

## The Effects of Arabic on English Writing of Petra University Students

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**Abstract:** In this article, I will discuss the interference effects of Arabic (L1) on the English (L2) writing of Jordanian students. This article is based on a sample of 10 essays of a given topic and the results of a placement test consisting of 50 multiple choice items. The errors will be classified, categorized and tabulated according to the levels of grammar. Based on a descriptive research, in this paper the author will elaborate on the controversial issue of L1 interference. A contrastive analysis (CA) of the writing of Jordanian students is done to investigate whether L1 is the only source of grammatical errors or not. The writer's experience shows that contrastive analysis can be reliable on spoken language, that is, pronunciation and intonation, which are not the theme of this paper.

**Key words:** interference, error analysis, contrastive analysis

### 1. Introduction

Among different skills of L2, writing is considered to be the most difficult skill to master. This difficulty, according to Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 303), "lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable discourse". As writing is a productive skill, the instructor has to exploit all ways and means that can serve to produce better writers. A number of studies (Jonopolous, 1992; Santos, 1988) assert that a lack of grammatical accuracy in writing may impede progress. Accordingly, it is important to help learners reduce their errors by diagnosing their causes. In this paper, the researcher will gather the errors according to the levels of grammar: Word order, morphology of words, classes, phrases and clauses. The question is whether these errors occur because of divergences between L1 and L2 or because of their convergences. Thus the notion of transfer is very controversial, having different meanings to different people. According to Widdowson (1990), although transfer is no longer viewed as the only cause of errors at the structural level, L1 is still a complex, and significant systematic resource for the achievements and synthesis of meaning. In addition, CA (Fox, 1994); Spack (1997) which has focused on characteristics of L1 languages and culture has helped us predict rhetorical errors in writing. It is worth noting that cultural interference can be an obstacle to comprehension. Before the writer goes further, he has to show the difference between errors and mistakes. Both Corder (1967; 1971) and James (1998) define a mistake which can be self corrected while an error cannot. Therefore, errors are systematic, likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner. Hence, only would the teacher or researcher locate them, the learner would not (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Accordingly, the writer will focus on students' errors not mistakes.

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## 2. Rationale of the Study

### 2.1 Significance of the Study

This study is very important for the teacher to help the students predict their errors before committing them. Therefore, it has good teaching implications for the classroom. It seems it is essential that EFL teachers know so well that transfer from L1 to L2 has a great educational value.

### 2.2 Questions and Hypotheses

Is negative L1 transfer/interference the major cause for errors in the English writings of Petra University students?

What are the major errors of senior students of the English Department may commit?

### 2.3 Objectives

This article provides a theoretical background for (1) error analysis, (2) models for error analysis, (3) sources of errors; identification, description, categorization and diagnosis of Arabic speakers' errors in English writing in order to locate their sources; discussion of the implications of the findings for teaching EFL to Arab students, and finally discussing the limitations of this study and the conclusion.

### 2.4 Definitions

#### 2.4.1 Interlingual/Transfer errors:

Those attributed to the native language (NL). There are interlingual errors when the learner's L1 habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent him/her, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (Corder, 1971). Interference (negative transfer) is the negative influence of the mother language (L1) on the performance of the target language learner (L2). It is "those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one Language.

Error analysis emphasizes "the significance of errors in learners' interlanguage system" (Brown, 1994, p. 204). The term *interlanguage*, introduced by Selinker (1972) refers to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learner's L1 and the target language. Nemser (1974, p. 55) refers to it as the *Approximate System*, and Corder (1967) as the *Idiosyncratic Dialect or Transitional Competence*.

## 3. Related Literature

Corder (1974) claims that by analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching. Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors made in the target language. He further contends that these errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. Gass and Selinker (2008) define errors as "red flags" that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the foreign language.

James (1998) states that since comparison depends on description, there exists an implicational relationship between contrastive analysis and linguistic theoretical models. He further proposes a framework of three phases: (1) division of language into 3 smaller units and more manageable areas: the levels of phonology, lexis, grammar. (2) The use of linguistic descriptive categories: use, structure, class and system. (3) A contrastive analysis utilizes descriptions arrived at the same model of language. Similarly, Lock (1996) introduces four levels of language

analysis: phonology, lexis, grammar and semantics. Grammar is further divided into four aspects: word order, structure of words and parts of speech. These aspects will be dealt with in the error analysis.

