Nominal-phrase premodifications by non-native English speakers: The case of attributive adjective word order of Saudi EFL students at tertiary level

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ABSTRACT: English nominal premodifications such as adjective word order have piqued the interest of researchers in recent years due to their learning difficulty for all language learners regardless of their linguistic backgrounds. Non-native English speakers like EFL students may find this case challenging. In light of this, the current study sought to ascertain the difficulty level of Saudi EFL students in recognising the natural order of English attributive adjectives, taking into account the most challenging order sequence, gender, and language proficiency levels. To accomplish this main objective, a designed pronominal adjective test was developed and carried out on 139 Saudi undergraduate EFL students who were purposively recruited for this study. According to the findings, Saudi EFL students had varying degrees of difficulty recognising the natural English adjective word order. While 66.2% of students had moderate difficulty choosing the appropriate adjective sequence, only 15.1% and 18.7% of participants had low and high difficulty, respectively. The most difficult was nominal premodifications with four modifiers, followed by three and two modifiers. When there were only two modifiers, most participants correctly identified incorrect adjective word ordering and provided corrections. When more modifiers existed, the percentages decreased, and the difficulty level increased. Proficiency language level and gender statistically significant differences were also discovered. Although the former revealed no differences, the latter had differences in favour of males, implying that females performed better in the test than males. Based on these findings, limitations and future research directions were proposed.

KEYWORDS: attributive adjective; nominal phrase; premodifications; Saudi EFL students; word order

1. Introduction

It is common for foreign language students to struggle with their written work, which could be marked by syntactical incompleteness. Because this study focuses on participants' written output, students are expected to have more difficulty mastering this critical productive skill if it is not sufficiently covered in their additional foreign language (FL) classes. One of the most important skills that should be emphasised in FL classrooms is writing proper sentences (Derakhshan and Karimian, 2020). Writing proper sentences without mastering the grammatical structures of the second language would be

demanding. Therefore, grammar is one of the most important subjects for EFL students' success in mastering English. Learning grammar is essential to learning a foreign language, especially if you plan to write in that language. However, achieving this competence is challenging when the grammatical structures of the first and second languages are different (Al-Khresheh, 2010, 2011). This paper focuses on one aspect of English grammar, the linear ordering of adjectives.

Several researchers have discovered that most EFL students face many grammatical difficulties when learning English, which is visible in their essays, assignments, and exam papers (Alhaysony, 2012; Toba et al., 2019). As a result, these students will likely face a wide range of difficulties related to syntax, phonology, morphology, and semantics. One of those topics covered in this study is syntax, specifically nominal-premodifications and, more specifically, the linear order of adjectives (e.g., in that nice new red car). They have always been a challenge for students of the studied disciplines and those from various linguistic backgrounds (Alhaysony, 2012; Al-Khresheh, 2015). Mastering English premodifications structures is difficult for all language learners. This may be explained by the fact that the order and quantity of these premodifications vary depending on the norms and patterns of the language to which they belong. Participants in the study, whose mother tongue is Arabic, were found to have difficulty ordering such premodifications (Khatter, 2019). As a result, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1) To what extent do Saudi EFL students struggle to differentiate receptively between pre-modifying sequences of adjectives that follow English word order rules and those that do not?
2) What is the most difficult prenominal adjective sequence faced by Saudi EFL students?
3) How competent are Saudi EFL students productively at spotting inappropriate adjective ordering and providing corrections?
4) Does Saudi EFL students' receptive ability differ between genders or relate to self-rated language proficiency?

2. Literature review

Grammar is an essential and widely emphasised part of language learning (Aronson, 1984; Chalker and Weiner, 2001; Crystal, 2004). Language learners who grasp grammar can effectively communicate with others. Many experts emphasise that you can communicate nothing without lexis (Al-Khresheh and Orak, 2021; Carter et al., 2000; Celce-Murcia, 1991; Khatter, 2019). In most people's eyes, grammar is the bedrock of the English language. Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1999) define language as a form of rule-governed behaviour. They further define grammar as a subset of the rules that regulate the configurations that a language's morphology and syntax assume.

A premodifier is a modifier that precedes the subject of a noun phrase or word and decides the meaning of a phrase in English grammar. Most commonly, premodifiers are adjectives, participles, and nouns (Arche et al., 2014; Celce-Murcia, 1991). This part of speech is also known as an epithet when employed as an adjective to characterize a person or object. The position of modifiers impacts their interaction with the word they modify. It will clear up any ambiguity that readers may have and make the content easier to understand (Khatter, 2019).

In all theories of syntax, flexibility in word order is a hot topic because it differs between languages. The basic linguistic elements of some languages are more flexible than others (Dixon, 2004). Because of this, it is unclear what might happen when learners of foreign or second languages start learning a new language with flexible word order or, to put it another way does not impose separate, fixed orders (Gershkoff-Stowe and Goldin-Medow, 2002). The difference in word order may be seen in Arabic and

English, where there are two preferences for adjective ordering. Because of these different frameworks, learners who heavily rely on their mother tongue when learning a second language may struggle. In EFL contexts, word order should be taught with great care because it cannot be picked up drastically because word order differs widely between languages (Al-Khresheh, 2010). According to Gershkoff-Stowe and Goldin-Medow (2002), word order is one of the most important tools languages provide for indicating who does what to whom. Word order is difficult to grasp because it differs significantly between languages.

