A Study of Arabic Interference in Yemeni University Students' English Writing

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyse and describe features of Arabic interference in paragraph writing by Yemeni university English students in the academic year 2009/2010 semester 1 at Amran and Hodeidah Universities.

Four levels of Arabic interference, namely, the missing Verb to be, the missing indefinite articles (a/an), word-order and subject-verb agreement were analyzed from samples of the students' paragraph writing.

It was found that the absence of 'be' and indefinite articles 'a/an' in the Arabic language led the Yemeni students to make errors in using them. The difference between Arabic and English word order leads the learners to make errors and, because of literal translation of Arabic words into English mainly represented features of L1 lexical interference in the students' written English.

Keywords: Arabic interference, interlingual errors, language transfer

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Introduction

Arabic is the official language in many countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Morocco. Arabic is also the language of the Qur'ran, so Muslims of all nationalities, such as Indian, are familiar with it.

There are many Arabic dialects, but there is one version that is taught in schools and used by the media across the Arab world.

Within each country, often in quite small areas, a wide variety of colloquial dialects have developed, differing from one another, not only in pronunciation, but also in common lexical items and, to some extent, in structure . The differences from one country to another are more marked than differences between UK, US and Australian English.

As it is a Semitic language, its grammatical structure is very different from that of Indo-European languages. There are far fewer areas of facilitation, and far greater areas of interference. This must be borne in mind when Arabic speakers are mixed with foreigner students.

The Three-Consonant Root in Arabic

The basis of Arabic language is the three-consonant root. A notion such as writing, cooking or eating is represented by three consonants in a particular order. There is a large potential for errors of interference when Arab learners produce written or spoken English.

All words (parts of speech) are formed by combining the three-root consonants with fixed vowel patterns and, sometimes, an affix. Arab learners may be confused by the lack of patterns in English that would allow them to distinguish nouns from verbs or adjectives.

Root	/k/ /t/ /b/	=writing
A person who does this for a living	Kateb	=a writer
Past participle (passive)	Maktoob	=written
Present tense	Yaktubuh	=He writes

Table 1- (Swan & Smith (2001)

Language Transfer and Interference

Language transfer is considered one of the most problematic phenomena in Second Language Acquisition. It plays a big role in the learning of another language.

It has been defined differently in different theories of L2 acquisition.

On the one hand, Behaviourists' view as exemplified in the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) considered transfer in terms of habit formation. On the other hand, the Minimalist position, which appeared as a rejection to the CAH, tried to diminish the importance of the L1

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and to emphasize the contribution of universal processes of language learning, such as hypothesis-testing.

However, it is now widely accepted that the influence of the learner's L1 cannot adequately be accounted for in terms of habit formation. Neither transfer is simply a matter of interference or of falling back on native language, nor is it just a question of the influence of the learner's L1, as other previously acquired languages can also have effect.

Odlin (1994: 27) offers this definition of transfer: "Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the TL and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired." Odlin (2003) also stated that language transfer is also known as cross-linguistic influence, language interference, the role of the mother tongue, native language influence and language mixing. Similarly to Odlin's definition and in accordance to Brown's opinion, transfer will be viewed as "the interaction of previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge with the present learning event to facilitate a new language learning task." (2007:117).

According to Mitchell and Myles (2004), the phenomenon of language transfer is also known as a cross-linguistic influence from the first language. This conveys meaning that language transfer is taken as the effect of speakers' or writers' first language on the perception of his or her second language. Indirectly, the knowledge of their first language will be used in the second language or target language as a way to acquire the second language itself.

Transfer can act as a language facilitator through general similarities between languages that "influence language development even in the absence of specific overt similarity" (Gass, 1996). When there are a large number of similarities, the learner is free to concentrate on other aspects of the grammar. In contrast, it could also be seen as a constraint on the hypothesis that the learner makes about the TL. Such constraints are strongly influenced by previous knowledge, which includes not only knowledge of the native language or other languages known, but also whatever is acquired of the TL, which is usually referred to as interference.

That is why we can say that the two, language acquisition and language transfer, are linked because language transfer is a process that goes hand in hand with the learning of a second language since once a person starts learning another language the transfer process begins.

Kellerman and Sharwood-Smith (1986) said that transfer is a process that leads to the incorporation of elements from one language to another.

Finally, the most specific definition is the one that Weinreinch (1953) called *interference* and defined as having two functions. The first one is when it works as an impediment to the production of the language learning and this by producing incorrect forms. The second one functions as a facilitative tool that helps in the learning of a second language

After defining the term transfer and after discovering that transfer is divided into two poles, the positive transfer and the negative transfer, let us see the difference between the negative transfer and the positive one.

