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L1 and its effect on EFL writing: a descriptive framework

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the interference of L1 on the writing of undergraduate EFL students of Saudi Arabia and aims to critically analyze their writing samples via comparative qualitative research methods. As a result, there is no helping verb in Arabic that is why they mostly do not use it in English and even if they do, they use it improperly. In conclusion, Saudi students prefer to understand their subjects, to be taught in Arabic. It is all their low motivation towards English and hindrance of L1 in its learning.

Keywords: Interference, Pronunciation, Punctuation, Syntax, Order.

L1 y su efecto en la escritura EFL: un marco descriptivo

Resumen

Este estudio intenta investigar la interferencia de L1 en la escritura de estudiantes de pregrado de EFL de Arabia Saudita y tiene

como objetivo analizar críticamente sus muestras de escritura a través de métodos comparativos de investigación cualitativa. Como resultado, no hay un verbo de ayuda en árabe, por eso no lo usan principalmente en inglés e incluso si lo hacen, lo usan de manera incorrecta. En conclusión, los estudiantes sauditas prefieren entender sus materias, que se les enseñe en árabe. Es toda su baja motivación hacia el inglés y el obstáculo de L1 en su aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: interferencia, pronunciación, puntuación, sintaxis, orden.

1. INTRODUCTION

While facilitating the writing skill of second or foreign language learners, most of the teachers tend to focus on the sentence structure or syntax, lexis and other parts of the target language. The importance of students' native language interference is neglected in this procedure. Such students, while writing in the foreign language are likely to incorporate some of the characteristics of L1, subconsciously due to the effect of language transfer. Language interference is the process in which linguistic features are transferred from one language to another in the language list of a bilingual or a multilingual person. Language transfer is the term, used for the transfer of linguistic features of one language to the other (LADO, 1957; DULAY, BURT & KRASHEN, 1982). The transfer is positive if the transferred L1 elements are the same as that of L2 and it is negative if the transferred L1 elements are different from that of L2.

As far as the Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia are concerned, English in spite of being a prestigious language is taught at the higher level and it does not play an important role at the official or societal level. Arabic is a sole means to communicate ideas: An average citizen does not need any other foreign language including English to accomplish his activities on a daily basis, or even for societal or professional advancement. Since Arabic is the main medium in almost all situations whether it is inside or outside the classroom, the target language is neglected. Hence, the way these undergraduate EFL students speak English is reflected in their writing as well. However, in classes at the college level (more specifically in English classes) the medium of communication is English. English reading and writing is only confined to the English classroom. Outside the classroom, English is used merely communicating with teachers who are non-native speakers of Arabic (RIDHA, 2012; KHALED & NASSAJI, 2013).

Without using the knowledge of rules of English, these learners write in English but carry Arabic grammar, punctuation, word order, article, etc. which creates problems in comprehending their English text. This is because of their habit of using L1 in all situations. They are taught about the application of rules, formation of words and their use in sentences but they still do not seem to master the language fully. In writing particularly, one needs to be formal, but they make mistakes in writing simple sentences, paragraphs or any kind of discourse (MOHAMMAD, 2015; KURT & ATAY, 2007).

The evidence of the influence of mother tongue on English is too apparent, which apprehends itself in terms of erroneous pronunciation. For example, if the learner pronounces /p/ as /b/, he/she writes the word /pet/ as /bet/, which in turn leads to semantic error and addressees need the help of context (pragmatics) to understand the said word appropriately. Pronunciation error is the result of many things. The most common reason is transfer or interference from the mother tongue. For example, the resemblance of native sound /b/ with that of the sound/p/ in target language (English) results in mispronunciation like /pan/ of English is written as [ban]. Therefore, these pronunciation errors occur due to the differences in the sound system and spelling symbols between the two languages i.e., Arabic and English. The same case is with other parts of language like syntax, morphology, etc.

2. METHOD

The objective of this study was to analyze EFL students' writing samples and describe the interference of their mother tongue on their L2 writing. Though the source of errors was already known i.e., the interference of Arabic. The data was collected from the undergraduate students in the form of written messages, answer sheets, and other written records like homework, class-work, assignments, etc., and from those written pieces, the errors were analyzed and classified into

pronunciation/spellings, syntax, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, etc.