The world's languages demonstrate a great variety of syntactic word ordering. They also differ across languages with strict word orders and those with more flexible ones; however, most only provide one unmarked/default choice (Dixon, 2004; Tomlin, 1986). Another notable feature of high-level word order in languages is that some lower-level word order choices strongly correspond with high-level word order. Relevant to the present study, subject-verb-object (SVO) languages like English, but to a lesser extent French, which is also SVO typically place modifying adjectives before the noun within the noun phrase (NP), whereas verb-subject-object (VSO) languages (represented in part by Arabic) place them after the noun (Arche et al., 2014). This finding has been included in several syntactic models, including Chomsky's head direction parameter (1981). For instance, native English speakers would naturally alter "yellow long dress" to "long yellow dress", although Arabic speakers might not consider it inappropriate. English is one of the languages that allows the simultaneous use of many prenominal adjectives, unlike Arabic, which allows multiple postnominal adjectives (Al-Khresheh, 2010). Speakers of languages lacking flexible word order must therefore organise the adjectives when multiple adjectives are present. Numerous studies have found that native speakers consistently prefer specific adjective orders. Native English speakers can employ many types of modifiers to define a noun, a verb, and a sentence. One of the most often used modifiers is an adjective. The vast English language vocabulary permits English speakers to alter nouns with several adjectives (Jiang, 2009).

The five main lexico-grammatical categories in English are nouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and adjectives (Akhtar, 1999). Numerous studies have established that an "adjective" is a word that describes or modifies a noun or pronoun, adding details about individuals, places, and things (Crystal, 2004; DeCapua, 2016; Swan, 2016). When adjectives precede a determiner and the head of a noun phrase and alter the noun that comes before them, Quirk and Greenbaum (2012) claim these adjectives are termed attributive. According to Chalker (1984), the traditional definition of an adjective describes how someone or something is. Adjectives, then, perform a similar function to descriptors. The main set of words that determine the properties of nouns is referred to in grammar as an adjective (Crystal, 2004; Swan, 2016). An adjective, according to the Longman Dictionary, is a word that describes a noun or pronoun. Ordinarily, adjectives come before nouns or nouns that they modify. Adjectives are words that describe, identify, or quantify nouns or pronouns, as defined by Rosato (2018).

Numerous studies (Baker, 2003; Dixon, 2004; Ranta, 2008; Tucker, 1998) have been undertaken on the lexical categories of nouns and verbs. However, less research has been conducted on adjectives. It is challenging to distinguish adjectives from other word classes, such as nouns and verbs. Tucker (1998) asserts that grammarians have neglected the study of adjectives in favour of the noun and the verb. He claims that adjectives relate to the "qualities" and "attributes" of the "objects" that participate in the "events" and "processes" that language helps to describe, implying that linguists have prioritised nouns and verbs. However, less research has been conducted on adjectives. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish adjectives from other word classes, such as nouns and verbs. According to Crystal (2004) English adjectives cannot function as subjects or objects (i.e., nouns) without an article. Hofherr (2010) states that distinguishing nouns, verbs, and adjectives across languages is challenging, with adjectives

proving particularly elusive. However, a body of literature identifies some distinguishing characteristics of adjectives to differentiate adjectives from other word classes like nouns and verbs. Both Baker (2003) and Dixon (2004) were cited by Hofherr (2010) as providing the following criteria: 1) Adjectives allow direct modification of nouns. 2) Adjectives differ from other predicates (nouns and verbs) in comparative construction. 3) Adjectives do not have their gender; they agree in gender with the modified noun in languages with gender agreement. 4). Unlike nouns, adjectives can appear without a preposition in resultative predictions.

Previous research has also shown that non-native English speakers struggle with adjective order, mainly when more than one adjective describes the same noun (Andayani, 2018; Flanagan, 2014; Ranta, 2008; Rosato, 2018). Adjectives are notoriously difficult for English learners, particularly when describing things in writing. Jung (2009) found that Korean learners of English preferred either the English or Korean order in some instances but deviated from both in others. The closer the adjective was to the noun's head, the greater the agreement between the two languages and the learner's interlanguage. Ginting et al. (2020) conducted interviews with Indonesian high school students who claimed to be unaware of adjective order restrictions. According to Kamal (2010), most senior secondary school students in Nigeria fail the English Language exam, meaning they fail to employ English adjectives effectively. English examinations for seniors continue to be plagued by widespread failure. Tribushinina (2012) highlighted the importance of cognitive, pragmatic, and linguistic variables in acquiring adjective order. According to her, semantic diversity is crucial in identifying adjective categories; students must recognise at least six distinct semantic categories before the emergence of morphosyntactic features of adjectives in their speech. According to Tribushinina (2013), contrast also influences adjective category acquisition. In summary, contrastive settings promote students' comprehension of adjectives; once an adjective category is discovered, contrasts are made in the background. Non-native English speakers are more likely to think and behave in their mother tongue than in English (Omar, 2012).

Due to the problematic disparities between Arabic adjectives and their probable English equivalents, Zawahreh (2013) discovered that locating and selecting the correct English equivalents of Arabic adjectives is challenging and misleading for students. Rosato (2018) utilised an interesting alternative low awareness method in which she had participants read aloud items chosen by the researcher that contained interesting, unexpected adjective orders. She attempted to detect where they encountered an order they did not accept based on pauses and intonation.

Amer (2013) used a similar descriptive-analytic approach to discuss the distinctions in the placement and sequencing of adjectives in Arabic and English and the implications for teaching adjectives in both languages. Because English and their native languages differ structurally, students have trouble placing and ordering English adjectives. He argued that for students to accurately and simply use adjectives, English should be taught inductively rather than deductively. Zawahreh (2013) asserts that it is challenging for EFL students to identify the appropriate English translations of Arabic adjectives from Arabic to English. This demonstrates how, in most cases, EFL learners may find selecting the appropriate English equivalents of adjectives challenging and misleading.

