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### Most Common Grammatical Mistakes Made in English by L1 Arabic Learners

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<b>Keywords:</b>  <i>-mistakes</i>  <i>- L1 Arabic learners</i>	<b>Abstract:</b> Robert Lado (1957), as well as most contrastive linguists, have shown that the learner's first language may have a big role to play in the process of second language learning. Due to differences between languages, whether in their syntactic, grammatical, pragmatic, or phonological systems, difficulties in learning a second language may arise. One of the most frequent difficulties Arabic L1 students face when learning the English language is learning the English language grammatical system and their ability to communicate effectively according to that.  This paper pinpoints common grammatical mistakes which English learners make and possible solutions to such mistakes are listed and explained. Illustrations are given of how the differences between the Arabic and English language regarding the grammatical system cause L1 Arabic learners of English to make mistakes and errors in their English learning process and how this prevents learners from meaningful English communication. The aim of this paper is to prove that English students make similar grammatical and syntactic mistakes which are repeated and frequent. That is, many grammatical mistakes of Arabic native language speakers are orderly made and
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<p>Available online 10/10/2019</p>	<p>regular. Errors in the English language grammar and syntax which students commit are not random and are found to be very much due learners' mother-tongue interference. Arabic first language interference is found to play an important role in English second/foreign language especially when it comes to learning the English grammatical and syntactic system. For instance, due to the differences between Arabic and English in terms of the use of determiners, prepositions, conjunctions, using singular/plural forms and proper word order many problems arise. English learners from an Arabic mother-tongue can be negatively affected by transferring from their parent or first language. This paper concludes a number of these negative interference problems, discusses them thoroughly and lists a number of possible solutions which are seen to be effective in English teaching classrooms and environments.</p>
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<p><b>الخلاصة:</b> يؤدي تنوع اللغات واختلافها في قواعد النحو والنظام الصوتي واستخداماتها دور كبير في مهارة وكفاءة المتعلمين على اكتساب وتعلم اللغة الثانية كما أشارت العديد من الدراسات، ولذا يناقش هذا البحث إحدى أهم المشكلات وأكثرها شيوعاً وتكراراً وهي الأخطاء النحوية التي يقع فيها طلبة اللغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية وخاصة الناطقين باللغة العربية وعدم قدرتهم على التواصل بشكل فعال في اللغة الثانية نتيجة لذلك.</p> <p>يبين هذا البحث أيضاً الأخطاء في قواعد النحو المنتشرة والشائعة في العملية التعليمية لطلبة اللغة الانكليزية والحلول المقترحة لحل وتجنب مثل هذه الأخطاء. توضح هذه الدراسة أيضاً التأثير الذي يؤديه اختلاف اللغتين العربية والانكليزية خاصة فيما يتعلق بقواعد اللغتين وأساسيات النحو وكيف أن هذه المسألة سبب في عدم قدرة الناطقين باللغة العربية كلغة أولى على التواصل والتخاطب بشكل كافي وفعال في اللغة الثانية (الانكليزية). يثبت هذا البحث كذلك أن الأخطاء التي يقع فيها طلبة اللغة الانكليزية الناطقين باللغة العربية مكررة ومتشابهة وسببها الرئيسي اختلاف التركيب اللغوي والنحوي بين اللغتين. فعلى سبيل المثال يعاني هؤلاء الطلبة من مشاكل في استخدام الضمائر وأدوات العطف وحروف الجر. وكذلك المعاناة في استخدام المفرد والجمع والترتيب الصحيح للجمل نحويًا. ويعرض البحث مجموعة من المقترحات والحلول من أجل التغلب على مثل هذه الأخطاء ومعالجتها.</p>	<p><b>الكلمات الدالة:</b> - أخطاء -المتعلمون الناطقون بالعربية</p> <p><b>معلومات البحث</b></p> <p><b>تاريخ البحث :</b></p> <p>-الاستلام : 2019/6/11 -القبول: 2019/7/20 - التوفر على الانترنت: 2019/10/10</p>
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## **Introduction**

