

The Influence of Mother Tongue Interference on the Acquisition of English Syntax among Iraqi EFL University Students

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Abstract

In the current study, the researcher examined how mother tongue interferences affect the acquisition of English syntax by Iraqi university students who are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research is based on the existing linguistic theories including the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis by Lado and the Interlanguage Theory by Selinker which are used to explore the influence of Arabic syntax on the syntax of learners of English as a result of which certain grammatical errors become persistent. With a mixed-methods research design, the first part of the study proposes analysis of written essays by 100 Iraqi EFL students in revealing frequent syntactic error types, and the second part of the study offers contextual information on pedagogical issues and solutions through semi-structured interviews of 10 English instructors with ample teaching experience. It is expected to find common patterns of interference (making mistakes in word order, verb tense, use of articles, and subjectverb agreement) and to vary according to different levels of proficiency. This study shows the crucial role that explicit contrastive instruction and instruction based on errors plays in reducing negative transfer effects. Overall, the findings are expected to be used in the design of curricula and in teaching the EFL in Iraq and other Arabic speaking countries and eventually lead to improved syntactic accuracy and communicative competence among learners. The study is relevant to the wider second language

acquisition research area in that it provides evidence-based suggestions on how English syntax can be learnt better in an environment with high incidences of mother tongue interferences.

1.Introduction:

Second language (L2) acquisition is a multifaceted cognitive and social process that may be determined by numerous factors, the role of first language (L1) being the most significant one. Mother tongue interference, also known as language transfer, can be described as the effects that the native language of the learner has on L2 acquisition. With regard to the Iraqi university students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the syntax of Arabic represents a significant problem because there are considerable typological differences between the two languages. The difficulties are reflected in the continuous syntactic mistakes, which is an issue that concerns the general linguistic proficiency and communicative success of the learners.

The syntactic and morphological systems of Arabic and English are rather different. Arabic is a Semitic language with a root-and-pattern system of morphology and a fairly flexible word order which may take the form of Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) or Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) depending on pragmatic reasons (Fassi Fehri, 2011). By way of contrast, English, a Germanic language, is known to have a strict Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order and a fixed syntactic hierarchy, in which any violation normally leads to ungrammaticality (Carnie, 2013). These are the basic syntactic differences which also add to the phenomenon of interference, whereby Iraqi learners automatically use Arabic syntactic structures in forming English sentences which result in errors in word order, use of article, tense, and agreement etc.

Since Lado (1957) famous claim that linguistic similarities and differences between L1 and L2 identify the extent of interference, the theoretical basis of language transfer has changed. Odlin (1989) built on this and distinguished between positive and negative transfer; positive transfer assists learning whilst negative transfer impedes acquisition. Negative transfer is dominant in Iraqi EFL context especially at the syntactic level because of structural differences between the Arabic and English languages. As an example, Iraqi learners tend to generalise and ignore English articles, which is a phenomenon that is not present in Arabic syntax, and place adverbs and auxiliaries in the wrong position (Al-Khatib, 2011). These observations are supported by empirical research. Al-Saadi (2018) has determined that Iraqi EFL students commonly write syntactically deviant

sentences which reflect the patterns of Arabic, specifically, in the area of complex sentence constructions and in forming questions. This kind of interference not only has a negative effect on grammatical accuracy, but also on confidence and motivation of the learners, which are very essential to effective acquisition of language (Ellis, 1997). It, therefore, means that mother tongue interference ought to be addressed in improving the syntactic competence and communicative proficiency of the Iraqi learners.

Pedagogically, the presence of syntactic errors which can be explained by L1 interference is an indication that contrastive instruction needs to be made explicit. It has been proposed that negative transfer effects can be reduced by increasing the metalinguistic awareness of learners to differences in syntax between Arabic and English (Al-Gharaibeh, 2016). In addition, the incorporate of error analysis in curriculum development enables the instructors to address frequent syntactic issues, hence enhancing the syntactic accuracy and fluency in learners.

The current study aims at exploring the particular effect of Arabic on learning English syntax by Iraqi EFL university students. It will attempt to establish the most common syntactic errors caused by L1 interferences, and explore reasons behind them. The study will also aim at investigating effective pedagogical techniques that would alleviate effects of mother tongue interferences on acquisition of English syntax. Through examining this population of learners, the study fills the gap in the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, in general, and offers some practical suggestions to EFL teachers in Iraq, in particular.

To reach these aims, the mixed-methods research design will be used. The quantitative data will be collected based on syntactic analysis of errors in writing and speaking English by Iraqi students, whereas the qualitative information will be gained using the interviews with EFL teachers. Such a complex method of studying the phenomenon of interference will allow it to be understood in a nuanced way and use it to make specific pedagogical decisions.