According to Corder (1967) these errors are used to be flaws need to be eradicated. For learners themselves, errors are indispensable since the making of these errors can be considered as a device that the learner uses in order to learn.

While Gass & Selinker (1994) define errors as “red flags” that provide evidence of the learner’s knowledge of the foreign language. Researchers took interest in studying errors because they are strategic for the learners to use to acquire a language (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975; Dulay and Burt, 1974).

The investigation of errors can be at the same time diagnostic, and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner’s state of language (Corder, 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on basis of the learner’s current problems. Richard & Simpson (1974) enumerates seven sources of errors: Language transfer, which is the core of this article. It is claimed that one-third of the deviant sentences can be attributed to the source language.

**Intra-lingual interference**, Richards (1974, p. 174) illustrates four types and causes for intralingual errors: **Overgeneralization**: is associated with redundancy reduction. It covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language. It may be the result of the learner reducing his linguistic burden.

**Ignorance of rule restrictions**: i.e., applying rules to contexts to which they do not apply.

**Incomplete application of rules**: semantic errors such as building false concepts/systems: i.e., faulty comprehension of distinctions in the TL.

**Sociolinguistic Situation**: motivation (instrumental or integrative) and settings for language learning (compound or co-ordinate bilingualism) may affect second language learning.

**Age**: learning capacities vary with age.

**Successions of approximate systems**: since the circumstances of language learning vary from person to person, so does the acquisition of new lexical, phonological, and syntactic items.

The studies relating to the process of language transfer and overgeneralization received considerable attention in literature. Swan and Smith (1995, p. ix) give a detailed account of errors made by speakers of nineteen different L1 backgrounds in relation to their native languages. Diab (1996) also conducted a study in order to show through error analysis the interference of the mother-tongue, Arabic, in the English writings of EFL students at Petra University. Okuma (1999) studies the L1 transfer in the EFL writings of Japanese students.

Habash (1982) studies common errors in the use of English prepositions in the written work of UNRWA students at the end of the preparatory cycle in the Jerusalem area and finds out that more errors were attributable to interference from Arabic than to other learning problems.

#### 4. Methods and Procedures

Now the writer proceeds to methods and procedures used in dealing with error analysis. Ellis (1995, pp. 51–52) gives us guidelines of the procedures of collecting data. Students who are under study are in the junior class of Petra University, majoring in English and studying syntax and report writing. They have been studying English at the university level for at least three years. It is worth noting that these students’ mother tongue is Arabic except one who is Russian.

#### 4.1 Error Identification and Categorization

The first step, we develop, is based on the literature (Corder, 1974; Richards, 1974; James, 1998; Selinker, 1972 in Richards, 1974; Richards & Sampson, 1974), a Taxonomy for Error Analysis including the following categories and sub-categories: **grammatical** (prepositions, articles, reported speech, singular/plural, adjectives, relative clauses, irregular verbs, tenses, and possessive case), **syntactic** (coordination, sentence structure, nouns and pronouns, and word order), **lexical** (word choice), **semantic, & substance** (mechanics: punctuation & capitalization, and spelling).

#### 4.2 Examples of Negative L1 Transfer Errors

These errors are related to the transfer of L1 system to L2.

#### 4.3 Grammatical Errors

I congratulate her on her success. أهنئها لنجاحها

##### 4.3.1 Prepositions

**They** pose a great difficulty for an EFL learner since there are various prepositions in English that have the same function. As a result, when students are not sure which preposition to use in a certain sentence, they often compare that sentence with its Arabic equivalence as shown above, giving a literal translation of that Arabic preposition in English., using, “for” instead of “on”. An Arabic preposition may be translated by several English prepositions while an English usage may have several Arabic translations (Scott and Tucker, 1974, p. 85).

