I INTRODUCTION

1.1 English in the Colleges of Education in Yemen

English is taught in Yemen as a foreign language. It was selected as the foreign language because of its present global position. The Higher Committee in the Ministry of Education aims at enabling the Yemeni learners to communicate with the surrounding world and to pursue higher studies anywhere in the world.

Students must finish 12 academic years before joining university; 9 years in basic school (stages 1-9) and 3 years in secondary school (stages 10-12). Formal education before stage 1 is not common in all the governorates. Only 25% of the kindergartens in some main governorates follow the government norms (The Higher Committee for Education Planning, 2004). The main place for contact with English is the schools. English is introduced to students at stage seven in basic school.

At the university level, English is taught in all the departments as a basic requirement. It is used as the medium (in the sense that all materials are written in English not being the language of class instruction) in all the medical departments and some science majors. There are two English departments, one is in the Faculty
of Education and the other is in the Faculty of Art. Students of these two
departments spend four academic years for studying English at the major level.

With such a limited exposure to English, the Yemeni students find it difficult to
communicate in English even after getting the university degrees. In addition to the
lack of contact, there are other problems like mother tongue interference, the overall
social structure where English has no role to play, the learning-teaching
environment, etc. The teaching strategies and the syllabus designing are also
wanting in many ways. As a cumulative effect of all these and some more factors the
development of linguistic and communicative competence among the Yemeni
learners of English is not in tune with the objectives of higher education in Yemen.

1.2 Objectives and Rationale

The main aim of the present study is to give a possible explanation of the common
errors particularly in written English committed by the Yemeni learners in English
departments.

Writing is a serious activity that demands attention to various aspects like
vocabulary, grammar and style. Many students lack confidence in writing and fear
that writing will not only expose but also magnify their inadequacies (Shaughnessy, 1977). Errors are documented by the students themselves that provide an opportunity for a researcher to explore into the causes. Error analysis helps diagnose the inadequacies or maladies at various levels like, teaching, support activities and the linguistic competence of the students concerned. Learners can also be given a convincing feedback on their errors. According to Johan Myles (2002), focusing on the process of writing as a pedagogical tool for the improvement of writing skills is needed in language departments.

The present research aims at probing into the errors documented by the learners in their writings and at arriving at some authentic solutions to the problems in writing.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The written performance of the college students in Yemen displays a variety of inadequacies in the use of language and the style of writing. Restricted vocabulary, lack of knowledge of the sentence structure in English and mother tongue interference are the major of hindrances. The learning-teaching environment in Yemen does not seem to adequately address these problems. The status of English as a foreign language and lack of contact with English aggravate the situation.
Consequently, the learners continue committing the same errors over the years. It is, therefore, necessary to undertake a serious study of the errors committed and their causes. Such a study is likely to have a great pedagogic significance in that it will help the learners to understand and realize their own shortcomings and will help them master the sentence structure in English. This realization definitely has a potential to play the catalytic role in developing writing skills.

1.4 The Organization of the Study

The study is centered on the diagnostic process of the students’ errors. The relevant theoretical background of the study is given. Then the effective variables, methodology used in selecting tests and the informants’ details are stated in the chapter devoted to data collection. The next step is the analysis of the data collected with elaboration of the comments on errors detected. The possible sources of the identified errors are discussed. Finally, the researcher presents the pedagogical implications of the findings and some remedial suggestions.
1.5 The Scope of the Study

The study investigates the errors related to the students’ ability to identify and use some lexical cohesive devices. In addition, it observes the influence of these errors on the text in general. The main linguistic areas included in the study are:

(i) lexical cohesion (collocation)
(ii) coherence
(iii) syntax

The investigation takes the three areas into consideration because they interact and sometimes overlap in the analysis of errors. The central focus is on lexical cohesive errors and how they affect syntax and coherence. The relationship between lexical cohesion, syntax and coherence is clearly highlighted by Nyyssonen (2001) and Shaughnessy (1977). They show how using proper lexical sequence and grammar in its regular function give learners a chance to speak coherently. In addition, Studying collocation is done in the syntagmatic relation which can be part of studying cohesion (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2006, cited in Talib, 2007). It is also included in coherence studies as treated by Taylor (2002) in the Language-internal Approach. Therefore, investigating errors in collocation presupposes recurrent reference to their interaction with syntax and coherence.
Some linguists, for instance, Conzett (2001) and Hill (2001) classify collocation into lexical collocation and grammatical collocation. Errors in content words are included under lexical collocation and errors in function words under grammatical collocation. Function words are identified here as words within clauses. The words included in the function word category are, however, a matter of disagreement among the linguists. The study adapts the following classification of function words:

