The Influence of the Arabic Sentence Structure on the EFL Students' Writing in Al al-Bayt University: An Analytic Study

Kifah Rakan Alqadi, Ph.D

Department of English Language and Literature,
Al al-Bayt University, JORDAN.

kifah_alqadi2014@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims at analyzing the writing productions of the EFL students at Al al-Bayt University, in the city of Mafraq in the north of Jordan, in the Writing (1) course that is taught during the first semester of the academic year 2019/2020. The researcher analyzed the content of the students' writing assignments through the whole semester, shedding light on the following aspects: Types of sentences, using verbs To Be, using present perfect, using articles and using relative pronouns and relative clauses. The analysis of the EFL students' writings showed that some of students use the Arabic word order to produce English sentences by starting with the verb instead of beginning with the subject which is a noun or a noun phrase. In addition, verbs To Be were often dropped in the English sentences. Also, there was difficulty in producing sentences in which the perfect aspect is used since it is not found in Arabic. Moreover, students made mistakes in using articles, whether definite or indefinite. Finally, some students committed mistakes in using the relative clauses and the use of the relative pronouns. The researcher presented some pedagogical recommendations at the end of the study.

Keywords: Arabic Sentence Structure, EFL Students' Writing, Al al-Bayt University.

INTRODUCTION

In learning any foreign language, most learners are unconsciously affected by their first language or as it is called their mother tongue. The influence might be positive in the case of common similarities between the native language and the target language; on the other hand, the influence might be negative and this occurs in the case of differences between the two languages.

The core of this study relies on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) that is based on the claim that the difficulty of second language acquisition can be predicted according to the degree of difference between the first and second languages. Lado (1957) in *Linguistics across Cultures* states that similarities between languages simplify acquiring a second language whereas differences cause difficulties; and that is what is known as the weak version of Contrastive Analysis. The strong version of the hypothesis is viewed in the prediction of the mistakes that might be committed by L2 learners due to these differences.

Differences become more difficult and challenging when the two languages, i.e. the native language and the target language, belong to two language families. For instance, Arab learners of English may confront more difficulties than German learners of English. Similarly, English learners of Arabic may face more difficulties in learning Arabic language than Hebrews who learn Arabic do. This is due to the fact that English and German languages belong to the Germanic language family whereas Arabic and Hebrew languages belong to the Semitic language family.

The researcher, as an EFL teacher at a public university in Jordan, recognized that EFL students repeat mistakes related to types of sentences in both languages, the usage of verb to be, the usage of present perfect, the usage of articles, and the usage of relative pronouns and relative clauses. They commit these mistakes when they write their assignments and tests through the whole semester. Such errors emerge as an expected result of the radical differences between English and Arabic; as it is known in contrastive linguistics, differences produce or result in difficulties, and difficulties cause errors accordingly.

Review of Related Literature

Thyab (2016) conducted a study that investigates the mother tongue interference in the acquisition of English articles by L1 Arabic students. She concludes that learning English articles by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic emphasizes the importance of Contrastive Analysis. She justifies that by referring to the fact that Arabic L1 speakers counter huge difficulty while attempting to use English articles. The source of such difficulty is based on the degree of difference between the Arabic article system and the English article system.

Alroudhan (2016) investigated the challenges faced by Arab adult learners of English as a foreign language in acquiring English restrictive relative clauses (RRCs), as well as the factors that affect the process of acquisition. Her study discussed the syntactic structure of RRCs in English and Arabic with regard to the use of resumptive pronouns and the use of overt versus covert relative makers as related to the definiteness of the head noun. The study concluded that participants accepted the use of resumptive pronouns and preferred the overt relative markers determined by definiteness.

Negative transfer of L1 on L2 was clear in Zagood and Juma (2012) and Shaheen (2013) studies that investigated the first languages' interference on acquiring the relative clauses by Arab learners of English as a foreign language.

Crompton (2011) discussed the article error in the English writing of the advanced L1 Arabic learners and the role of transfer. He , in his article, describes an enquiry into article system errors in a corpus of English writing by tertiary-level L1 Arabic speakers; then he compares frequencies of articles with those in native English and non-native English speaker corpora. He found that the most common errors involve mis-use of the definite article for generic reference; the researcher states that the strong likelihood that these errors are caused by L1 transfer, rather than an interlanguage developmental order, is argued by a comparison of the forms of generic reference in English and Arabic.