Abubakar et al. (2017) used a test with phrases that have English adjectives before nouns in the wrong order. The participants' first language (Hausa), which ostensibly allows for various alternative orderings, was said to have influenced many inaccurate corrections. The study, however, did not quantify which adjective categories were the most challenging. Al-Hassaani and Ja'ashan (2017) primarily examined the ability of a group of students to place a single attributive adjective before a noun as opposed to after it in English. However, they did not examine the ordering of multiple prenominal adjectives. They discovered

a low rate of correct responses, which they partly attributed to the native language, although they did not provide data to support this conclusion. The present study addresses the ability of university-level Arabic learners of English to recognise and produce many types of ordered prenominal adjectives in English and provide accurate statistics.

El Shaban (2017) employed a test to investigate adjective errors, including order errors, among Arabic learners of English. Nonetheless, the nature of his adjective order test is not described. He concluded that some order errors were caused by their first language. However, he asserts that developmental errors (those not driven by the first language) were far more prevalent. Andayani (2018) also interviewed participants briefly, asking them pointed questions regarding their familiarity with adjective order and whether or not they claimed to have used it. She was accessing explicit knowledge with a high level of awareness. Afterwards, Oteef (2018) addressed the syntax of Arabic adjectives within a current Minimalist framework; nevertheless, he did not discuss multiple adjectives or how to account for their ordering.

Even though this subfield of English grammar receives little attention, research on English adjective ordering is crucial to developing instructional materials and approaches for teaching adjective ordering. EFL instructors must know what EFL students typically struggle with, what they already know, and what is easy for them to acquire in English. Overall, studies of EFL adjective order of Arabic-speaking learners are sparse, allowing space for research like the present study to accurately measure their receptive and productive adjective order competence at a level where implicit and low-level explicit knowledge may be accessed. It will also highlight previously neglected concerns, such as the relationship between knowledge of adjective order and background characteristics, such as gender and general language proficiency, and the specific adjective classes whose order causes the most difficulty/non-native-like performance.

3. Research method

This study aimed to determine the difficulty level of recognising and producing the natural adjective order by Saudi EFL students using a designed prenominal adjective test as the data collection instrument. A quantitative research design was followed in this study. Variables such as gender and language proficiency were considered to determine whether there were any significant differences.

3.1. Research design

Because the quantitative research design is frequently seen as quick, focused, scientific, and practicable, it was chosen in this study to meet the primary research objectives. It targets fewer variables and is more precise by the use of numbers. This can aid in removing biases from the study and improve the reliability of the results. It is frequently simpler to collect big sample sizes, which is an additional advantage in the present case (Azarian, 2011; Babbie, 2005; Gay and Airasian, 2005).

3.2. Participants

This study included 139 Saudi undergraduate EFL students (males = 61, females = 78). All of them are English majors in their third and fourth years at Northern Border University. The average age of the participants is around 21. Arabic is their first language. The sample for this study is considered homogeneous regarding their linguistic backgrounds and socioeconomic status. They were purposively picked since it is assumed they will have a strong command of English and the proper syntactic exposure to the phenomena under study. Furthermore, they have taken various grammar classes, including Grammar 1, Grammar 2, Advanced Grammar, and several writing courses. The students were enrolled

in the academic year 2020–2021's first semester. **Figure 1** illustrates the participants' demographic data, including their language proficiency self-rating.
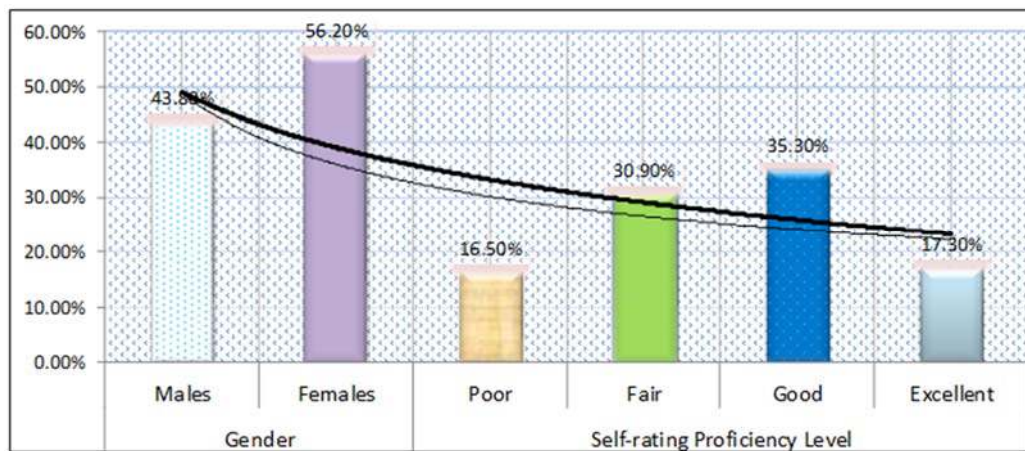
Figure 1. Demographic data and language proficiency level.