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The Negative Transfer

Negative transfer is a term used to define the use of prior linguistic knowledge in the production of second language that results unacceptable forms. This negative transfer hinders or blocks the learning and the accurate performance of appropriate target language forms. As Corder (1983) said that any native language influence would" actually inhibit, prevent, or make more difficult the acquisition of some feature of the target language.

Subsequently, however, other linguists opposed the Behaviorists' views and their "stimulus response theory" and there comes the cognitive school that accounted for the transfer theory. They defined *transfer* as: **"**to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture**"** (Lado in James, 1998:14).

Positive transfer is similar to negative transfer in the sense that it is the use of prior knowledge or skill in the learning of a target language but the only difference that exists between the two is that the Negative transfer hinders the learning whereas the positive one helps and accelerates progress in the learning of the target language.

As O'Malley and Chamot (1995) defined, "it is the use of previous linguistic or prior skill to assist comprehension or production."

In this respect, positive transfer unlike the negative one has a positive effect on the learning of the target language and this if and only if the two languages, the previously learned and the target ones, have similarities in terms of grammar for example word order.

According to James (1998), interlingual error (Mother-tongue influence) is one of four causes of errors. These kinds of errors are influenced by the native languages which interfere with target language learning. Learners translate word by word idiomatic expressions, vocabulary and even the grammatical rules of the learners' first language into the second language. In contrastive analysis, it is believed that the type of errors made by the learners of the target language can be predicted and their causes can be determined.
Interlingual errors have a structure similar to semantically equivalent phrases or sentences in the L2 learner's L1. They refer to L2 errors that reflect L1 structure, regardless of the internal processes or external conditions that give rise to them.

The sources of interlingual errors are all conditions that result in the premature use of the L2 by the language learner. These would include pressure to perform in the L2, living in an environment where the use of the L2 is very limited, conscious L2 language processing, and so forth. Krashen (2002) mentioned that first language interference is one of the several sources of errors learners make.

Mother Tongue Interference

Mother tongue interference is one of the major causes leading to leaner's committing errors. Norrish (1987) states that learning a language (a mother tongue or a foreign language) is a matter of habit formation. When learner strives to learn a new habit, the old ones will interfere with the new ones. In other words, the term "first language interference" best summarizes this phenomenon.

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Besides, being able to express fully one's ideas in another language is always a demanding task. Thus, when learners' second language is not sufficient in expressing themselves, it is likely that they will rely on their first language to express their ideas. Edg (1989: 7) is in line with this thought: "when people do not know how to say something in a foreign language, one possibility is to use words and structures from their own language and try to make them fit into the foreign language."

Johanson (1975) states that to use two languages familiarly and without contaminating one by the other, is very difficult. Various researchers have concentrated on errors, which demonstrate the influence of one's native language to second language acquisition.

It is a traditional version of the contrastive analysis hypothesis which predicts that elements of a foreign language that are similar to the student's native language will be simple, and those elements that are different will be difficult, and where differences exist, errors would be bi-directional. For example, French speakers learning English and English speakers learning French would make errors on parallel linguistic features (Lightbown and Spada 1999:73).

Hagege (1996) argues that the teacher should know that a child who is in the process of acquiring a second language will subconsciously invent structures influenced by knowledge, he already possesses and this may constitute errors which are completely natural.

Arabic Situation

In reviewing some studies conducted on the interlingual/syntactic errors committed by Yemeni EFL learners, Diab (1996) states that most of the syntactic errors committed by EFL Arab learners are attributed to the influence of L1 'Arabic' linguistic structures. He also states that Arab learners depend heavily on their mother tongue in FL. He also asserts that one "common syntactic error that students commit as a result of transfer is faulty word order."

Noor (1996) presents a justification for analyzing such syntactic errors to better understand strategies utilized by EFL students when they write in a FL. Noor's study is considered a review of the most frequent syntactic errors made by Arab EFL learners. The important discovery of Noor's study is that the most frequent and common source of error is the influence of the native language in processing English syntactic structures.

Our Study

As this study investigated interlingual errors in omission of required elements ,word order and subject verb agreement syntactic categories made by Yemeni EFL learners, the study offers plausible explanations of the occurrence of errors within the omission of required elements as one of the most important syntactic categories in the process of second language acquisition.

This study also offers new information about the importance of the differences between the two varieties of the subjects' native language and the confusion happening while trying to write in English, especially with respect to the omission of the two elements 'be' and 'a/an' category. Furthermore, this study differs from other studies conducted in the same field as it

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mainly focuses on interlingual interference from learners' L1 as one of the major linguistic factors which may affect FL acquisition

Methodology

The subjects who participated in this survey are 200 first and fourth-year University students aged between 18 and 25 taking English as a foreign language in two public universities in Yemen. The research material used is a written composition. The students were asked to write the composition during the first semester of the academic year 2009 / 2010.