##### 4.3.2 Articles

Honesty is \*virtue. (الأمانة فضيلة) omission of the article in Arabic

When **\*the\*** evil comes ( عندما يأتي الشر ) => use of article in Arabic

In English, abstract words referring to ideas, concepts “attributes” or qualities are used without the article “the” to refer to that idea or concepts, etc. which belong to everybody or everything. In Arabic, however, such abstract words are preceded by a definite article equivalent to “the” in English. Hence, errors pertaining to the misuse of the article “the” occur (Diab, 1996).

Calling others students to come (مناداة البنات الأخريات؟)

##### 4.3.3 Adjectives

“In Arabic, adjectives agree in number with the nouns they modify. As a result, agreement errors of this type occur in the English writings of Jordanian students” (Diab, 1996).

#### 4.4 Syntactic Errors

Among the frequent syntactic errors are those of word order, coordination and omission of the copula. A common syntactic error that Jordanian students commit as a result of transfer is wrong word order. In English attributes precede the nouns they modify. However, in Arabic, they generally follow them.

Here are three pairs very delicious. Instead of: Here are three delicious pairs.

A similar mistake occurs with the use of adverbs as an adverb that modifies an adjective or another adverb generally precedes that adjective or adverb. However, in Arabic, this is not the case. Hence students write the following:

Every person almost has a laptop. Instead of Almost every person has a laptop.

Following the Arabic word order.

##### 4.4.1 Coordination

In English, items in a series are separated by commas, and the coordinate conjunction “and” is used just before the last word. On the other hand, in Arabic, each item in a series is preceded by the conjunction “wa”, which is equivalent to “and”. Accordingly, the following sentence is correct in Arabic:

I bought a pen and a pencil and a copybook and a ruler, but quite anomalous in English.

...Most people when they grow up (معظم الناس حين يكبرون.....) (also colloquial)

In Arabic, personal pronouns are often added to verbs.

#### 4.4.2 Omission of the Copula

There is no copula in Arabic at the surface structure; therefore, Arab students neglect the use of copula in English structures. For example:

The garden beautiful instead of The garden is beautiful.

This is a common mistake whose source is the mother tongue.

### 4.5 Lexical Errors

Owing to students' restricted vocabulary, they often translate words from Arabic to express a certain idea in English, unaware of English collocations, that is, word “A” in a certain English sentence coexists with word “B” and not with “C” even though “B” and “C” may be synonymous. Hence the student has to decide which one collocates with the meaning expressed in the sentence. For examples:

If I lie to my wife, she would **loose** trust in me. Here students do not transfer this from the source language. But note the following:

When I divorce my wife, I have to pay her **rent**. طلاق لي زوجتي يتوجب علي دفع نفقتها

Another example is:

شهادة الزواج يقال لها وثيقة نكاح في السعودية In Saudi Arabia and if the marriage certificate is literally translated, it will be “|Fuck” document or “love-making certificate.

Patients should have physicians describe medicine to their patients

Animals are usually very afraid of **high sounds**. (أصوات عالية؟)

For me achieving these goals makes me happy. بالنسبة لي.....)

However each person must **succeed to his ability** حسب قدرته

In my free time I will **practice** on improving my basketball fundamentals. (أتمرن على.)

### 4.6 Semantic Errors: Literal Translation

Semantic errors occur when students use literal translation to convey in English Arabic expressions, idioms or proverbs. The outcome is as follows:

\*I cut a promise to do better in discourse analysis next time.

Instead of: I promise you to do better in discourse analysis next time

\*My cousin made an accident and could not study.

Instead of: My cousin had an accident.

\*By accomplishing these plans, I will **insure myself** an outstanding life.

Instead of: By accomplishing these plans, I will have a life insurance policy.

### 4.7 Capitalization (No Capital Letters in Arabic)

Lack of capitalization in the Arabic alphabet and punctuation conventions are different. No distinction is made between upper and lower cases

Thus, the errors were explained in grammatical terms, and thoroughly examined to find their sources, paying particular attention to negative L1 transfer, since we needed to address our research question: “Is negative L1 transfer/interference the major cause for errors in the English writings of Petra University students?” Being myself a native Arabic speaker holding a PhD degree in applied linguistics based on the literature, the writer is able to perceive and pinpoint the errors due to L1 (Arabic) Transfer. (However, the writer should not forget that some errors are caused by interference from standard Arabic and others by interference from colloquial Arabic.)