3.3. Instrument

A prenominal adjective English test was meticulously built as an elicitation instrument to assess the participants' proficiency in recognising and producing English nominal phrase premodifications. The test examines both participants' receptive ability to recognise errors and participants' productive ability to construct English nominal phrase premodifications appropriately. It consists of two sections. The first section covers demographic information, such as age, gender, and language proficiency. The second part has the test questions where the participants are asked to decide the natural order of adjectives in each sentence. Only two options are provided: correct or incorrect. They were asked to correct the incorrect order to ensure that the participants could recognise it. The ordering of adjectives is covered in all 30 questions. Three main categories make up the test questions. Each category deals with a specific order of attributive adjectives. Each item consists of a short sentence made from familiar vocabulary and containing a noun phrase with two, three or four pre-modifying adjectives, which may be either in a correct or incorrect order. As seen in **Table 1**, the test's 30 questions are designed to fall into three length categories of 10 items each, mixed at random.

Table 1. Classification of items test categories.

Categories	Item numbers
Category 1 (Two modifiers)	2, 6, 8, 11, 17, 19, 22, 24, 27, 29
Category 2 (Three modifiers)	1, 4, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 23, 26, 30
Category 3 (Four modifiers)	3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 25, 28

Category one has two modifications, category two has three modifiers, and category three has four, as seen in Table 1 above. An equal number of correct and incorrect stimulus sentences represent each adjective category. Therefore, each category has five items where the correct response is to choose "correct" and five where the correct response is to choose "incorrect". If the item is judged incorrect, participants are prompted to offer a correction. Following Byrd (1992), the adjectives in this test were placed in the following order (quality–size–age–temperature–shape–colour–origin).

3.4. Data collection

The test occurred during the first semester of the academic year 2020–2021, as was aforementioned. A Google form was used to administer the test online, making it easier to collect and process the results.

The test was administered to the participants over a single session (a lecture period lasting 60 min). This time frame proved to be adequate for completing the test. The data was gathered via the English language program at Northern Border University.

3.5. Ethical considerations

On the top of the first page of the test, the participants were given an accurate description of the main research objective. All individuals provided their informed consent before participating in the study, which was completely voluntary. The consent was both oral and written. Likewise, participants had the option to leave the study at any time. It was confirmed that all data would be kept private and utilised only to further the objectives of this research.

3.6. Data analysis

SPSS 27 was used to analyse the gathered data. The data were presented using the tabulation method. Correct initial responses were coded I, and incorrect responses 0. That is, responding "correct" to a correct stimulus and "incorrect" to an incorrect stimulus were coded 1, meaning accurate receptive judgment; other responses were coded 0. The mean accuracy of judgment scores was then calculated for each item across participants and across items.

The corrected versions were scored for each person out of all the items the researcher judged to be incorrect (i.e., 15 of the 30 sequences offered) and limited further to those for which a participant proposed a correction. Therefore, if a participant judged 12 of those 15 items to be incorrect and proposed a correction, and 3 of those 12 "corrections" were accurate corrections, their score would be 3/12 (or 25%) for production accuracy.

4. Results

4.1. Results of test validity and reliability

A pilot study was conducted on a group of 30 students, separate from those in the later main study. It took place before the main study to determine the validity and reliability of the main instrument, which contains a researcher-designed test. Furthermore, certain statistical and nonstatistical procedures were used to ensure the test's validity and reliability. This covered content validity, construct validity, study instrument reliability, and test item characteristics.

The test's content validity was confirmed by presenting it to a group of three experts in English linguistics and teaching methods and one expert in assessment and measurement. This procedure was implemented to ensure language appropriateness, the scientific validity of the test, the suitability of the test items to students' skill levels, the validity of each item as a measure of the intended skill, and to ascertain the need for addition, modification, or deletion of any items. It also covered the suitability, adequacy, and clarity of the test instructions and the time allotted for completing the test. In response to the feedback from the experts, modifications were made, and items were added or removed until the test's final set of 30 items was obtained.

According to Gay and Airasian (2005), the three stages that determine the construct validity are as follows: first, calculating the correlation coefficients between the test questions and the overall score; second, calculating the correlation coefficients between the scores for each sub-category and the overall score for this category; and third, calculating the reciprocal correlation coefficients between each sub-skill of the test and each other, then between it and the overall score. **Table 2** displays the findings of the first stage of calculating internal consistency, **Table 3** displays the results of the second stage, and **Table 4**

presents the outcomes of the third step.

The significance of the correlation coefficients between the test questions and the overall test result is displayed in Table 2. The level at which these coefficients were mostly significant was 0.01. At the same time, some were statistically significant at the level (0.05), indicating that the first stage of the test's construction validity stages had been completed.

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between test questions and total test score.

Items	Correlation	Items	Correlation	Items	Correlation
1	0.47**	11	0.71**	21	0.76**
2	0.63**	12	0.47**	22	0.79**
3	0.76**	13	0.84**	23	0.49**
4	0.45**	14	0.83**	24	0.51**
5	0.76**	15	0.39*	25	0.58**
6	0.75**	16	0.76**	26	0.37*
7	0.68**	17	0.81**	27	0.87**
8	0.86**	18	0.46**	28	0.45**
9	0.77**	19	0.44**	29	0.41**
10	0.86**	20	0.84**	30	0.82**

** sig ($\alpha = 0{:}01$); * sig ($\alpha = 0{:}05$).

Table 3 demonstrates the significance of the correlation coefficients between each test question and the main skill to which it belongs. These coefficients were statistically significant at the level (0.01), indicating that the test's internal consistency reached its second stage.

Table 3. Correlation coefficients between test questions and total score of each adjective category.

Items	Correlation	Items	Correlation	Items	Correlation
1	0.52**	11	0.77**	21	0.81**
2	0.75**	12	0.78**	22	0.75**
3	0.75**	13	0.72**	23	0.54**
4	0.74**	14	0.61**	24	0.53**
5	0.64**	15	0.91**	25	0.59**
6	0.72**	16	0.76**	26	0.46**
7	0.79**	17	0.61**	27	0.88**
8	0.56**	18	0.74**	28	0.49**
9	0.83**	19	0.84**	29	0.45**
10	0.81**	20	0.62**	30	0.84**

** sig ($\alpha = 0{:}01$); * sig ($\alpha = 0{:}05$).

The correlation coefficients between the three test categories and each other and between them and the overall test score are all significant, as seen in Table 4 below. They were all statistically significant at the level (0.01), proving the third step of the test's internal consistency to be valid.

Table 4. Matrix of cross-correlation coefficients between the test categories and its total score.

Test categories	Two modifiers	Three modifiers	Four modifiers	Total
Two modifiers	–	0.91**	0.93**	0.86**
Three modifiers	0.91**	–	0.83**	0.95**
Four modifiers	0.93**	0.83**	–	0.96**

** sig ($\alpha = 0{:}01$).

The results obtained throughout the first three stages indicate that there is an availability of solid indications that reflect the validity of the test in measuring what it was created for, which leads to confidence in its use throughout the current study.

The Split-half method and Kuder-Richardson Formula 21 were utilised to ascertain the reliability of the test. The receptive scores of the pilot sample were calculated to obtain the test reliability coefficient using the Split-half method, whereby the scores of the first and second half of the test were calculated in order to measure the correlation between the two halves. The length was then adjusted using the Spearman-Brown formula; thus, the Split-half method's reliability was 0.85 before and after adjustment (0.92). This demonstrates that the test's reliability is high. Furthermore, the Kuder-Richardson method 21 was also utilised to calculate the reliability coefficient. The Kuder-Richardson coefficient was determined to be 0.93 overall, a high value supporting applying the test to the study's primary sample.

Table 5 shows that the difficulty coefficients of the test questions ranged between 0.30 and 0.80 and the coefficients of ease between 0.20 and 0.70, which are appropriate values. Abu Allam (2012) acknowledges that there is agreement that ease or difficulty coefficients that fall between 0.20 and 0.80 correspond to positive standard scores under the moderation of the distribution of scores that reveal acceptable levels of ease or difficulty. This boosts confidence in the test's difficulty and ease. The test questions' discriminating coefficients ranged from 0.20 to 0.80, which is high. They vary from 0.20 to 0.80, indicating a moderately positive trend. These values show appropriate discrimination, boosting confidence in the study's test questions.

Table 5. Difficulty, ease and discrimination coefficients for test items.

Items	Ease	Difficulty	Discrimination	Items	Ease	Difficulty	Discrimination
1	0.533	0.467	0.8	16	0.767	0.233	0.4
2	0.6	0.4	0.4	17	0.8	0.2	0.267
3	0.633	0.367	0.467	18	0.733	0.267	0.333
4	0.733	0.267	0.533	19	0.767	0.233	0.533
5	0.567	0.433	0.6	20	0.733	0.267	0.4
6	0.333	0.667	0.267	21	0.733	0.267	0.467
7	0.567	0.433	0.2	22	0.767	0.233	0.4
8	0.767	0.233	0.2	23	0.8	0.2	0.333
9	0.7	0.3	0.333	24	0.3	0.7	0.667
10	0.667	0.333	0.667	25	0.733	0.267	0.4
11	0.533	0.467	0.4	26	0.333	0.667	0.367
12	0.733	0.267	0.2	27	0.6	0.4	0.537
13	0.3	0.7	0.467	28	0.8	0.2	0.567
14	0.767	0.233	0.4	29	0.733	0.267	0.3
15	0.8	0.2	0.467	30	0.767	0.233	0.433

4.2. Results of the main study

After confirming the validity and reliability of the instrument, the main study was conducted with a group of 139 participants, omitting those who had taken part in the pilot study. The participants' test results were ranked from lowest to highest and divided into three main categories: high grades (20–30), medium grades (10–19), and low grades. This was done to ascertain the extent to which Saudi EFL students struggle with recognising the correct order of English adjectives before a head noun (0–9). Next, the frequency of each category was examined, as seen in **Table 6** below.

Table 6. Descriptive analysis for the distribution of participants' receptive scores.

Test judgment score	Frequency	Percentage	Difficulty
0–9	26	18.7%	High
10–19	92	66.2%	Moderate
20–30	21	15.1%	Low

Only 15.1% of participants, as shown in Table 6, had low difficulty selecting the appropriate adjective

sequence. 66.2% of participants had moderate difficulty, compared to 18.7% who had high difficulty. A further informative piece of evidence is as follows. The correctness judgment part of the test was effectively a two-choice multiple-choice test. Therefore, if they were blindly guessing, participants would, on average, get half the items right (score of 15). As an indication of the difficulty of the test, it is helpful to test whether participants scored significantly above the chance level of 15 and exhibited definite receptive knowledge of such orders. The one-sample *t*-test shows that the mean is not significantly greater than 15. Therefore, it implies that the participants' receptive judgments are not significantly better than if they blindly guessed the response. This does not mean they were guessing: it simply shows that their knowledge did not help them do better than if they had just blindly guessed.

The mean and standard deviation of the participants' test results were analysed and sorted according to the degree of difficulty, as in **Table 7** below, to identify the most challenging sequence of adjective word order.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for correct receptive judgment of each category of test item.