To sum up, mother tongue interference is still a daunting obstacle to learning English syntax by Iraqi EFL learners. It is important to identify and intervene on this problem based on empirical-based research and pedagogical creativity with the view to transforming the linguistic performance of learners. It is expected that the results of the present study will not only improve the current practice of teaching the English language in Iraq but will also enrich the existing discussion regarding language transfer and SLA in the global context.

Problem Statement:

In spite of years of English language training, Iraq University students continuously exhibit syntactic inaccuracy which can easily be attributed to mother tongue interferences (Arabic). The consequences of such interferences are frequent grammatical mistakes, such as incorrect word order, article omission, tenses discrepancies, and agreement issues that overall negatively affect the syntactic competence of learners (Al-Khatib, 2011; Al-Saadi, 2018). Such syntactic challenges not only limited the academic success of the students especially in written tasks and oral delivery but also hamper successful communication in real and academic life (Ellis, 1997).

Furthermore continuity of these errors even impacts negatively in the long term language proficiency as the learners are not in a position to develop fluency and accuracy in the English Language (Odlin, 1989). Although mother tongue interference is a critical factor which may affect the acquisition of English syntax, most of the pedagogical models in the Iraqi higher education setting fail to explicitly address the issue of L1 influence. The problem with teaching methodologies is that they often include general grammar instruction without references to the actual syntactic deviations between Arabic and English that cause transfer errors (Al-Gharaibeh, 2016).

The pedagogical gap identified above cries out on the concentrated empirical study that will systematically examine the nature and the degree of Arabic interference in English syntax amongst Iraqi EFL learners. This gap is crucial to fill in to acquire evidence-based instructional practices that would be designed to reduce L1 interference and enhance syntactic accuracy. In the absence of such specific interventions, there can be little doubt that Iraqi students will keep suffering as far as syntactic errors are concerned, and therefore acidic performance and overall communicative competence in English.

Research Questions:

To understand and reduce the effects of mother tongue interferences in the learning of English syntax by Iraqi EFL university students, this research attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Which kinds of English syntax interferences are the most common among the Iraqi EFL learners due to the influence of Arabic?
2. How big is the difference in the level of mother tongue interferences in various levels of English language proficiency?

3. Which pedagogical measures can be the most effective in reducing syntactic interference of Arabic in English language learning process?

Objectives

The main questions of the present research are the following ones:

- To establish and classify the highest frequency of syntactic errors that take place in writings in English by Iraqi EFL university students.
- To determine the degree to which these syntactic errors are caused by interference of Arabic syntactic structures.
- To design and prescribe teaching methods that would alleviate the powers of mother tongue interference on the learning of English syntax.

Significance of the Study

Thorough knowledge of how Arabic can interfere with the English syntactic acquisition is of great importance to various stakeholders in language education. The findings of this study can be used by teachers to design instructional strategies that specifically overcome the mother tongue interference effects on syntactic issues and hence improve the grammatical accuracy and overall communicative competence in the learners. Evidence-based information will assist curriculum designers to create materials and programs to highlight syntactic differences between Arabic and English to create more efficient learning channels. More so, the findings will be useful to linguists and applied linguistics researchers in developing theoretical understanding on language transfer phenomena.

Literature Review

Mother tongue interference in SLA is a phenomenon which has been the main topic of research in applied linguistics over the decades. The present literature review investigates three closely related areas that form the background of the present study: (1) theoretical basis of language interference, (2) empirical studies of syntactic transfer, specifically in Arabic-English scenario, and (3) teaching strategies aimed at alleviating effects of L1 on L2 syntactic acquisition. The review will be a critical summary of classic and recent research that puts the study of syntactic errors in Iraqi EFL learners in the context of existing linguistic theories and pedagogical knowledge.

Theoretical Bases of Language Interference

Language interference, which can also be alternately termed as language transfer, is described as the impact of the first language (L1) of a speaker on the second language (L2) acquisition and usage (Odlin, 1989). Lado (1957) provided the

theoretical foundations of how this influence works: her Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) stated that the main reason why L2 learning is difficult is the differences between L1 and L2 structures. On the basis of Lado, positive transfer helps in learning the two languages in cases where they are similar and in cases where there are structural differences, negative transfer or interference leads to errors.

Although the CAH offered an innovative model, it was criticised on two counts: its deterministic view and the fact that it could not explain all errors made by learners (Ellis, 1997). It gave rise to the interlanguage theory developed by Selinker (1972) that views language of the learner as a distinct linguistic system not just determined by L1, but also affected by cognitive factors, learning strategies and target language exposure. Interlanguage can deal with variability and developmental stages in learner language which provides a more dynamic conceptualization of transfer phenomena.