Learners of a second language, whatever their background, come across a number of difficulties when attempting to learn a new language this is due to the differences between languages and to the dissimilarities in their grammatical, syntactic, phonological and pragmatic systems too. This is a problem which is also found in L1 Arabic learners of English due to the influence of their mother-tongue. Mother-tongue interference is the influence of the learners native language on their second language learning ability. However, it must be realized that mother-tongue interference does not always mean a negative influence on second/foreign language learning ability. In some cases, the learners' mother-tongue may positively influence the learners' ability to learn new second/foreign language learning skills, specifically, in language aspects which are to be similar between the learners' mother-tongue and her/his second language. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper is to show areas of difficulty that arise in the English language learning process due to the negative influence of learners' native language. L1 Arabic learners of English encounter mother-tongue interference also, especially when it comes to learning the English grammatical and syntactic system. For instance, due to the differences between Arabic and English in terms of the use of determiners, such as the use of articles many problems arise. The use of prepositions properly by L1 Arabic students is also influenced. English learners from an Arabic mother-tongue can be negatively affected by transfer from their first language considering the use of adjectives, learning correct word order, using singular and plural forms, joining items by using connectors and conjunctions, and so on.

All in all, Arabic native speakers are very much influenced by their parent language, also termed as their mother-tongue, native language, first language and, or L1. This is the case, especially when they are communicating and learning the English language while referring to their first language for a source of help and backup. This is due to differences in the use of articles, prepositions, determiners, adjectives, word order and other language items and skills by both the Arabic and English languages. Due to the importance of such language items to the English second language learning process and due to the need of adequate competence of such matters by L2 English learners, this paper lists a number of these negative interference problems and discusses them thoroughly.

## **Statement of the Problem**

English language students make certain mistakes which are found to be repeated among English students. Many of these mistakes are not random and are similar from one student to another. Many of these mistakes made in the English language, especially by Arab mother-tongue students are due to the interference of their first language. This is a basis of contrastive studies and what is known as mother-tongue interference. Here, in turn, interference of the mother-tongue regarding grammatical points is analyzed and studied.

## **Hypotheses of the Study**

This study hypothesized the following:

1. English students, as well as learners of English, in general, make certain mistakes that are similar to one another and repeatable.
2. English students in ESL/EFL make grammatical mistakes that are found to occur due to first language interference and mother-tongue influence.
3. Contrastive studies should be taken into consideration due to mother-tongue inference, especially regarding English students with an Arabic native language.

## **Procedures of the study**

The procedures in this study are as follows:

1. Giving a theoretical background on grammatical mistakes that are found repeatable by L1 Arabic students.
2. The sample of the study has been collected from English students' compositions and writings in Tikrit University College of Education for women.
3. These compositions are analyzed by the researcher and studied to measure L1 Arabic students' grammatical mistakes.
4. The study is conducted, through the study, of second year students' compositions, in order to analyze and study repeatable grammatical mistakes due to first language interference.

## **Value of the study**

It is hoped that this study could be a contribution to a better realization of grammatical and structural mistakes, especially mistakes which are repeated by English students and the importance of contrastive studies within this regard. It is expected that this study tackles the importance of the study and realization of first language interference, with regard to L1 students and learners of English with an Arabic mother-tongue. The hope, in this study, is also to direct teachers, regarding grammatical and structural mistakes and how they are usually similar among ESL/EFL students and are not- random. This is to direct teachers, in the hope of improving

learning and teaching as well as hope of more success in schools, colleges and ESL/EFL environments.