1. conjunctions,
2. complementizers,
3. subordinators;
   a) adverbial clauses
   b) concessive and contrastive
   c) that-clauses
   d) wh-nominal clauses
   e) adjuncts and conjuncts

1.6 Methodology of the Study

1.6.1 Selection of Population

The informants are selected randomly among the English major students in the faculty of Education in Yemen. It is a longitudinal study; the same selected groups
are to be subjected to three successive evaluation positions. The groups belong to different domains: urban and semi-rural.

The groups selected are the batches graduating in the academic year 2005/2006 in the departments of English, Faculty of Education, Hodeidah (urban area) and Faculty of Education, Zabid (semi-rural).

1.6.2 Selection of Texts

The written performance of the students is traced through their writing from second year to fourth year (studying in college lasts for four years in Yemen). That is, first at the end of second year after completing four courses on the four basic language skills- writing, speaking, listening and reading- and grammar. The second position is at the end of third year when they finish courses in advanced reading skills, advanced writing skills and the essential background about English linguistics. The last position is when the students are about to graduate as English teachers.

First year was skipped because the students’ performance reflects the influence of school education rather than college education. In addition, they do not make stable
groups as they may transfer to/from other departments and, often, not used to the new environment which may disturb their performance.

1.6.3 Selection of Tools

The study is corpus-based; the students written texts are the corpora. Special software is used in this study, Oxford Wordsmith Tools 4.0.

To be computer read, the texts are typed and fed into the computer. The researcher, first, reads the texts and selects the doubtful collocations. Word lists are made and all the words included in the subgroups of function words are checked. If the words are available they are selected to be analyzed in the texts. A concordance list is made for each selected word at each level and group. Then, the noticed errors in collocation are studied in details.

As there is a need for a comparative data in corpus-based analysis (Stubbs 2004), the learners’ corpora is compared to the British National Corpus (BNC). If the collocation is not available in the BNC in the same sense used in the texts, it is judged as unacceptable.
For some tasks given in the fourth year, tables with statistics are required for the analysis. The tables were prepared with the help of Microsoft Office Excel 2003 program. The important figures, the frequency and the percentage of the item are given and interpreted.

1.7 Hypothesis

The study sets the following hypothesis regarding Yemeni college students’ errors.

1. Lexical cohesion is a major area of Yemeni students’ errors at the college level.
2. Lack of mastery over lexical cohesion seriously affects syntax and coherence.
3. Learner autonomy is not well developed in colleges of education in general and regarding vocabulary acquisition and use in particular which has a negative impact on the performance of the students.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies mainly in employing a new research methodology, Learner Corpus, for analyzing the errors of the Yemeni learners. Special software is
used in this study, i.e., Oxford Wordsmith Tools 4.0. The learners’ corpora are compared to the British National Corpus. Besides, the central linguistic element investigated is lexical cohesion and its interaction with syntax and coherence which was left out of concern in the previous work done by Yemeni scholars (like Al-Raymi 1999, Al-kadasi 1999, and Abdul-Mughni 1999).

Another important point is tracing the performance of the same groups throughout their college education period taking the progress of their autonomous learning into consideration. Though some researchers (like Mahdi, 2003) compared the performance of the students at different academic levels, those students were different groups at different levels, not the same group at different levels. Such comparisons may not give valid information about the progress students make, as the informants’ performance could be influenced by other factors like individualism, intellectual differences, the teaching materials introduced to each group and many other factors.

The advantage of the same group successive tests is that their results reflect the actual progress made and the level of autonomy achieved by the learners during their education. The current work is a novel study concerning the new exploration
methodology and the area of errors analyzed in Yemeni students’ written performance.

1.9 Limitations

Teaching materials was included as a variable affecting learners’ performance which demanded analysis. Due to time limit and the unavailability of most of the materials used in teaching the language basic skills and grammar, it was difficult to give elaborated analysis of the materials used in teaching the informants of the study.