During the analysis, firstly, the articulation of individual sounds was addressed. However, much importance is not given to the teaching of pronunciation. One strong reason is that most of the teachers are of the view that the learners should be able to write grammatically correct structures, and then they will stress upon pronunciation. They tend to overlook the fact that when the articulation of English sounds is inappropriate, this would definitely lead to inappropriateness in writing English sounds. In fact, the importance of pronunciation in communication, particularly in the use of a second or foreign language cannot be denied. Its importance is similar to that of grammar and vocabulary. The other aspects of language like syntax, morphology, and semantics are also affected. The reasons can range from teachers using old translation methods to students not paying proper attention in the class. The age of the students' ranged from 18 to 26.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the written samples included errors in spelling, punctuation, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, etc. The main reason for the errors in the L1 interference that is quite high in their L2 (negative transfer). The L1 habits of these EFL students cause change in L2 syntax, semantics, phonology, etc. The present paper focused on

the L1 interference of their written text with reference to pronunciation/ spelling (phonology), syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. In capitalization, they are confused while capitalizing the words (CUMMING, LAI & CHO, 2016).

There are punctuation mistakes in every piece of written conversation. In Syntax, errors are quite frequent in the formation of tenses. In addition to this, the parts of speech, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives, etc. are areas of ample concern. Students make semantic errors and the main cause of these errors is the way they interpret English sounds. While speaking or writing, they tend to think in Arabic and cause semantic errors. As far as pragmatics is concerned, they simply translate structures from Arabic to English which leads to pragmatic errors since the context is not taken into consideration. The paper also provides some recommendations and strategies to prevent writing problems expressed by undergraduate EFL learners. In this paper, the major problems faced by EFL students in the process of learning English have been discussed in detail below (HUSIN & NURBAYANI, 2017).

The errors in pronunciation are due to L1 interference. The sounds of English are replaced with the sounds present in their native language. In this process, some sounds had more probability of being confused or mistaken by the students, resulting in spelling errors. The sounds in slanting brackets or slashes are the actual sounds of the target language, which are replaced by those sounds that are present in

Arabic and are represented by square brackets (KRASHEN, 1982; SHABBIR, ABBAS, AMAN, & ALI, 2019).

/p/ as [b] as in /pan/ [ban]

/v/ as [f] as in /van/ [fan]

/tʃ/ as [ʃ] as in /chin/ [ʃin]

/k/ as [g] as in /cap/ [gap]

These types of errors occur because of the sound system of Arabic. Arabic does not have; therefore, it is replaced by /b/. Since the place of articulation is the same for both the sounds, they treat /p/ as [b], which obviously is not appropriate according to the sound system of English. Moreover, this increases their tendency to make errors in spelling. Most of the spelling mistakes are due to phonic transcription also, they treat the sounds the way they pronounce. Since English words are difficult for them in writing and in pronunciation as well, so the learners tend to jump into their mother tongue to ease their writing (FAROOQ & WAHID, 2018).

L1 can be helpful in learning L2 if the transfer is positive, which is definitely not the case here. According to the examples given above, such phonological errors lead to semantic errors as well such as the word /van/ is interpreted as a [fan], /pin/ as [bin], /cap/ as [gap], though semantically incorrect. They treat /k/as [q], sometimes mispronouncing it as [g] for example, /pack/ as [paq] or [pag]. Therefore, the most common spelling errors are related to pronunciation and this is shown through their replacement of English consonants with the Arabic ones. That means mispronunciation of the

sounds leads to spelling errors. Hence, here more emphasis should be on pronunciation, which will automatically prevent spelling errors (HAMDI, 2015; SABBAH, 2015; MAHMOOD, ARSHAD, AHMED, AKHTAR, & KHAN, 2018).

While writing something, they simply translate from Arabic to English by taking help from online translators like Google translator. With the result, they do not take context into consideration due to which the discourse is lost. Whatever they write, they write it in an improper context and it becomes very difficult to understand the text. Here, mistakes appear in grammar especially in parts of speech, for example, the use of adjectives. In English, the adjectives are usually placed before the noun they qualify e.g., good boy, where an adjective good is followed by a noun boy. Similarly, in thin girl, an adjective thin is succeeded by a noun girl, but in Arabic, the case is reverse. Here, a noun is followed by an adjective. There are some examples below:

Table 1: shows a noun followed by an adjective

English	Arabic
1. He is a good boy.	hwa waladh jayd (He boy good)
2. She is a beautiful girl.	hiya bint jamilah (She girl beautiful)
4. It is an easy exam.	haada imtihan sahl (It is exam easy)

It is obvious that the learners tend to stick to their native language while making sentence structures, resulting in grammatically unacceptable forms. They follow Arabic rules in writing English.

4. DISCUSSION

In the analysis of writing samples of EFL students/learners, it is found that these learners transfer linguistic items from their mother tongue to their target language. This is because Arabic is the only language used by them for communication in all the spheres including academia. This hinders their language learning process that demands maximum the use of the target language in concrete situations. Some of the samples that consisted of numbers in English were found to be written in Arabic style. For example, 63 (sixty-three) was found to be written as 36 (thirty-six), 54 as 45, 26 as 62, etc. (as discussed above).