Since these theories, current studies acknowledge that mother tongue interference is not homogenous or unavoidable, but depends on the linguistic distance, proficiency of the learner, context of the learning situation and individual cognitive constraints (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). More specifically, syntactic interference has been considered as being determined by typological differences, whereby languages with significant dissimilarity in syntactic structures present more difficulties to the learner (Odlin, 1989). Because of the structural differences between the Arabic and English, particularly in the word order and the morphological marking, EFL learners in Iraq are particularly prone to syntactic transfer errors.

Empirical Investigations of Syntactic Transfer

The syntactic consequences of mother tongue interference in Arabic learners of English have been well documented in many empirical studies. The free word order in Arabic and the lack of some grammatical elements pose a serious challenge in learning the syntax of English in a proper way (Al-Khatib, 2011). Let us take the example of Arabic, which has the variable subject and verb position, and compare it to English which uses Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) rigidly. Thus, the Iraqi learners tend to utter the sentences with a non-canonical word order in English, which is a feature of Arabic syntax (Al-Saadi, 2018).

Another area of interference includes article usage. In English, definite and indefinite articles (the, a/an) are used, but in Arabic there is no straight counterpart of indefinite articles, and the definite article al- has a different behaviour (Ryding,

2005). It leads to the frequent omission or misuse of articles by the Iraqi learners (Al-Khatib, 2011). In addition, the systems of tense and aspect in Arabic and in English are quite different as the system of tense and aspect in English obliges clear expression whereas the system of aspect in Arabic involves the use of aspectual distinction in conjunction with temporal adverbs (Bahloul, 2005). One of the common forms of syntactic transfer is the errors in using tenses, e.g. simple past and present perfect tenses can be mixed up.

The agreement in subject-verb is also a victim of the variation in the systems of grammatical gender and number agreements. The Arabic verbs consist of agreement with the subject in gender and number, whereas the English verb exhibits a limited agreement only in the third person singular present tense (Suleiman, 2003). Iraqi students can carry over Arabic agreement patterns into English mistakenly and make mistakes such as He go instead of He goes (Al-Saadi, 2018).

Cross sectional studies show that incidence and severity of syntactic interference is generally inversely proportional to the English proficiency of the learners, hence indicating that high levels of English proficiency may aid in inhibiting the negative transfer and promote the acquisition of target like syntactic competence (White, 2003). The mother tongue structures, however, appear to always have an effect on even the advanced learners as they tend to have fossilized errors which are based on L1 interferences.

Instructional Strategies to deal with L1 Influence

Considering the reported problems caused by mother tongue interference, pedagogical interventions have been concerned with the methods to minimise the effects of L1 and ensure proper syntactic acquisition. Contrastive analysis is still useful in the classroom, especially with the explicit error correction and metalinguistic awareness activities (Al-Gharaibeh, 2016). It has been found that, when teachings learners of certain synthetic distinctions that exist between Arabic and English, they have been in a position to recognise and prevent negative transfer (Selinker & Lakshmanan, 1992).

Error analysis (EA) is an addition to contrastive approaches which diagnosis frequent learner errors so that the instructor can focus their instructions to cure particular types of interferences (Corder, 1981). Systematic error analysis in the Iraqi EFL context can also identify most common syntactic problems and inform the design of a set of targeted teaching resources (Al-Khatib, 2011).

Communicative language teaching (CLT) methods focus on meaning and fluency in combination and do not insist on accuracy but again, researchers have warned that without direct focus on the syntactic form, learners risk fossilization of errors (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Consequently, it is suggested that balanced programs that combine form-based instruction with communicative practice will be effective ways of dealing with mother tongue interference (Ellis, 2001).

There are also potential opportunities in the use of technology enhanced language learning in reducing L1 interference. Individualized syntactic feedback and practice that is capable of teaching a learner to internalize correct English structures can be achieved through computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs (Chapelle, 2001). Nonetheless, these technologies must be adjusted to the linguistic and cultural background of Iraqi learners so that they could be most effective.

As highlight in the literature, mother tongue interference is a complex phenomenon that has extensive effect on the acquisition of English syntax by Arabic speaking learners. Contrastive analysis to interlanguage theoretical models and empirical studies help to reveal certain syntactic problems of Iraqi EFL students. Pedagogically, contrastive instruction together with error analysis and balanced communicative strategies can be regarded as the most effective anti-interference means. The review serves as the background of the current study in terms of focusing on determining the error patterns and establishing specific teaching strategies to enhance the syntactic competence of Iraqi learners of English.