## **Literature Review**

Determiners, prepositions, adjectives, word order, singular and plural forms, using connectors and conjunctions and similar grammatical and syntactical items are found in every language. These language items, however, are used daily and spontaneously in both the Arabic and English languages. Determiners are considered an essential part of the English language grammatical system, as well as the Arabic language. This is also the case with prepositions. Therefore, learning English syntactical items, such as determiners and prepositions and being able to reach adequate competence of these language items is considered inevitable for second language learners of English. As a result, learners of English should carry enough knowledge of these necessary grammatical items in the English language in order to be capable of using these language items properly. L1 Arabic speakers of English need to be taught the similarities and differences between English and Arabic in regard of the use of determiners in general and articles in specific, not to neglect the use of prepositions also. As such, contrastive studies need to be given more attention and focus, as they are one way in improving our second/foreign language learning attempts. Moreover and more precisely speaking, Arabic mother-tongue learners of English need to be made aware of how to use syntactical language items such as determiners and propositions in English, when and why. In addition, it is required from EFL/ESL classrooms and in EFL/ESL teaching materials to illustrate such matters and to show areas wherein the learners' mother-tongue may have a negative influence on the learning ability of determiners, the article system and the use of prepositions in English and should present to students places where first language interference may occur.

Teaching English as a second language is met with problems of mother-tongue interference, which means problems of first language interference or the effect of the learner's native language on her/his learning attempts of a new and another language. Part of these problems is mother-tongue interference in Arabic-native speakers' acquisition of the English articles, prepositions, determiners and so on. (Sabbah, 2015: 274)

Contrastive analysis is concerned with the study of a pair of languages with the aim of discovering their structural similarities and differences. Contrastive analysis is 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. (Mozlan, 2015: n.p.)

Contrastive analysis, and the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which are concerned with comparing languages in the aim of discovering similarities and differences in hope of finding possible areas of difficulty or otherwise, are used to explain why certain items in second language acquisition are more difficult to learn than others. This is based on the idea that the more difference between the learners' mother-tongue and the target language, the more difficulty the learner will face. ("Contrastive analysis," 2015: n.p.).

According to Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures* (1957) those items of a target language that are similar to the learners' first language will be easy for her/him to learn while items and structures which are different from the learners' first language will be difficult to learn. This is, also, part of what is known in contrastive studies as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. (Mozlan, 2015: n.p.)

There are many grammatical mistakes that English language learners make due to first language or mother-tongue interference. For example, English language learners make errors and mistakes in the use of articles because of the differences between the article system in both Arabic and English. English language learners misuse articles due negative transfer from their Arabic mother-tongue. Transfer is of two types, according to contrastive studies. There is positive transfer in which the learner's mother-tongue facilitates the learning and acquisition of target language items and structures. Within the topic of English articles there are instances in which translation from the mother-tongue helps. So, when the learner refers back to the article system in Arabic and attempts to use her/his first language as a back-up, there are instances where positive transfer is applicable. Notwithstanding, there are instances when the learners' mother-tongue becomes a source of error, especially with regard to the use of articles. In this case, this is known as negative transfer. Concerning using English articles this is found because of the different uses of the article system and how they are encoded in both languages. This idea is also part of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, where in we have the strong version and the weak version. (Sabbah, 2015: 272)

Nonetheless, there is an important difference, within English language studies, between mistakes and errors according to Ellis, Corder & Brown among others (as cited in Sabbah, 2015:

270). Errors are made by learners due to ignorance of the correct rules and happen on a deeper level than mistakes which are considered to be slips of the tongue or lapses in the learner's performance in the second language. (Ibid)

Mistakes in English language learning environments can be explained by referring to language theories and learning theories. Among them are the Contrastive Analysis Theory and the Error Analysis Theory. The Contrastive Analysis Theory, as mentioned above, explains learners' errors by analyzing similarities and differences between two languages or more. In contrastive studies it is asserted that learners of a new language will tend to depend on and refer back to their native language when they encounter target language items that greatly differ with their mother-tongue. The theory of "Error Analysis", similarly, studies learners' errors in the second language with the aim of recognizing the reasons behind such errors and their causes.

