The Grammatical Impact of EFL Arabic Learners' Mother Tongue in English Writing of Al-Mergib University Students

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Article Info

Abstract

The process of second language learning has been influenced by so many factors, the mother tongue (L1) maybe the one of the greatest factors. When the rules of the two languages contact that is called 'language transfer'. Two results might be caused when the second language learner tries to recall one of his/her mother tongue's items: positive transfer or negative transfer. In this study, the researcher focuses on the negative transfer or mother tongue interference in English writing. A big number of linguists have researched the influence and the relationship between L1 and L2 learning. Many studies indicate that for EFL students, there tends to be interference from their first language in the process of writing in English. This paper mainly focuses on some factors of the grammatical, namely subject-verb agreement, tenses, articles and prepositions, influence of L1 "Arabic" in L2 "English" writing learning, and the L1 transfer to English writing. The participants of this study were 22 Libyan third-year students of English Department in Al-Mergib University. In the data collection period, the students were required to write an essay in English and to do fill-the-blanks test then the gathered data were analyzed qualitatively. The findings showed that the participants clearly recalled structures, thought and translated from their mother tongue in their English writing in all the studied items: subject-verb agreement, tenses, articles and prepositions. The students also showed other grammatical errors such as: missing verb to be, use of word order, wrong spelling and plurality case. Teachers then should include more free and controlled writing exercises and should vary their teaching methods to improve students writing abilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Many researchers believe that writing demands a great deal of skills and conventions such as writing readiness and grammatical rules for the students to become proficient and effective writers. However, there are factors that influence students to produce effective paragraph or composition in writing skills. Language is systematically organized by its grammar, which is connected tightly or linked to meaning and communication, so it cannot make sense without shaping grammatical and linguistic structures.

There are many factors that affect students' written English. One of the main factors that may many teachers neglect, which is students' native language (L1) interfering in English writing. (Noor, H 2007), explained the influence of native language structures on students' performance and development in the target language. That happens when the rules of the two languages contact, it is likely for their own protecting functions to resist that is called language transfer. Two results might be caused when one language rules try to conquer the ones of another language: first result is positive transfer or negative transfer when learners apply the knowledge and skills of their native to the second language; the second result is when the second language rules conquer the learners' native language, the linguistic proficiency of the second language learners' has enabled him/her to overcome the negative transfer. It is evident for the beginner to transfer their own language rules to the second language because the protecting function of their mother tongue has rooted in learners' mind.

Negative transfers usually known as 'interference', when the experience in one language complicates the use of another language. Interference is defined as errors in the learner's use of a foreign language, which can be traced back to the mother tongue (Dulay& Burt, 1977). Language interference can be understood as a process when one language has an impact on another language and when individual is experiencing language transfer. On one hand, interference can effect in a positive as well as in a negative way. Though the greater the difference between the two languages, the more negative effects of interference are expected to be. We should take into account that languages with more similar structures are more likely to be exposed to mutual interference than languages with fewer similar features. Here it should be noted that more learning difficulties might be expected when L2 is more distant from L1, as the learner would find it difficult to learn and understand a completely new and different usage. As a result, the learner would resort L1 structures for help.

The present research focuses on the effect of first language grammar on the learning of second language writing. The first language of this study is Arabic language and the target language is English. In other words, this study focuses on Libyan learners of English as a foreign language in terms of the principles of grammatical items transfer, particularly in the following grammar items: subject- verb agreement, tenses, articles and prepositions.

L1 interference is a phenomenon that makes it more difficult for second language learner to master the target language. The hypothesis of language interference stems from the "overwhelming evidence that language transfer is indeed a real and central phenomenon that must be considered in any account of the second language acquisition process" (Ellis, 1997). Language interference, according to Dulay et al (1982), is defined as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. In other words, interference is defined, according to James, (2005), as errors in the learner's production of the target language which result from the influence of the mother tongue. That is, second language learners tend to rely on their native language (L1) structures to produce a response whenever writing the target language (L2). Ellis (1997) suggests that the further apart the two languages are structurally, the higher the instances of errors made in L2

which bear traces of L1 structures. Thus, it is expected that there should be high influence of Arabic language on Arabic speaking learners of English language. The interference may result from a strategy on the part of the learner, which assumes or predicts equivalence, both formally and functionally, of two items or rules sharing either function or form (Kupferberg, &Olshtain, 1996).

Differences between L1 and L2 writing processes receive insufficient attention which resulted in the misunderstanding of the L2 writing aspects and hence, downgrading the writing skills of L2 writers. In the domain of L2 writing, one consistent and salient characteristic, which is fundamentally distinct from L1 writing processes, is that L2 writers, either "skilled" or "unskilled", switch back and forth between their L1 and L2 in order to work through a particular problem that they are struggling with while composing in the L2. Previous studies show that L2 writers use their L1 to plan their writing for text generation (Cumming, 1989; