Investigating The Effect Of Grammatical Differences Between English (L2) And Arabic (L1) On Saudi Female Students' Writing Of English

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the grammatical errors committed by the Female Saudi Students can be attributed to their mother tongue interference. This study analyses 120 English essays written by Arabic speaking Saudi Female Students studying at Prince Fahad Bin Sultan University. Since the researcher's mother-tongue is also Arabic, the interference of Arabic language committed by these students was easily found upon examining their writings. The findings of this study revealed that the transfer of Arabic linguistic structures influenced the English writings of Saudi Female Students on the grammatical level. Furthermore, the English writing skill of the Saudi Female Students needs development. The study concluded that the percentage of the total grammatical errors committed by the Saudi students was 1179 errors. Out of the 1179 errors, 59 errors were in Active and Passive Voice, 118 errors in plurality, 118 errors also in articles, 165 errors in the use of word order, 188 errors in prepositions, 244 errors in Verb Tenses and Form, and 306 errors in Subject-verb agreement which is the highest percentage of errors as a result of the effect of the L1. On the basis of these findings, a group of recommendations and some pedagogical implications for educators and policy makers were provided to improve the EFL teaching-learning process.

Keywords: Language interference, contrastive analysis, error analysis

Introduction

As stated by Lado (1964), interference is the negative influence of the mother language (L1) on the performance of the target language learner (L2). Saudi students face difficulties when it comes to learning English as a foreign language. The cause of such difficulties is due to their mother tongue interference. Mother tongue interference means the effect of the learners' native language on foreign language learning. Norris (1987) states that

185

learning a language is a matter of habit formation. When a learner strives to learn a new habit, the old ones will interfere with the new ones.

According to Oldin (1989), "transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired." Due to the differences between the Arabic and English grammatical systems, such problems arise. However, this paper lists these problems, discusses, explains, and analyzes them in order to answer the question of this paper.

Literature Review
Language Interference

According to Newmark (1966), 'interference' is not the first language 'getting in the way' of second language skills. Rather, it is the result of the performer 'falling back' on old knowledge when he or she has not yet acquired enough of the second language. In the words of Lado (1961,19): "This theory opens the way to a comparison of the grammatical structure of the foreign language with that of the native language to discover the problems of the students in learning the foreign language."

Language interference is also known as language transfer, linguistic interference, L1 inference, and cross meaning (The Free Dictionary by Farlex).

Language interference refers to the influence of the native language of the learner on his/her acquisition of the target language. It occurs when a speaker or a writer applies knowledge of his/her native language to a second language.

Language interference can be positive or negative. It is positive when relevant structures of both languages are same and result in a correct production of the target language. On the other hand, it is negative when different structures of both languages interfere with the learning of the second language.

Many previous studies show that the application of unacceptable linguistic norms already found in the SL to the FL exercise a negative interference. Interference is regarded as classic howlers, something to be systematically avoided because it works against a fluent and transparent reading (Javier 2009: 75).

Gass & Selinker (1992, 2001) stated that comparative studies between the first and the second languages are one important preliminary step to understanding language transfer. This comparison, they add, often guides us to understanding the hypotheses related to language transfer phenomena. Sabbah (2015:271) divides transfer into two types: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the process of using rules from L1 which facilitates or has a positive influence on learning L2.

Consequently, this transfer is mostly due to similarities between L1 and L2. In contrast, a negative transfer is the transfer of rules from L1 which impedes or has a harmful influence on the command of the rules of L2.

Diab (1996) proves that Lebanese EFL students committed many grammatical, lexical, semantic, and syntactic errors. These errors were attributed to a negative inter-lingual transfer from Arabic linguistic structures into English Language.

Thyab (2016:3) refers to the mother tongue interference as the influence of the native language of the learner on his/her acquisition of the target language. She also attributes the difficulties that the English language learners encounter to the degree of differences between the Arabic article system and the English article system.

Contrastive Analysis

Nobody can ignore the deep interrelationship and effect of contrastive and error analysis in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. However, Gass & Selinker (1992, 2001) state that comparative studies between the first and the second languages are one important preliminary step to understanding language transfer. This comparison often guides researchers to understanding the hypotheses related to language transfer phenomena.

Wardhaugh (1970) defines contrastive analysis as a means of comparing learners' L1 and L2 to analyze possible difficulties that the learners might encounter in a L2 learning situation. Contrastive analysis assumes that the patterns and rules of L1 cause difficulties to L2 learning.

Contrastive analysis is concerned with the study of two languages aiming at discovering their structural similarities and differences. Almaloul (2014) supports the belief that contrastive analysis studies the similarities and differences between two languages or more. It asserts the claim that learners tend to depend on and refer back to their native language when they encounter target language items that greatly differ from their mother- tongue. Malzan (2015) considers contrastive analysis as a method that was widely used in the 1960s and early 1970s to explain why some features of a target language were more difficult to learn than others.