Alasfour (2018) investigated the effect of first language (L1) transfer on Arabic ESL learners' acquisition of the relative clauses, the passive voice and the definite article. She used Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA) to analyze Arab learners' writing of English as a second language at the ACTFL Advanced Mid proficiency level. The researcher presented teaching implications that include familiarizing language instructors with possible sources of errors for Arabic ESL learners. She also recommended adopting a CA-informed instruction to help students reduce and overcome errors that are influenced by their L1.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The researcher's aim of the present study is to shed light on the common mistakes that EFL students at Al al-Bayt University usually commit while writing their Writing (1) assignments; which are represented mainly as single paragraphs and rarely as separate sentences. She also attempts to present some pedagogical implications that can be benefited from in the field of teaching English as a foreign language.

PROCEDURES

1) The researcher will ask students (70 male and female students who are enrolled in the Writing 1 course) to write different assignments on various topics through the semester that lasts for approximately three months.

2) The researcher will analyze the mistakes that the students make in the aspects of (Sentence Type, Verbs to Be, Present Perfect, Articles, Relative Pronouns and Clauses).

3) The researcher will clarify which aspect is the most dominant in committing the mistakes.

4) The researcher will justify the reasons beyond making these mistakes.

5) The researcher will present some pedagogical recommendations.

Category

The writing assignments of the EFL students in the Writing (1) course at Al al-Bayt University.

Units

1. Types of sentences
2. Using verbs to be
3. Usage of present perfect
4. Using articles
5. Using relative pronouns and relative clauses.

Limitations of the Study

The present study is limited to the students who study English as a foreign language in Al al-Bayt University in Mafraq city in Jordan in the first semester of the academic year 2019/2010.

Sample

It is one of the three sections of Writing (1) course that are taught on the first semester in the academic year 2019/2020. The number of the sample participants is 70 and the number of the assignments is 10 written by each student.

RESULTS

After correcting the writing of the EFL students, the researcher analyzed the errors committed by them in their assignments; moreover, she classified these errors into different categories among which verb to be, relative clause, articles, present perfect and types of sentences are focused on. There appeared other types of errors related to different aspects of the language, but the emphasis of the study was only on the categories mentioned above. The correction of the students' papers was gradual, which means that the instructor, and the researcher at the same time, investigated and corrected the papers all through the term since the assignments are part of their Term Work grade. These assignments were written in different classes through the semester and were corrected gradually.

In (Types of Sentences), few students used the Arabic sentence structure (Word Order) that is divided into two main types: Verbal sentence versus nominal sentence. They start their sentences by using verbs at the beginning e.g. (use many people technology nowadays) instead of (many people use technology nowadays); in such examples the students used the Arabic word order to produce English sentences. Others started with the verb without mentioning the agent or the subject who did the action e.g. (went to the university) to say (I

went to university), that is because in Arabic, they say (ذهبت إلى الجامعة) in which the verb is followed by the subject which is a pronoun that is attached to the verb. In Arabic, the verbal sentence starts with a verb; the nominal sentence starts with noun that is called (Topic) and then followed by another noun, nominal sentence, verbal sentence or an adverb of time or place that is called (Comment) or (Predicate).

In using articles in their writing, the students misused the definite as well as the indefinite articles. The system of using articles in Arabic is different from it in English. The definite article (The) is used in various contexts that are apparently different from those in Arabic; in English the definite article is used with unique nouns, musical instruments, definitions…etc. In Arabic for example the generic nouns are used with the definite article e.g. (الحياة) which means (life) but in Arabic it is used with the definite article, opposite to the English language in which the noun is used without the definite article. An example from the students' writing is (say hi when you see them in street), in this sentence, the student should write (in the street). The indefinite article has no correspondent in Arabic; the students most of the time do not use the (a/an) indefinite articles that precede words that start with consonant sounds and words that start with vowel sounds respectively e.g. *a man* and *an apple.* For example, they wrote sentences such as : *He is good and intelligent boy, My uncle lives in city, They expect to have baby.* These examples lack the obligatory indefinite article (a) that modifies the indefinite singular countable nouns (boy, city and baby) respectively. The indefinite nouns and adjectives in Arabic are nunated i.e. inflected by one of the three vowel diacritics indicating that the word ends in an alveolar nasal (n) without the addition of the letter (noon / N). For instance, they say (رأيت رجلا في الشارع) to mean (I saw a man in the street), the noun / rajulan / which means (a man) is nunated; simultaneously, the definite article (ال) is not used since the noun is indefinite (نكرة).