Adjective modifiers	Mean	Median	SD	SE	Range	Difficulty rank
Four modifiers	2.99	3.00	1.97	0.17	9.00	1
Three modifiers	4.71	5.00	1.84	0.16	10.00	2
Two modifiers	6.81	8.00	2.65	0.22	8.00	3

Table 7 depicts that participants experience high difficulty with adjective word order when there are four modifiers. When there are fewer modifiers, the difficulty gradually decreases.

To find out if Saudi EFL students can recognize the wrong order of modifiers and give corrections, **Table 8** shows the number of general and correct attempts for each participant, along with the frequency and percentage of each. The overall percentage of accurate corrections for the 15 incorrect items was 21%. That is less than half the accuracy rate noted above for receptive accuracy judgment (48%).

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for producing corrections of unacceptable orders.

Adjective modifiers	Items	Attempts number	Correct attempts number	Percentage
Two modifiers	2	108	30	28%
	6	96	25	26%
	8	112	36	32%
	17	109	21	19%
	29	137	40	29%
Total	5	562	152	27%
Three modifiers	1	19	3	16%
	4	103	30	29%
	13	57	11	19%
	15	59	13	22%
	21	95	19	20%
Total	5	333	76	23%
Four modifiers	5	60	8	13%
	7	93	12	13%
	9	28	5	18%
	10	109	13	12%
	12	72	11	15%
Total	5	362	49	14%

Table 8 shows that the percentage of participants who correctly identified wrong adjective word ordering and fixed false constructs was highest when there were just two modifiers in the question, at 27%. When more modifiers existed, the percentages dropped to 23% for three modifiers and 14% for four modifiers, respectively. Overall, this echoes the finding for the judgment scores, albeit at less than half the

percentage. Even on the easiest (2 adjectives) items, and only considering instances where a correction was offered for an incorrect item, the rate of accurate corrections is little more than one in four.

In order to assess whether there are statistically significant differences between Saudi university EFL students according to their gender, the *t*-test and its statistical significance for the differences between the mean scores of two independent samples—males and females—are displayed in **Table 9**.

Table 9. The results of the *t*-test independent-samples.

Gender	N	Mean	Std. deviation	t	df	Sig.
Male	61	12.0870	6.703	–5.098	137	0.000
Female	78	16.6571	3.340			

Table 9 demonstrates statistically significant differences in test scores between male and female participants at the level (0.05). This difference favors female participants whose significance level is (0.000), which is less than (0.05) and statistically significant. This means that male participants struggle more than females to learn adjective word order.

To determine whether there are statistically significant differences between participants' mean test scores based on their reported language proficiency level, a one-way ANOVA analysis was performed, as shown in **Table 10**.

Table 10. The results of the one-way ANOVA of differences between means of accuracy of judgment scores of different proficiency levels.

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	22.866	3	7.622	0.227	0.877
Within groups	4528.155	135	33.542	–	–
Total	4551.022	138	–	–	–

Table 10 clearly shows no statistically significant differences at the level (0.05) between the average test scores of participants based on their self-rated language proficiency level. The significance level was 0.877, which is greater than the chosen threshold significance level (0.05) and, therefore, not statistically significant.

5. Discussion

The aspects of EFL student adjective order performance assessed in this study are not just novel because of the focus on Saudi university students. They are also novel in that, as the literature review showed, the questions addressed have not been widely addressed in EFL adjective studies. Hence, surprisingly, there is little to compare the findings. One has to look for general principles to assess them.

The first research question concerns the difficulty Saudi EFL students identify receptively between pre-modifying adjective sequences that follow English word order rules and those that do not. Overall, the participants in the present study only managed a little fewer than 50% correct on the receptive judgment items. The majority, two-thirds, however, were classified as performing "moderately" because they scored between 33% and 63% in judgment accuracy (Table 6). In fact, even that result gives the impression that they did better than they did. Since every item had only two receptive responses—correct or incorrect—they would have scored around 50% just by random guessing. Hence, it must be said that they struggled. Only, in fact, on the easiest items (the 10 two adjective sequences). Put another way, only 15% of participants scored 66.6% or better in accuracy score.

Other studies that used similar judgment tests also generally found that students made wrong choices

(e.g., Abubakar et al., 2017; Jung, 2009). However, comparing their scores with ours is difficult because they were not reported or the test items differed. There is no way of assessing their difficulty level compared to ours. For instance, Jung (2009) used only two adjective sequences, which made that study's test easier than ours. Their interest was often more in assessing the impact of the first language on wrong choices.

There are two leading possible ultimate causes of the present result. It could be a case of either interlingual or intralingual interference. As stated earlier, Arabic is more flexible than English in terms of not restricting the order of adjectives, whereas English does. Some participants might think that English adjective order is similar to Arabic ones. Hence, they might select some choices randomly because of this belief. Moreover, intralingual interference might also have a crucial role here. Some participants may not have mastered the English language grammar perfectly. Therefore, they possibly generalised some rules or ignored some rule restrictions (Al-Hassaani and Ja'ashan, 2017).

That is, despite their high level in the English department, perhaps the participants predominantly do not know which order is correct. Possibly they have not met enough examples in the English that they are exposed to (English course books used in their English classes and, more recently, textbooks for courses in English linguistics, literature or language teaching). Possibly, they have never been taught the rule for adjective order in English or have forgotten it. Therefore, they would prefer not to answer most of the test items, i.e., to avoid them, but they are required to. Hence, they may randomly choose whether to say an item is correct, yielding an overall 48% accuracy. What cannot be said is that the participants possibly knew the correct orders at a high level of awareness, e.g., as a rule, they had learned but, under time pressure, could not recall it quickly enough and use it in the actual test. Sixty minutes were allowed for the test, which was undoubtedly ample to allow recall of any explicitly memorized rule, i.e., monitoring in the sense of Krashen (1981).