In addition, since I have been teaching English as a second language for over 30 years, and since I have finished the coursework for my MA degree in Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language, I am able to detect the developmental errors in my students’ essays.

## 5. Implications

Corder (1967, p. 5) claims that “We cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way”.

Petra University students, according to this study, face two kinds of problems in essay writing: Translation from Arabic, their mother tongue & incomplete learning of essay writing rules and conventions. What should we, teachers, do then? First, it would be very useful to increase the number of assignments for the sake of which the students would have to do a lot of research during their free time, hence they would be reading a lot of English material and thinking in English, especially if they have to make oral presentations for their work. In addition, if we implement Team Work in class there are some useful guidelines on this site and we get the students to work in groups on their projects, they would have to practise together for their oral presentations, and speak English with each other instead of Arabic. Besides, they would, hopefully, correct each other’s mistakes.

As for the writing rules and conventions, these need to be “enforced” much earlier. All teachers (from grade 1 and on) would need to get together in order to try to solve this problem. In the meantime, that would help the students be more accurate, but still, nothing can replace Essay Writing itself in order to improve writing. The aforementioned project/presentation assignments are good, but they are not enough. The students need to write in class, at home, in their journals... They need to be given some well defined Essay Writing Rules (for the thesis statement, introduction, conclusion, transition words, etc...), and some samples of their writings need to be transcribed and distributed to them for correction and analysis: they would be learning from their mistakes! In brief, we definitely have to adapt ourselves and our curriculum to their needs.

## 6. Limitations & Suggestions for Further Studies

“We should be aware that different types of written material may produce a different distribution of error or a different set of error types” (Corder, 1974, p. 126). We need to keep all these facts in mind when conducting an error analysis and reaching conclusions on which we would base all our teaching. Besides, this study was conducted on a small number of students, and also on a very limited number of essays. Therefore, the conclusions reached are far from being decisive.

We consider this study a preliminary one that just “gives an idea” of those Petra University students’ sources of errors. It should set the pace for other studies which would be much more comprehensive, covering a bigger number of students and a wider range of materials; we hope to be able to conduct one in the near future.

## 7. Conclusion

James (1998, p. 204) maintains that, “Humans are prone not only to commit language errors themselves, but also to err in their judgments of those errors committed by others” We need to be careful when conducting an error analysis study. This study attempts to identify, describe, categorize, and diagnose the errors in English essay writing of the Arabic speaking Jordanian students. Just as Richards (1979) and Brudhiprabha (1972) found that only one-third of the second language learners’ errors could be attributed to native language (NL) language transfer, this is what this study has come up with. Most of the errors are caused by an over-application of L<sub>2</sub>. We do need to incite our students to speak English at home and with their friends in order to reduce the number of mistakes due to Negative L1 transfer, but we also need to try to teach more effectively the rules and conventions of writing.

However, when trying to solve these problems, we need to bear in mind that “L2 users’ knowledge of a second language is not the same as that of native speakers even at advanced levels. L2 users’ knowledge of their first language (L<sub>1</sub>) is not the same as that of monolingual native speakers. L2 users think in different ways to monolinguals. Trying to get students to be like native speakers is ineffective; their minds and their knowledge of language will inevitably be different. The benefits of learning a second language are becoming a different kind of person, not just adding another language. The main obstacle to setting the successful L<sub>2</sub> user as the goal is the belief that the native speaker speaks the true form of English. This implies the comparison of one group with another: the language of non-natives has always to be compared with that of natives; anything that deviates is wrong. For other areas of language study, William Labov established that it is discrimination to treat one group in terms of another group that they can never belong to, whether women as men, black Americans as white Americans, or working-class as middle-class. People must be allowed to be what they are when this is an unchangeable effect of birth or of early up-bringing.

An appropriate goal for many students is then using the L2 competently for their own purposes and in their own ways, which may very well not be the same as those of a monolingual native speaker and indeed may not involve native speakers at all. Students can become successful L2 users rather than forever “failing” the native speaker target (Cook, 1999).

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