Lado (1957) claims that those items of a target language that are similar to the learners' first language will be easy for them to learn. In addition, those items of a target language that are different from the learners' first language will be difficult for them to acquire.

The student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy, while others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his/her mother tongue will be simple for him/her,

while those elements that are different will be difficult as confirmed by Lado (1957: 2).

As stated by Weinreich (1953:2), the greater the difference between the two systems, i.e. the more numerous the mutually exclusive forms and patterns in each, the greater the learning problem and the potential area of interferences.

Lightbown & Spada (2006) explain that the elements of a foreign language that are similar to the student's native language will be simple, while those elements that are different will be difficult. Thus, where differences exist, errors would be bidirectional.

Eric (2008) states that contrastive analysis hypothesis is based on the claim that the difficulty of a second language acquisition could be discovered or foretold depending on the degree of difference between the learners' first and second language. She adds that there are certain problems with this hypothesis. One problem, for instance, is that this hypothesis does not predict many of the errors the learner makes in the second language acquisition. Another problem is that this hypothesis predicts interference errors where none would arise.

Error Analysis

Subsequently, no one in this world can learn or acquire any language without committing errors. Corder (1967:23) considers Learners' errors as "important in and of themselves." For learners themselves, errors are 'indispensable' since committing errors is an essential device that the learners use in order to learn. Corder (1981) elaborates that committing errors or mistakes by English foreign learners while learning, is considered as an obligatory feature of learning. In other words, errors are considered as a basic part of the learning process as well as a device that a learner uses to learn. Corder (1973:257) emphasizes that the study of errors can help us to "infer what is the nature of the learners' knowledge at that point in time in their learning career and what more has to be learnt." Not only this, but Lightbown & Spada (2006) also went further and consider the error in language learning and the knowledge of grammar as one of the most important aspects that indicate the development of L2 learners' (inter-language) system. Similarly, Ranganayki (1983:2) asserts that "the errors are not problems to overcome or evils to be eradicated", they are simply a part of the language learning process. Thus, no one can acquire any language without committing errors.

Error is an essential device that the learners use in order to learn. Gass & Selinker (1994) define errors as "red flags" that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the second language.

The process by which these errors are encountered, computed, and

analyzed is called errors analysis. Sridhar (1980) states that error analysis is widely used in identifying and analyzing the systematic errors that student make in their English writings in order to find out which mistakes result from their native Arabic language influence. Norris & Ortega (2008) emphasize that error analysis is "used to elicit, observe, record the language (and language related to the behavior of second language learners), and enable the resulting evidence in light of explanatory theories of the language acquisition process" (p. 735).

Richards & Sampson (1974:15) advocate that "at the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort." According to Corder (1974), error analysis has two objects: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical object helps to "elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language." On the other hand, the applied object helps to enable the learner "to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes."

Methodology
Research Question
The main question of this study is:
To what extent does the mother tongue interference cause error in the English writings of Saudi female students?

Data Analysis Procedures
Corder (1967 & 1974) identifies a model for error analysis which includes the following three stages:
1-Data collection
2-Description
3-Explanation which is considered to be the ultimate object of error analysis

However, Brown (1994: 207-211) and Ellis (1995: 51-52) elaborate on this model. Ellis (1997:15-20) and Hubbard et al. (1996:135-141) gave practical advice and provided clear examples of how to identify and analyze learners' errors. The initial step requires the selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors. The errors are then classified. The next step, after giving a grammatical analysis of each error, demands an explanation of different types of errors. Gass & Selinker (1994: 67) also identified 6 steps to be followed in conducting an error analysis: collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analyzing the source of error, and remediating for errors.

189

Error/Data Collection

A sample of written work was collected from 120 female students in Fahad Bin Sultan University (FBSU). Those students were in the Foundation Year Program. The point to be mentioned is that English is the medium of instruction in FBSU. Thus, these students were asked to write an essay of 200 -250 words and were given sufficient time to write. They were asked to write on: 'How and where are you going to spend your holiday this summer?

Results, Discussion, and Application
Data Analysis and Discussion

One hundred and twenty Saudi female students learning English as a foreign language (L2) at the Foundation Year Program in FBSU were the study group of this research. The aim of this study is to analyze the grammatical errors the study group students commit in their written compositions.

The result of this study shows that the Saudi female students make a lot of errors of different types. However, the most common type of error which is the cornerstone of this study is grammatical errors. It is worth mentioning that the findings of this study are in harmony with the results of previous studies in general and those related to the Arab World in particular. They include the study of Diab (1996), Abu-Rabia et al. (2006), Hourani (2008), Hassan (2011), Sabbah (2015), and Thyab (2016).

