

ENGLISH SYNTACTIC ERRORS BY ARABIC SPEAKING LEARNERS: REVIEWED

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0. Introduction

In recent years, applied linguists have been much concerned with the description of linguistic behaviour of the L2 learners labelled as deviant or error. In particular, a technique known as error analysis has been developed by means of which it is claimed access is gained to the transitional competence of the L2 learner thus making the description of the learner's interlanguage and the explanation of the systematic nature of the errors generated by its grammar possible. Such a technique, it seems, plays an important role in understanding the processes that underlies SLA. It figures out statistically the troublesome linguistic areas L2 learner encounters while learning English. These troublesome linguistic areas or errors for short are an inevitable part of the process of SLA. They provide valuable feedback to both teachers and learners regarding learner strategies and progress. They also provide researchers with insights into the nature of the SLA process itself.

The aim of the present paper, by reviewing the studies available is to demonstrate the most general types of syntactic errors Arabic speaking learners encounter in learning English as a foreign language. These types of errors will be presented in the following seven divisions: verbal errors, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, sentence structure, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions.

1. VERBAL ERRORS

Morphological and inflectional errors, which seem to be characteristic of most EFL learners (see Richards, 1971), are excluded here. Errors in the use of tense, phase, aspect, voice, verb-formation, concord, and finite and non-finite verbs will be discussed in this paper.

1.1 *Tense*

Three types were recorded in the literature: tense sequence, tense substitution, and tense marker deletion.

1.1.1 *Tense sequence:*

The literature reported that Arabic speaking learners of English may use present simple with past simple tenses particularly with compound and complex sentences (Scott & Tucker, 1974; Al-Kasimi et al. 1979; Kambal, 1980; El-Badarin, 1982; El-Sayed, 1983):

[1] *They came late yesterday and go directly to the hall.

One can argue here that the error in tense sequence may not be a negative transfer from the mother tongue (MT) since Arabic¹ requires that the same tense be used across such sentences.

1.1.2 *Tense substitution:*

Arabic speaking learners may use simple past tense instead of the simple present (Scott & Tucker, 1974; Mukattash, 1978, 1986; Kambal, 1980; El-Badarin, 1982; El-Sayed, 1983; Meziani, 1984):

[2] *The sun rose from the east.

Or they may use the simple present instead of the simple past (Al-Kasimi et al. 1979; Al-Muarik, 1982; Meziani, 1984):

[3] * Yesterday I has a party that's why the house is in a mess.

The errors instanced in [2] and [3] above, which were most noticeable in compound and complex sentences, seem unlikely to be due to negative transfer from Arabic. Indeed, the linguistic contexts of these examples do require the use of the simple present and the simple past, respectively, in Arabic as is the case in English.

1.1.3 *Tense marker deletion:*

Deletion of the auxiliary *have* or *has* in forming the present perfect was the most common error here (Kambal, 1980; El-Badarin, 1982):

[4] *He just gone to the market.

1.2 Phase

Arabic speaking learners use erroneously non-perfective instead of the perfective or avoid using it as a whole (Asfoor, 1978; Kambal, 1980; El-Badarin, 1982; Mukattash, 1986):

[5] *He didn't come until now.

One can admit here that the systems of time sense in the two languages concerned, i.e. English and Arabic, are very different (Al-Bouq, 1988). For example, Arabic has fewer restrictions on agreement between tenses across clauses than English. This means that it is normally acceptable in Arabic to switch from one tense to another, while in English a switching of this sort is considered a deviation. For example, the Arabic sentence /raʔaytuhu min qabl/ can be translated to mean: (1) 'I saw him before,' or 'I have seen him before.' This may explain the fact that the Arabic speaking learner is not restricted in his choice of verbs, as noted above, and, as a result, he tends to transfer into English the freedom of choice in this regard.

1.3 Aspect

The literature reported cases where Arab learners failed to use the progressive, and used instead the non-progressive (El-Badarin, 1982; Mukattash, 1986):

[6] *They aren't cause difficulties to us.

Mukattash (1986) maintains that his subjects (Arab EFL university students) "tended to use the progressive" in example [6] above "instead of the non-progressive" (p.193).

Asfoor (1978), however, found that some of his subjects (Ss) used the progressive aspect (-ing) of certain verbs instead of the present tense:

[7] *I am not understanding the lesson.

The errors in [6] and [7] above are examples of negative transfer from MT. While the verb 'cause' in [6] does not occur in the progressive aspect in Arabic, 'understand' in [7] is allowed to be used in the progressive aspect. Consider the following example:

[8] English: I understand my lesson today.
 Arabic equivalent: /ʔnaa faahim darsee al-yawm/
 English translation: I'm understanding my lesson today.

In the English translation the Arabic verb /faahim/ is assigned to the form 'understanding' which is the progressive aspect of the verb 'understand' in English. Since this verb form is not allowed to be used in this aspect and context, the Arabic speaker is thus considered to be making an error as a result of violating this rule.

1.4 *Voice*

The Arabic speaking learners of English found active sentences less problematic than the passive ones. This let some of these learners avoid using the passive (Kleinmann, 1977; Schachter, 1979; El-Badarin, 1982). On the other hand, some studies reported two types of deviations these learners encounter while constructing the passive: (1) adding an appropriate (tensed) form of *be* but not adding the past participle form of the main verb (Kambal, 1980; Al-Muarik, 1982; El-Badarin, 1982; Schachter, 1992):

[9] *Oil was discover in the 19th century.

and (2) using the past participle form of the main verb, but no form of *be* is added (Kambal, 1980; Al-Muarik, 1982; El-Badarin, 1982; Mukattash, 1986; Schachter, 1992):

[10] *But when oil discovered in 1948 and began export it.

One can argue here that the error under discussion is due mainly to L1 influence: in Arabic the passive form is derived from the active form by means of internal vowel change (e.g. /shariba/ → /shuriba/ = drank → drunk).

1.5 *Verb-formation*

1.5.1 *Copula deletion:*

The most frequent type of deviation Arab speakers encounter in forming the English verb is the deletion of the copula (Scott & Tucker, 1974; Asfoor, 1978; Mukattash, 1978, 1986; Assubaijai, 1979; Beck, 1979; Al-Kasimi et al. 1979; Kambal, 1980; Sharma, 1981; Al-Muarik, 1982; El-Badarin, 1982; Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983; Abu Ghararah, 1989):

[11] *You said you not tired.

[12] *He intelligent.