Alternatively, many participants may have been misled by the order adjectives follow in their first language, Arabic, or be strategically compensating for ignorance by using that as a guide. However, it is hard to see a clear pattern in the responses that supports this. For instance, 22 long yellow dresses and 24 overpriced Arabic food were presented in the correct order among the two adjective sequences items. In Modern Standard Arabic, both follow the reverse order (MIO), i.e., literally "dress yellow long" "food Arabic overpriced" (Fehri, 1999). Therefore, if participants were applying MIO to make a possible English order from Arabic order, they would accurately agree that those English stimuli were correct. If, however, they were using the Arabic order after the noun directly to make a possible English order before the noun, they would inaccurately declare both wrong. The accurate response for long yellow dress was one of the highest at 77%, and for overpriced Arabic food was one of the lowest at 30%. Therefore, systematic exploitation of the first language seems unlikely.

However, one thing that does emerge is that there is no support here for any universal cognitively based order (Rosato, 2018). If that existed, participants would know it and, regardless of knowledge of the order in any particular language, be able to follow it. This, therefore, is consistent with those who doubt that any fixed natural order of adjectives exists (Leivada and Westergaard, 2019).

The second research question deals with the most difficult prenominal adjective sequence faced by Saudi EFL students. All over again, this seemingly simple question has not been widely addressed. Our findings indicate that whether receptive or productive measures are used, the order is always that difficulty follows the pattern of four adjectives > three adjectives > two adjectives.

There may be a simple explanation for this, founded in the same logic that underlies the fact that

multiple-choice tests where the items have five alternatives are harder than tests where items have three or two alternatives. In the present study, three categories of adjective order items were used, with sequences of two, three or four adjectives. Suppose we include the noun, sequences of three, four, or five words. It can then be reformulated regarding the number of alternative orders for those sequences. For two adjectives and a noun, the mathematics of permutations tells us there are 3! = 6 orders to consider, including the one in the stimulus item (and options where the noun comes first or in the middle of the sequence). There are 4! = 24 orders to choose between for three adjectives and a noun. For four adjectives and a noun, there are 5! = 120 orders to consider. Suppose we regard the students as definitely knowing that the noun comes after the adjectives in English, so their problem is only choosing from the potential adjective orders before that noun. In that case, the number of options they face is: for two adjectives 2! = 2, for three adjectives 3! = 6, and for four adjectives 4! = 24.

Thus, it could be argued that the observed more incredible difficulty of accurately ordering longer adjective sequences (receptively or in production) could arise simply because there is a rapidly increasing number of potential orders for the learner to choose between. It could also be influenced by the fact that longer sequences are rarer in native speaker input than the learner may receive. In the 100 million words of the British National Corpus, there are 23,549 two-adjective sequences but only 341 three-adjective sequences and 11 four-adjective sequences (González-Díaz, 2008). Although that does not cover sequences, including nouns used as modifiers, it demonstrates how little input a learner will likely receive beyond two adjective sequences.

Those considerations for sequences of two, three and four adjectives, i.e., rapidly increasing numbers of potential orders to choose among and decreasing frequency in NS use, doubtless apply equally to Arabic and English. Hence, there is no reason to expect any difference between the languages in the increased difficulty with increased length of sequence that could lead to the first language influencing the second language.

The third research question concerns how competent Saudi EFL students are productively at spotting inappropriate adjective ordering and providing corrections. As with receptive knowledge discussed earlier, the findings of different studies here inevitably depend on the difficulty of the sequences involved—how far they involve adjectives that students may have met in sequences before and how long the sequences are. Production ability for adjective orders was targeted in several studies that relied on natural student output to study their adjective orders. However, the sequences produced were often short (one or two adjectives only); hence, accuracy appears to have been high (Andayani, 2018). This recapitulates Al-Khresheh (2010) finding, where it was shown that student output might appear error-free in some areas simply because they avoid using the structure in question. This "error in error analysis" shows itself as much in learner use of multiple English attributive adjectives as their use of relative clauses and phrasal verbs. Students may know these areas are challenging and avoid using them.

Studies like ours, by contrast, required participants to produce corrections of orders that were provided, so the researchers controlled the difficulty and eliminated avoidance. The resulting accuracy rate was low (21% overall). Other comparable studies (Abubakar et al., 2017; Akhtar, 1999; Al-Hassaani and Ja'ashan, 2017) do not always report accuracy; in any case, it is hard to compare findings since the different studies all chose different items to test. Hence, there is no guarantee that the items were at the same difficulty level in the different studies.

Another thing that chimes with the general literature is that production scores were lower than receptive ones. It is widely found in all areas of learning that receptive knowledge is easier to gain than

productive knowledge (Webb, 2005). For example, receptive knowledge scores are always higher than productive knowledge scores in vocabulary learning. However, the difference is not usually as significant as in the present study. For instance, a vocabulary study by Webb (2005) found production scores, as a percentage of receptive scores, ranged between 93% and 58% for words of different difficulty. The present study found productive scores were only 43.5% for receptive ones and 39.6% for the easiest (two adjectives) items.

