	1. Helps learners notice errors and think critically about their language use. 2. Promotes reflection and careful consideration of language forms during learning.
Pedagogical	1. Review, recycle, and reinforce: strategies for grammar accuracy. 2. Adopt an experiential teaching approach.	1. Strengthens learning through repeated practice and review of key structures. 2. Engages learners in hands-on activities to apply grammar in real contexts.
Sociocultural	1. Build an Arabic cognitive community.	1. Provides a collaborative, social and cultural environment that supports language use and interaction.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Findings reveal that first-language (L1) interference, the complexity of Arabic grammar, pedagogical practices, and insufficient corrective feedback are key contributors to recurring errors. The study emphasizes the need for reinforcing core grammatical structures, experiential learning, building an Arabic cognitive community, and timely targeted feedback, offering practical implications for improving Arabic language teaching worldwide.

5.1. Limitations

Despite its potential to address challenges related to recurring errors, particularly in the use of the definite article ال (*al*) within noun-adjective and noun-noun phrases, the suggested solutions may not be applicable in every classroom. Variations in instructional time for Arabic classes can limit teachers' ability to implement these strategies fully. Often, teachers are required to complete a predetermined syllabus and cover all four language skills, which may leave limited time to address all emerging learners' need. Consequently, time constraints may compel teachers to make strategic choices to balance departmental requirements, class objectives, and students' needs. Nonetheless, effective time management can ensure that quality work leads to more comprehensive and robust learning outcomes.

A second limitation is that the interventions are based on students' perspectives and have not yet been empirically tested. Therefore, further research is recommended to examine the effectiveness of these suggested strategies in diverse classroom settings.

5.2. Implications

This research bridges interlanguage theory and classroom practice, providing teachers and learners of Arabic as a second or foreign language with

valuable insights into effective strategies to prevent persistent errors and linguistic fossilization. By drawing on Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory and incorporating diverse students' perspectives, the study offers practical and evidence-based pedagogical guidance that can be applied to Arabic language teaching and learning worldwide.

Author contribution statement:

Chami: designed the research, collected, transcribed and coded the data, wrote the text, carried out the analysis, and wrote the text.

Yahchouchi: read and edited the text.

Hashem: read and edited the text

The usage of GenAI: Chat Gpt was used in this manuscript only to check the grammar of the Introduction and literature review.

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