Discussion

The analysis of written composition gave the following results:

Types of Interlingual Errors

Error type	Occurrences	Percentage
omission	229	69.39%
Word order	52	15.76%
Subject verb agreement	49	14.85%
Total	330	100%

Table: 2

Most of the errors are due to the omission of some required elements as 'verb to be' and 'indefinite article' because in Arabic language there are no equivalent elements. So, Yemeni students do most of their errors in this type. The omission errors constitute 69.39 % of the total number of the errors made by the Yemeni students, which is a high percentage in this category.

The word order errors constitute 15.76 % of the total number of the errors. In many cases, the learner may transfer the Arabic word order during their writing.

The subject verb agreement errors constitute 14.85 % of the total number of the errors. It seems that the linguistic structures of the mother tongue are the main cause of interference when writing in the second language. Students tend to apply the rules of their first language when they do not know the rules of the second language.

Sample of Errors

Interlingual errors

The interlingual errors were classified into three types: omission, word order and subject verb agreement.

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These omission errors were divided into omission of 'verb to be', and 'indefinite articles' because there are no equivalent words in Arabic language.

The missing/ omission of verb (be)

In English, the verb, "be" is the most common verb form used in many different ways. It is used as an auxiliary, as a main verb, as a linking verb; it is used to indicate someone's identity, age and cost; it is used with prepositional phrases ,with "to" infinitive, in questions and negative clauses, in continuous tenses.

In Arabic, there is no equivalent usage to encompass all of the above- mentioned function. The following examples were taken from students' writing:

> *English important for Islamic society.
> *I learning English.
> *It important in the world.
> *My plan for future to be a good student in English language.
> *The future very nice.

The above sentences show that there is a direct influence from the mother tongue during writing in English.

The omission of the indefinite article (a, an)

The absence of (a, and an) article in the Arabic equivalent leads the students to make errors in using them so the following sentences show written by students with the missing of articles.

> 1-* I will be teacher.
> 2-*it is modern language.
> 3-*The Arabic language important language
> 4-*I like to be in future good teacher.
> 5-*It helps me to find job.

The above sentences show the missing article by the students. The third sentence shows that there are two-missing elements 'verb to be' and 'indefinite article'.

Word order

Classical Arabic tends to prefer the word order VSO (verb before subject) rather than SVO (subject before verb). However, the word order is fairly flexible, since words are tagged by case endings, whereas SVO is more common in spoken Arabic.

The word order errors constitute 6.3% of the total number of the errors.

In many cases, the learner may transfer the Arabic word order during their writing, as illustrated in the following examples:

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1-* English is language international.
2-*He is learning grammar English.
3-*You like reading story English.
4-* I want to be teacher English excellent.
5-* I speak always English inside the class.

The above sentences show different kinds of word order. The first one is in the noun phrase where the order of noun phrase in Arabic language follows this order: N + adj but the order of the noun phrase in English is different. The adjective word must be before the noun, not after. So, the Yemeni students make many errors in this type because they have influenced by their mother tongue.

The second word order which is shown in the above sentence is the position of adverb. The correct order of adverb must be before main verb.

* I speak always English inside the class.
I always speak English inside the class.

Subject verb agreement

The subject verb agreement errors constitute 14.85 % of the total number of the errors. Subject verb agreement errors occur when the subject and verb in the sentence do not agree. Singular verbs need "s" at the end while plural verbs do not. In the Arabic language, when the subject is singular, the verb must be singular and when the subject is plural, the verb must be plural. The following sentences are correct in the Arabic language but wrong in English. The subject verb agreement in English must follow the following structure:

1-Subject(He/ she/ it) + verb + present marker 's'
2-subject (I/ they/ we / you) + verb
1-* My parents wants me to help them.
2-* English become the best language.
3-* Arabic language play an important role.

Conclusion

The aim for this study was to investigate the errors produced in essays written by Yemeni students, and to look into some specific types of errors where Arabic interference from the L1 could be the main reason why they occurred. Judging by the results, negative transfer plays a significant role in the English language production by Yemeni students. Of the categories of errors included, the omission of some required elements was the category with the highest frequency of instances.

The total identified errors from the whole group were 330. Of these errors, the most frequent errors made were found in the omission of 'verb to be.' The omission of indefinite articles (a/an) accounted for 229 or 69.39 %. The second frequent errors made were found in the wrong use word order, which accounted for 52 or 15.76%. The third frequent errors made were found in the wrong use of subject-verb agreement, which accounted for 49 or 14.85%.

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In identifying the total frequencies of the errors made by individuals, the greatest numbers of errors were found in the omission of 'be' and 'a/an', word order, and subject-verb agreement.

It can be concluded from the study that the most frequent errors in writing were due to the interference of the Arabic language. This is because the learners apply the structures of their mother tongue when they write in English. The differences in the structures of the two languages cause the problems in writing the second language.

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