Another difficulty that the EFL students in this study faced is the use of Verb To Be. As known, verbs to be are not used in Arabic whereas in English there are: is, are, am, was, were, been, being and be. Students wrote sentences such as : *They our neighbors* instead of They are our neighbors, and *I student in university* instead of I am a student in university. The absence of Verbs To Be in the Arabic language created a difficulty in learning English as a foreign language since differences cause difficulties.

The use of the perfect aspect is usually difficult for Arab EFL students. This aspect does not exist in Arabic whether in past, present or future and therefore they make mistakes in producing structures that require this aspect to be used in them. For example, they wrote sentences such as: *I am studying since the morning, they went to the market before I met them, she worked for three hours.* In the previous sentences, students should have used (have been, had gone, has worked) respectively. The researcher, as the teacher who conducted the study, noticed the high degree of neglecting using the perfect aspect in her students' writing in different classes through long semesters since she has started teaching English as a foreign language. Although tenses and their aspects of English were focused on through examples and exercises that are supported by drawing the Time Line, most students failed to recognize when to use the perfect tense and how. Even when they use the (The Verb To Have Family), they did not use the past participle form of the verb after these auxiliaries (*have, has* and *had).*

The relative clause gives additional information about a noun or a noun phrase and it also restricts it. This type of clause usually starts with a relative pronoun like *who, whom, whose, when, where, which or that*; when one of these pronouns modifies or refers to the subject of the sentence, it should be obligatory used whereas when it refers to the object in the sentence, it is optional. The Arab learners of English generally commit mistakes when using these

pronouns e.g. they may produce structures as : *The man bought the car is my friend* or *The course it is a prerequisite is very difficult.*

Moreover, many Arab EFL students would express the sentence(*I met the woman whom you told me about)* as (*I met the woman whom you told me about her)* because in Arabic they say: (قابلت المرأة التي أخبرتني عنها); the third person singular feminine pronoun at the end of the sentence, after the preposition ('an) or (about) is obligatorily used here whereas it is ungrammatical in English. This difference between the two languages usually leads to mistakes in forming sentences, EFL students tend to use the relative pronoun (that) as an alternative for the other pronouns regardless their functions or indications. This tendency was noted by Al-Washali and Hasnain (2013), also Amer (2003) supports this tendency since this pronoun can replace living and non-living things. The researcher noted that some students find difficulty in using the pronouns (whose, whom and when) when they want to modify a precedent referent in the sentence; for example, they may write: *The woman her daughter died was very sad* instead of writing : *The woman whose daughter died was very sad.* The differentiation between (who and whom) is sometimes a problem for some students; this might be due to the fact that a few students do not know that (who) modifies the subject or the agent while the pronoun (whom) modifies the object or the receiver of the action e.g. *The boy who broke the window ran away* versus *The boy whom you met ran away.*

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The researcher at the end of the analysis of the writing productions of her students, presents some recommendations as a conclusion of her experience in teaching Writing courses. First, EFL learners had better be exposed to extra authentic written texts in English that express various purposes and content. Second, Teachers should train students to write more assignments on different topics and patterns of organization. Third, the productions of the students should be discussed in front of the whole class anonymously with concentrating on the common mistakes that are usually committed by the students. Teachers can employ the Portfolio that gathers the students' writing through the whole semester, this helps the students recognize their repeated mistakes and try not to commit them again. In addition, focus should be directed to the sentence structure in English and the differences between the Arabic and English languages should be clarified continuously by giving various examples.

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