Methodology:

The research design of the current study is mixed-method that is, it combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods to have a comprehensive investigation on the effect of mother tongue interference on learning English syntax by Iraqi EFL university students. These approaches combined enable measuring syntactic error patterns and, at the same time, examining contextual factors that can have an impact on language learning and teaching practices (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative aspect entails the systematic investigation of written samples of English gathered on a purposive sample of 100 EFL Iraqi university students in intermediate to advanced English classes. Writing samples will include essays and brief compositions of about 500 words in length, written under classroom

conditions that are controlled. These samples will be analyzed regarding syntactic mistakes, especially the ones that can be attributed to Arabic interference such as mistakes in word order, use of articles, verb form and subject-verb agreement.

Identification and classification of errors will be performed according to the existing patterns in error analysis (Corder, 1981; James, 1998). All errors will be coded in terms of type and frequency, whereas quantitative evaluation of the prevalence and distribution of syntactic errors will be possible. Descriptive and inferential statistics will be employed in the identification of patterns and correlations, especially those that concern the error frequency in the various levels of proficiency. Qualitative Phase

The qualitative stage includes semi-structured interviews with 10 instructors of English language at different universities in Iraq. These teachers also possess at least five years of English teaching experiences, and they are conversant with the typical linguistic issues among Iraqi students. The interviews will focus on contextually detailed information on perceptions of mother tongue interferences, problems experienced when teaching English syntax, and the strategies that the instructors use in correcting mother tongue interferences-related problems.

Audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis with the help of NVivo software, so that recurrent themes and patterns could be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative information will add richness and complexity, and will serve to contextualize the quantitative results, pointing out pedagogical realities; it will also be used in recommendations.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative stage entails semi-structured interviews of 10 English language teachers across different universities in Iraq. These teachers are teaching English at least five years and know typical linguistic issues of Iraqi students. The interviews will attempt to gather deep, situational data pertaining to the perception of the instructors towards mother tongue interference, difficulties they face when teaching English syntax, and methods they use in trying to remedy errors caused by interferences.

Audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed verbatim and subjected to the thematic analysis with the help of NVivo software to reveal common themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Such qualitative information will add richness and complexities and will serve to complement the quantitative results by pointing out pedagogical realities as well as guiding recommendations.

Data Triangulation

In order to increase validity and reliability of results, triangulation of data will be used by cross-checking the quantitative error analysis with the qualitative data of instructor interviews (Denzin, 1978). It is a way to guarantee the comprehensive impression of the phenomenon as it mediates between the learner performance data and the teaching attitudes. Conclusions will be informed and evidence-based pedagogical recommendations made to ameliorate mother tongue interference through the integration of data.

Ethical Considerations

The appropriate institutional review board will be sought. The study will guarantee the participants informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. The anonymization of writing samples and interview data will be used to ensure the anonymize the participants.

Participants

The research will be carried out among the English-major students in three leading universities of Iraq. Stratified sampling will be applied when selecting participants in order to balance the representation of participants of different proficiency levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Such stratification is meant to capture variations in mother tongue interference, as learners advance in their development of the English language. The quantitative phase will involve 100 students who will be asked to give written samples to be used in the analysis of syntactic errors.

Also, 10 university English teachers having at least five-year teaching experience will be specifically chosen to take part in the qualitative phase. These teachers will be selected within the same institutions; hence, they will have comprehensive understanding about the frequent syntactic issues of Iraqi EFL learners and their teaching methods. Their opinions will provide excellent contextual insight to supplement the numbers data.

Data Collection

The process of data collection will embrace two major sources in accordance with the mixed-approach design. On the quantitative aspect, student essays will be collected during regular writing tests and set course work in the English departments of the involved universities. These writing texts will be gathered in a standardized manner so that there is uniformity and reality of data portraying the syntactic competence of the students.

To address the qualitative aspect, semi-structured interviews will be held with English instructors either face-to-face or through Zoom, depending on the

availability of the participants and taking into consideration the logistical issues. Interviews will be conducted using a flexible guide that will enable discussion on observations by the instructors on mother tongue interferences, difficulties on teaching syntax in English and effective remedial measures. With the consent of the participants, all the interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed word-to-word for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will be systematic and will be analysed using the mixed-methods design. In the quantitative data, a coding scheme will be designed using the typical English syntactic types most likely to interfere including subject-verb agreement, article use, word order, verb tense, and prepositional errors. Every syntactic mistake identified in the student essays is going to be put into this framework, so that the frequencies can be calculated, and the patterns can be identified. Descriptive statistics will be computed to measure the frequency of occurrence of certain types of errors and inferential statistics could be used to correlate the level of proficiency and the distribution of error.