Within this regard, determiners are applicable. Other grammatical mistakes faced by English language learners that are found to be repeatedly made by English language learners of an Arabic L1 are in their use of determiners. Determiners, which are words used before nouns and words which are used to refer to something of a particular type or something specific, are also affected by negative transfer from the Arabic language with regard to L1 Arabic language learners' of English. (anonymous, 2019: n.p.)

It must be mentioned, that determiners go before a noun or noun phrase but do not add information to that noun or phrase and do not carry much meaning on their own. (Ibid)

The list of determiners used in the English language includes: articles, "a", "an", and "the". The articles "a, an" are indefinite articles, whereas "the" is called a definite article. Words like "my, your, our, their, his, hers, whose, etc." are determiners and known as adjectival possessive pronouns. Determiners in English also includes demonstratives or demonstrative pronouns, such as "this, that, these, those, which, etc.". Quantifiers such as "few, a few, many, much, each, every, some, any, etc." are also types determiners used in the English language. Numbers "one, two, three, four, etc." and ordinals such as "first, second, next, etc." are also examples of types of determiners. (Hassan, 2017: 17)

## **Methods**

A qualitative approach is adopted in this paper. Teaching English Composition for two years in a row and by noticing students' writings it has been found that EFL/ESL students commit common mistakes and make similar errors regarding English grammar. These mistakes are found to be repeated by students. Also, it is found that the main source of these mistakes and errors is the learners' first language (Arabic) and translation or transfer from their native language. So, for example, in the Arabic language we repeat "wa" when enumerating or mentioning a list of items in a series. So, for example, in Arabic it is said or written as follows: "اشترت الأم لطفاتها لعبة وعصير وشوكولاتة"

EFL/ESL students or learners from an Arabic mother-tongue repeat the mistake in that they write "the mother bought her child a doll and juice and chocolate and fruit." This, in fact, is inaccurate grammatically in English language. This sentence should be written as follows in the English language: "The mother bought her child a doll, juice and chocolate" Here, the conjunction "and" should be included in the sentence to the final added word in a list.

By following Lado' studies of contrastive analysis, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Inference Theory, results have been gathered within this paper.

By studying and analyzing previous ESL/EFL student compositions, as well as considerations of previous researches, and pre-existing data and through the comparison between Arabic and English structural systems certain cases have been perceived, here, also.

## **Discussion and Results**

Grammar and syntax are not an easy language aspect to be learned by second/foreign language learners, however, it is vital and indispensable. To learn a language one must learn its grammar well enough. Our schools and educational systems in the Arab world focus on grammar and its rules and requirements. However, need arises that attention be payed to teaching L1 Arabic students areas of interference and transfer. That is, more attention should be put on teaching L1 Arabic learners of English aspects and parts of the English language where their Arabic mother-tongue may lead them to make mistakes or errors due to negative transfer and due to the negative interference of their parent language or mother-tongue. In turn, more focus needs to be directed to contrastive studies, where first language interference is found. If Arabic mother-



tongue learners of English were made aware of such interference matters they will, in turn, be made aware that referring to their first language or translating from their native language in such grammatical aspects will not help, if not realize that it will certainly be a source of mistakes and even errors.

Thus, learning English articles by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic is asserted to the significance of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. This paper supports and highlights such findings. Due to the difference between the Arabic article system and the English one, many Arab learners of English encounter difficulties while trying to learn the correct use of articles in English language. The difficulty in learning English articles is faced by L2 English learners whose native language has no article system or whose native language has an article system that functions differently.

English language learners make repeated grammatical mistakes in the English language, especially in the use of articles. Sources and reasons behind such grammatical mistakes which are found to be made by L1 Arabic students in almost a similar way is because the notion of definiteness and indefiniteness with regard to the article system are encoded differently in the Arabic language than that in English. The English language system includes the definite article "the", the indefinite articles "a"/ "an", and the zero article "Ø". Arabic language, on the other hand, includes the use of the definite article "the" or "ال التعريف".