Error Identification and Categorization

In order to analyze different types of grammatical errors in the students' essays, the errors were identified and categorized into different error types. The researcher and two other raters analyzed the written data. After then, they classified and identified the grammatical errors into errors in the use of tenses, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, subject-verb agreement, word order, and plurality. Haung (2002) shows that absolute frequencies refers to the actual occurrence of errors expressed by natural numbers. The errors were counted and rated in the percentage of frequencies. A total of 1179 grammatical errors were found. The results presented in table 1 show that the most common grammatical errors were as follows: subject-verb agreement 206 (26%), tenses 224 (19%), preposition 188 (16%), articles 118 (10%), word order 165 (14%), plurality 118 (10%), and active and passive voice 59 (5%).

Classification of Grammatical Errors

A total of 1179 grammatical errors were found. The distribution of the student's grammatical errors is as follows: Subject- verb agreement (26%), Verb Tenses and Form (19%), Prepositions (16%), Word order

(14%), the use of the articles, plurality (10%) for each, and active and passive voice (5%). See table 1 for details.

Types of Errors	Frequency	Percentage of Errors
Verb Tenses and Form	224	19%
Prepositions	188	16%
Articles	118	10%
Active and Passive Voice	59	5%
Subject- verb agreement	306	26%
Word order	165	14%
Plurality	118	10%
Total	1179	100%

Table 1. Classification of grammatical Errors

Subject-Verb Agreement

According to this study, the most common type of error made by the target students is subject- verb agreement. Students in the study group committed 306 errors (26%). This high percentage in misusing subject-verb agreement reflects the incompetence of the learners in using this aspect of language. Also, it refers to the possibility of negative transfer from L1.

Examples of subject-verb agreement errors committed by the study group:

A.   Plural subject does not agree with singular verb:

In Dubai Airport, people help travellers.

B.   Singular subject does not agree with plural verb:

My brother always spend his holiday in Mekkah.

This study shows that target students transfer their L1 structures to what they write in L2. They commit errors where the subject number is confusing (singular vs. plural) as shown in the above examples. Students seem to be confused between the third person singular morpheme (s) and the plural morpheme (s). Unlike English, in Arabic, the verb is pluralized when the subject is plural. Thus, it remains single when the subject is single. As a result, students tend to overgeneralize the rule by adding the plural morpheme (s) to the verb when the subject is plural. Also, students omit the third person singular morpheme (s) from the verb if the subject is singular. This is an evidence of mother tongue interference and is considered as a confusing area for Saudi female students.

Verb Tense and Form

The second highest rate of error in this study is the misuse of verb tense and form with a percentage of 19%. 224 students committed this type of error. While Arabic has only three tenses (present, simple, and future), English has 14. This is a real structural challenge facing Saudi students learning English. The target students committed more errors in misusing the

simple past tense, future tense, past perfect, and present simple as shown in the following examples:

A. Last holiday, I am <u>spend</u> my time in Dubai (confusing the simple past with the present simple leading to wrong insertion of the verb (am)).

B. Next year, my family will <u>going</u> to America (confusing the future tense with present continuous leading to the addition of (-ing) to the verb).

The above misuse of tenses could be attributed to the lack of comprehensive grammar drills needed to enable students to master the use of the different types of English tenses. This tendency is enhanced by first language interference because in Arabic, time sequence in a sentence does not matter much.

Prepositions

Preposition use errors form 16% with the number of 188 errors. Arabic language interference is strongly shown in the wrong choice of the proper prepositions as can be noticed in the following examples:

A. I love travelling <u>in</u> plane.

In the above example, the student translates literally from Arabic, so she uses the preposition (in) instead of (by).

B. I like playing <u>with</u> computer games.

As the above example shows, mother tongue interference occurs when the student uses the preposition (with) when no preposition is needed: I like playing computer games.

 C. My brother afraid <u>from</u> fire works.

 In (c), translating literally from Arabic, the student uses the preposition (from) instead of the right preposition (of).

Articles

English articles represent a problem for Arab learners of English. In this study, incorrect use of articles is 10% with 118 errors. Examples of article use errors are shown below:

A.   Every body like <u>the</u> travelling.

In example (A), the student adds the definite article (the) where a zero or no article is needed. This is a very common mistake among Arab learners of English resulting from mother tongue interference as in Arabic. Therefore, the Arabic definite article (ال) = (the) is a basic part of all common nouns: السفر travelling, اللعب playing, etc.