In the case of the qualitative interview data, thematic analysis shall be performed on the data with the aid of the NVivo software to assist in the effective coding and management. Transcripts shall be analyzed to establish common themes concerning perceived mother tongue interferences, pedagogical issues, and effective teaching methods by the instructors. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative results will allow synthesizing the picture of the phenomenon of syntactic interference and making recommendations based on the evidence.

Ethical Considerations

All the participants will be informed about the purpose of the study and procedures and their right to withdraw without any penalty at any point in time before data collection through an informed consent process. The participants will be convinced of the voluntary nature of participation, and refusal to participate will not lead to any consequences on their academic status or relations with colleagues.

In order to safeguard the privacy of participants, anonymity will be upheld firmly with all data sources being assigned codes and all outputs (reports and publications) will not contain any personally identifiable information. The issue of confidentiality will be observed in the research process through the storage of data in password-protected files, which will be accessible to members of the research

team only. The study will obtain ethical approval from the appropriate institutional review boards before starting the study.

Study of Limitations

The present research recognizes various limitations that could possibly affect the generalizability and applicability of its results. The study is limited initially to Iraqi university students and therefore the generalisation of the findings to other EFL situations of diverse linguistic, cultural or educational backgrounds might not be tenable. One should be cautious about generalizing outside this narrow population.

Second, the researcher limits the investigation to written syntactic mistakes and, therefore, Mother tongue interference in spoken English could not be studied. In turn, the impact of Arabic on oral syntax and fluency has not been studied, and it can be the subject of future research.

Third, the qualitative aspect will use self-reported experiences and perceptions among university English teachers. Although very informative, such data is open to biases, such as selective memory and subjective interpretation, that might impinge upon the qualitative findings.

Expected Results

It is expected that the study will identify the same patterns of syntactic errors among the EFL university students in Iraq which may be attributed directly to Arabic interference. It is expected that these mistakes will feature prominently deviations in the word order, use of verb tenses, omission or wrong usage of articles and inconsistencies in subject-verb agreement. The quantitative analysis will probably show a difference between the frequency and types of syntactic errors of different proficiency levels, where more advanced learners have fewer errors, but possibly fossilized interference errors.

These results should be supported by qualitative data obtained through interviews with instructors that will offer contextual reasons as to why these errors are still persistent and reveal the existing difficulties with regard to current pedagogical issues. The quantitative and qualitative data triangulation will assist in identifying the effective evidence-based instructional strategies to be used to alleviate mother tongue interference.

In general, the results of the study will amend practice in the following suggestions to the curriculum planners and teachers to improve the syntactic accuracy and consequently raise the communicative competence of Iraqi EFL learners.

Teaching Implications

The results of the present study have important vindications with regard to the English language teaching in Iraqi universities. The syntactic patterns of interference that were identified can be used by the English teachers to create grammar-based lessons that would directly target the most frequent errors caused by the influence of Arabic grammar. The inclusion of specific diagnostic tests will allow teachers to track the progress of learners in mastering the overcoming interference and make appropriate instructions changes.

These insights can also be of use to curriculum developers who can update the existing textbooks and other learning materials to incorporate contrastive analysis of the syntactic structures in English and Arabic. These materials may be used to develop the metalinguistic awareness of the learners so that they can be able to identify errors caused by transfer and rectify them.

Also, the paper has emphasized the teaching importance of contrastive teaching methods which make learners aware of the differences and similarities between L1 and L2 syntax. Explicitly teaching these contrasts will enable teachers to enable learners to overcome the negative transfer and to build more precise syntactic competence, and thus positively affect overall communicative efficiency.

Conclusion

Mother tongue interference has remained to be a great challenge in second language acquisition especially in the realms of syntactic development. This research is relevant towards establishing a better comprehending of the effect of Arabic syntactic structure in the process of acquiring English syntax by Iraqi EFL university learners. The research provides useful information on the nature and scope of L1 interference by determining the pattern of common errors and investigating pedagogical issues that instructors usually encounter.

These results highlight the need of specialized, contrastive teaching methods that would focus on teaching the syntactic differences between Arabic and English in an explicit manner. Such practices are bound to increase syntactic accuracy and the general communicative competence of learners, hence their academic performance and language proficiency in general. The potential ultimate contribution of this research is the basis of improvement of teaching practices of the English language in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking environments to ensure more effective second language acquisition.

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