The definite article "the" or "ال التعريف" is used in almost a similar way to the English definite article, because the Arabic language encodes the notions of definiteness and indefiniteness in a different way than that of the English language. In the Arabic language, the definite article is "the" or "ال التعريف", whereas, the definite article has no equivalence. That is, there is no indefinite article in Arabic. Furthermore, because of the uniqueness of the English article system and because they are frequently used within the English language, Arabic L1 learners of the English language face significant difficulties in learning the English article system all over the world. (Hassan, 2011: 3)

For example, Arabic L1 learners of English may say "University library is open" instead of "The university library is open" due to the interference of the Arabic language "مكتبة الجامعة مفتوحة". This is, as explained earlier, known as negative transfer of the learners' mother-tongue or first language. This is because the learners of English refer back to their parent language for help

and back-up. In this example, the source of error is because of L1 Arabic interference in which we find that the Arabic language has no use of the definite article but, in fact, a zero article is used. Another example of repeated mistakes made by L1 Arabic learners with regard to grammar, specifically concerning articles is the omission of the indefinite article "a" so, for example, L1 Arabic learners usually say "My father works in hospital" instead of "my father works in a hospital" because such an article does not exist in the learners' mother-tongue (Arabic). The source and cause of this grammatical error is also because of negative transfer from the learner's mother-tongue and because of first language interference wherein the Arabic translation of such a sentence is "يعمل أبي في مستشفى" . (Sabbah, 2015 : 274)

Common grammatical mistakes or errors that L1 Arabic learners make as a result of mother-tongue interference is, as mentioned earlier, in the use of determiners such as articles. Another source of mistakes and errors students and second language learners commit and which occur due to their Arabic language interference is in their attempt to use English prepositions. Prepositions are considered one of the most difficult grammatical aspects that face learners of English, in general, and Arabic native speakers, in particular. It is a fact that the prepositional system in the English language is very varied and many prepositions in English carry the same function, which makes it difficult for learners to distinguish between them. For instance, the prepositions "in", "on", "at" all refer to place but are used differently according to the situation of the sentence. Notwithstanding, Arabic mother-tongue English language learners may face even more difficulty than others when using English prepositions due to the reasons mentioned earlier, regarding first language interference and due to the fact that the prepositional systems in both Arabic and English are very different.

Consequently, when L1 Arabic learners try to solve difficulties they face when attempting to use English prepositions and if they were to refer to their native language, they will most likely make mistakes and errors, within this regard. For example, a student of an Arabic mother-tongue may use the preposition "in" instead of "at" to refer to "position" as in the sentence "I am in school" rather than "I am at school" affected by interference from the Arabic language, translated from the Arabic first language "أنا في المدرسة".

Likewise, other grammatical mistakes that L1 Arabic learners of English may make is in the use of adjectives. In English, adjectives do not agree with the nouns they modify. In Arabic

language, however, the case is not similar. I.e., in the Arabic language, adjective agree in number with the nouns they modify. The cause of this error that English language learners from and Arabic first language background is also due to mother-tongue negative transfer. (Sabbah, 2015: 274)

Other mistakes or errors that may be made by L1 Arabic learners of English could be made due to in the differences between word order in both English and Arabic. For example, adjectives follow the nouns they modify in Arabic grammar while in English language the adjectives precede the nouns they modify. For example, "It is a large house", or "A noisy party. While, if translated from Arabic to English, English language learners would say something like "A party noisy", "A house large" accordingly affected by negative transfer from their first language concerning word order: "أنه منزل كبير"، "إنها حفلة صاخبة". (Ibid)

English language learners from an Arabic mother-tongue may also face difficulty when attempting to distinguish between singular and plural forms, due to the fact that the English language does not have easy rules regarding these grammatical aspects. For instance, some English words have the same form for both singular and plural. For instance, the "s- plural" is used in the English language sometimes at the end of the word despite being a singular form. Examples include "physics", "mathematics", "statistics", and so on. So, if an Arabic mother-tongue learner of English was to go back to her/his native language to decide whether a word is singular or plural, negative transfer may occur and interference may result, as in using the word "statistics" which is singular in English but plural in Arabic. Therefore, such a learner may confuse the "s" letter, at the end of the word "statistics" to be an "s-plural". This may happen, as a result of mother-tongue interference due to the learners' inability to differentiate between singular and plural forms in English, as in the Arabic word: "إحصاء". (Ibid)