B.   Dubai is beautiful city.

Omission of the indefinite article where it is necessary is one of the most common types of errors committed by Saudi female students. Being negatively influenced by their mother tongue language structures, the target students tend to omit the indefinite articles when they write English

sentences. The indefinite articles *a* and *an* have no existence in Arabic. In Arabic, a singular of a count noun is not referred to using a separate word (a, an, one) as the case is in English. The Arabic word كتاب meaning (a book) is only one word. Most Arab writers of English tend to transfer their mother tongue structures to whatever they write in L2.

Word Order
Word order errors reached 165 rating 14%. As confirmed by Madbouly (2004: 75), Arabic adjectives are post-modifying elements which always follow nouns and never come before them. This area is considered a confusing area as can be noticed in the following example:
A. Holliday is a time fun.
B. Dubai is a city crowded.
  Being negatively influenced by their L1 structures, most Arab writers of English tend to place the adjectives after nouns and not before them where they must be placed.

Plurality
  Plurality errors are ranked the sixth in the results table. It cannot be considered as high as the other five types of errors. It is relatively low as there are 118 errors rating 10%. This study shows that target students have difficulty in determining whether the word is plural or singular. Examples of errors:
  A. I like visiting many country.
  B. In travelling, I meet new friend.
  The above two example show that students drop the plural morpheme (s) because they are confused whether the word is plural or singular, and that is due to the lack of comprehensive training in plurality and singularity.
C. News in TV are full of information about countries
D. Informations about your hotel are important.
  English plural nouns have some irregularities. Not all words ending in (s) are count nouns such as the word *news*, for example. Moreover, some words are no-count and, therefore, do not take (s) to form plural like the word *information*. Most of the target students are not aware of this. Being influenced by L1 highly regular grammatical rules, they transfer their L1 structures to L2.

Passive Voice
  The percentage of errors committed by the students in the misuse of passive voice is 5%. The number of the total errors found was 59.
  Example:
Travelling is encourage by the government

Overgeneralization is the cause of errors because students use this technique when they feel confused between active and passive voice. Richards (1971) attributes the errors mentioned above to be derived from "faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language."

Conclusion

The main objective of the present study is to investigate, identify, describe, categorize, and diagnose the grammatical errors in writings made by Saudi female students learning English as a foreign language in the Foundation Year Program, Fahad Bin Sultan University. This study supports and highlights the findings that second language learners' errors could be attributed to native language (NL) transfer. Due to the differences between the Arabic and English grammatical systems, a lot of Arab learners of English face difficulties while trying to learn the correct use of grammar. The source of such difficulties is based on the degree of difference between the Arabic and English grammatical systems. Thus, it is concluded here that teachers of English to Arabic speakers should be aware of the areas of expected difficulty resulting from L1 transfer. Consequently, teachers should help learners overcome such problems and should lead them to better target language acquisition.

On the other hand, this study supports the assumption that error and contrastive analysis can provide knowledge about the development of learners' language. Accordingly, error analysis is essential for language teachers. They understand students' errors and build the educational techniques and methods needed to improve their students' level. It also helps students to avoid most of the L1 interference errors.

Bedagogical Implications

Corder (1967: 5) claims that "We cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way". In the light of the findings of this study, the first step of solving any problem would be in having an awareness of it. So, teachers should diagnose student errors and have good knowledge about the negative effect of the mother tongue resulting from differences between L1 and L2. Instructors can also raise EFL learner's awareness of such errors. Consequently, it would help them avoid or, at least, reduce the amount of their L1 interference and help them develop stronger new learning habits to overcome those existing old learning ones.

The researcher agrees with the study of Hourani (2008), Hassan (2011), and Thyab (2016). They opined that once teachers are equipped with proper knowledge about the L1 transfer, it will in turn help them to make informed decisions when faced with real-life problems later on. In other

words, a language teacher can now address this problem by directly asking students not to constantly translate meanings from their mother tongue and revert, but instead to their L2 competencies

As for the writing rules and conventions, these need to be "enforced" much earlier. Therefore, teachers should help students to improve their writing skill by concentrating on writing in class or writing assignments. Moreover, they need to be taught some well-defined essay writing rules (thesis statement, introduction, conclusion, transition words, etc...). Teachers should teach students elements of good writing: unity, coherence, cohesion, grammar, and vocabulary. On the other hand, students can participate in correction and in the analysis of their writings in order to discover the errors and how to avoid such errors in future writings. Students should be encouraged to submit their hand written assignments instead of typed ones for writing skill courses. The findings of this study supports and placed emphasizes on the statement of Nassaji & Fotos (2004) that there should be a reconsideration of the role of grammar in L2 classroom. Also, some types of focus on grammatical forms would help learners to develop high levels of accuracy in the target language.

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