However, such errors were seen in some samples only, but this is because of the fact they keep Arabic style in mind and are prone to making errors like writing numbers from right to left and there are organizational differences between Arabic and English that result in serious mistakes very often. In the following example, there are mistakes in punctuation. Periods are missing; capital letters are employed instead of small letters and vice versa. Mistakes appear in the organization of words into sentences.

Table 2: Shows mistakes in punctuation and word organization

please tell me why give me this mark for my research I do all my know and you know I cannot came to lectures same another student please I need my Grades to tell me what is the errors and I try correct it I am crying every time about my baby and difficult this courses I set with my Baby I cannot study anything please help me look at my baby it is very tired

As explained above, there is no capitalization in Arabic and this is the reason they do not use capitalization at the beginning of a sentence. However, some students who remember capitalization rules use capital letters at the beginning of a sentence. There are no periods in the whole text, verbs are missing at most of the places. Some more examples are given below.

Table 3: Shows punctuation mistakes and verbs missing

My Favoret (Favorite) restaurant
My favaret restorat is prosted ALMadina (Broast Al Madina). My faforet (favourite) mail in it is prost (broast). The potatos is a great start with Garleck Soce (garlic sauce), and vegetabl sald, after then after that you started with a fraid Chicken (fried chicken). I like it but my friend does not like it much

In this instance, where the student is required to write a paragraph about her favorite restaurant, there are mistakes in

punctuation, pronunciation, and grammar. Because of MTI (mother tongue influence), pronunciation error occurs which leads to a spelling error (use of f instead of v). There is also transliteration of the text such as soce instead of sauce, fraid instead of fried.

There is no helping verb in Arabic that is why they mostly do not use it in English and even if they do, they use it improperly like he does his work, she not like coffee or She is not like coffee, there is no present perfect tense in Arabic so they make mistakes in perfect tense as well. For example, He has done this work, they have studied here for 2 years. They use adverbs for expressing continuous. For instance, alanaahmedyalabalkarah means Ahmed is playing football. In future tense too, adverbs denote the auxiliary verb expressing the future.

Table 4: shows L1 habits intervening L2

A paragraph about Family

My family consists of 7 people, I am and father and mother and 3 sisters and I am the eldest sister in this family and after me 3 sisters who names Baghdad, shawal, taslim and My youngest brother. He is 3 years old and also we have a boy with 4 very beautiful girls.

In this paragraph, the student has used conjunction and more than needed. This is because of the transfer of L1 (Arabic) in English. They use an Arabic word wa means and frequently and because of this they repeat the word in English.

Table 5: shows L1 habits intervening L2

Advertisement
Announcement
We are the company for marketing, and we are looking for vacancies: that they have suitable requirements or equivalent
Secretariat-1
Marketing management-2
Send your CV to our E-mail-3

The above example shows that the text is written in a somewhat Arabic style (from right to left) whereas in English it is from left to right, so the mother tongue style intervenes here as well.

5. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the students' samples, L1 interference errors in different parts of language were found. In capitalization, L1 interferes in the way, as the learners are confused while capitalizing the words because the Arabic language does not have capitalization. In the analysis part, learners' ability to use syntax and grammar shows that they have many problems in expressing their ideas even in doing controlled writing paragraph. In Syntax, errors in tenses are frequent. In addition to this, the parts of speech, prepositions, conjunctions, etc. are areas of ample concern. For example, they make mistakes in the

use of adjectives. Since English is very different from Arabic but their L1 intervenes in their L2. They mix both languages.

To avoid errors in pronunciation, they should use drills because by drilling they will remember the sounds of English and write them properly. Teachers should give them passages to read which might help them in improving vocabulary and in writing correct spellings of words. Drills and role-plays in the class will not only help the students to improve their pronunciation but will also boost their confidence while speaking English. As far as pragmatics is concerned, they simply translate structures from Arabic to English. The use of online translation systems like Google Translator to translate from Arabic to English is quite common which leads to pragmatic errors since it does not consider the context. The teachers, by all means, should discourage this practice.

The need for a learner for learning L2 or a foreign language acts as a motivating factor for its acquisition. However, in case of Saudi students, things seem to be a little different. For them, English is a foreign language and is limited to only a subject. Most of them learn it to understand and get good grades in the subjects that are in English. In fact, they prefer to understand their subjects (which are in English), to be taught in Arabic. It is all their low motivation towards English and hindrance of L1 in its learning.

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