Another grammatical mistake and error that is repeatedly found to be made by L1 Arabic mother-tongue learners of English is in using connectors and conjunctions. In the Arabic language, words written in series and joined together are done so by placing "wa" between them. As a result of Arabic mother-tongue interference, Arabic L1 learners of English are found to connect words mentioned in a series and join them by repeatedly using "and" between these words. The correct way to join words in a series in the English language, however, is by using commas between them and using the conjunction "and" before the last word. For example,

Arabic learners of English usually write "I ate apples and bananas and strawberries and oranges and dates" which is an incorrect way of connecting words in English, where such words are joined or connected as follows: "I ate apples, bananas, strawberries, oranges and dates." (Ibid)

Here, emphasis on previous research findings regarding the English language and its grammatical and syntactical rules has been applied. A major source and cause of repeated error is found to be because of the differences between the Arabic and English languages in concern to these necessary and essential language structures and elements. Arab learners of English, as any new language learners of any background, make mistakes or repeated errors in their English learning process. Nevertheless, many of these mistakes or errors are unconsciously or involuntarily made by Arab learners of English due to the differences between the grammatical system in both languages.

Making mistakes when learning a new language is something inevitable. However, teachers should be required to make lists and become familiar with the common errors learners of a target language make in their learning process. It is suggested, here, that teachers highlight repeated mistakes and common errors and correct these frequently faced problems made by students. Mistakes and errors should lead to improvement, progress and not lead to frustration. As well, teachers should learn how and when to correct these errors. Also, the suggestion, here, to teachers of second and foreign language classrooms is to show respect to students' native language. It is also needed that teachers highlight to L1 Arabic learners of English the areas where the native language would be a source of error, if the teacher was knowledgeable of the learners native language. If not, teachers could ask their Arabic L1 speaking students how a rule is used in their native language all in the aim of familiarizing learners with contrastive studies, in which referring to the mother-tongue in new language acquisition could be a source of improvement and progress or error. (Sabbah, 2015: 274).

## **Conclusions**

Due to the fact that learners of the English language, especially learners from an Arabic first language background make repeated mistakes and errors regarding English grammar. And, due to the fact that these mistakes are made by L1 Arabic learners in almost a systematic way and are similarly made by other learners due to the negative influence of their mother-tongue, learning English by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic

emphasizes the importance of contrastive analysis and contrastive studies. This is due to the fact that Arabic L1 speakers encounter huge difficulty while attempting to use the English language grammar and syntax among other language items. The source of such difficulty is mostly based on the degree of difference between the Arabic article system and the English system and may be sometimes also due to confusable similarities between the Arabic and English languages.

The difficulty in learning English language grammar and syntax by Arabic L1 speakers is because their native language has a system that functions differently. Finally, it is concluded that it is the duty of teachers of the English language to take such matters into consideration and it is on their part to attempt to clarify areas of expected difficulty and confusion that learners of English may encounter in the English language learning process. This would certainly lead to overcoming problems learners may face and thus lead to better second/foreign language learning and acquisition.

This, in turn, emphasizes the importance of contrastive analysis studies and the need to include them in educational systems, because the source of many of the difficulties that L1 Arabic learners of English come across is due to the degree of difference between both languages. Teachers of the English language should become knowledgeable of such language aspects as they are regarded an expected sources of difficulty, mistakes and errors. Need arises that teachers become aware of repeated mistakes and errors that L1 Arabic learners make in regard to English language grammar and familiarize students with these problematic areas all in hope of better English second/foreign language learning and teaching.

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