The fourth research question involves whether the students' receptive ability differs between genders or relates to self-rated student language proficiency. Previous studies have generally not compared genders, maybe because there is no apparent reason to expect a difference between genders in this language ability (Amer, 2013; Al-Hassaani and Ja'ashan, 2017; El Shaban, 2017). The present study included gender comparison and surprisingly found a clear and significant difference. The better performance by females, however, is not easy to explain. It might be speculated that it arises from the fact that, even at university, Saudi Arabian females are taught separately from males. Hence, although they follow the same course syllabuses and use the same prescribed textbooks, there are different (same-sex) male and female teachers who inevitably may differ in emphasis, enthusiasm and teaching skill. Alternatively, it could be that the females were more diligent doing the test and took more time to think while the males rushed through. Research evidence shows that females are more cooperative than males in online data-gathering by researchers (Otufowora et al., 2021).

The connection with overall language proficiency has not typically been looked at in adjective order studies. In this case, that is maybe because a relationship would always be expected between any specific area of language skill or knowledge and an overall language proficiency measure. Once again, however, a surprise result was obtained. No relationship was found, even using ANOVA as a test rather than a trend or correlation test, which would take into account the ordinal nature of both variables.

Again, it could be only speculated as to the explanation. It could be due to adjective orders not being covered in the students' courses, e.g., missing in syllabuses and textbooks. Alternatively, it could be because actual overall language proficiency was not measured, only self-rated language proficiency. That might not be closely related to actual proficiency. Hence, an existing relationship between actual adjective order ability and actual general language ability would go undiscovered. In general, high correlations are reported between reported and actual ability. Still, they are not the same construct that needs to be considered (Brady-Amoon and Fuertes, 2011).

6. Limitations and directions for further research

This study has some limitations. Due to the short sample size, the results cannot be extended to all Saudi EFL students due to individual variances in the student's living and learning environments. This study's participants reside in an environment where English is rarely utilised outside official teaching. This supports conducting a comparative study with a larger sample size in various contexts where English is widely used. Without practice, it is impossible to gain any language proficiency. Such an examined topic necessitates that students practise the language officially and informally. The use of a researcher-designed test is another limitation of the study. Other data collection methods, including surveys and composition tests, are highly recommended for future research. This syntactic issue and similar ones can also be investigated through interviews from teachers' perspectives. Teachers can also provide better explanations for EFL students' word order problems.

7. Conclusion

Results showed that Saudi EFL students experienced various degrees of difficulty identifying the natural adjective word order. Moreover, half of them had some difficulty selecting the proper adjective order. Nominal premodifications with four modifiers were the most challenging, followed by those with three and two. The highest number of participants identified inappropriate adjective word ordering and gave adjustments when there were only two modifiers. As the number of modifiers increased, the difficulty rose, and the percentages dropped. Language proficiency level and gender statistically significant differences were also examined. Although the former showed no differences, the latter did, and these differences favoured males, suggesting that females performed better than males on the test. These findings were explained in some detail.

Author contributions

Al-khresheh and Alruwaili contributed equally to this work. They both participated in the research design, data collection and analysis, discussion, and manuscript writing. Both authors critically reviewed and approved the final version of the paper for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix

Table A1. The test.

Part 1: Demographic data

Age

Gender   Male   Female

How do you rate your overall English proficiency compared with the proficiency of other students in your class? (circle one)

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

Part 2: Test questions

Decide whether the adjectives in the following sentences are in their natural order. If you think the order is incorrect, kindly provide the correct order.

1. A <u>chocolate delicious round</u> cake was prepared.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

2. A white <u>new bus</u> is coming.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

3. A <u>shiny new Germanic sports</u> car was parked opposite my house.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

4. An <u>American big black lorry</u> participated in the competition.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

5. At Dubai Airport, I bought a <u>modern yellow cotton beautiful</u> shirt.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

6. <u>Farming excellent</u> products were made by our company.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

7. He bought me a <u>blue plastic tacky small</u> souvenir.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

8. He has got a <u>silver beautiful</u> ring.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

9. He is a <u>Chinese young handsome thin</u> man.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

10. I am talking about the <u>green old antique big</u> car that always parks over there.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

11. I bought an <u>interesting old</u> novel.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

Table A1. (*Continued*).

12. I liked that <u>old lovely ceramic coffee</u> mug.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

13. I met a <u>French beautiful tall</u> girl.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

14. It looks an <u>amazing little old Saudi</u> dress.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

15. Last week, my friends and I visited a <u>little lovely ancient village</u>.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

16. My brother rode a beautiful <u>big black Friesian horse</u> in the parade.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

17. My family has just moved into a <u>modern small</u> house.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

18. My grandmother has knitted a <u>nice new woolen pullover</u> for me.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

19. My husband offered me an <u>unusual gold</u> ring.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

20. My little daughter has <u>beautiful long blond</u> hair.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

21. Salma was given a <u>white small cute</u> kitten by her father.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

22. She is wearing a <u>long yellow</u> dress.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

23. The gallery sold only <u>strange old Italian</u> paintings.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

24. The restaurant has <u>overpriced Arabic</u> food.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

25. The school has <u>five excellent old British</u> teachers.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:

Table A1. (*Continued*).

26. There is a <u>beautiful square wooden</u> table in our garden.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:
27. There is an <u>original electronic</u> piano.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:
28. They live in an <u>attractive old round wooden</u> house.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:
29. We are playing a <u>new exciting</u> game.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction:
30. We watched an <u>interesting old American</u> movie with friends at home last night.
(   ) Correct.
(   ) Incorrect.
Correction: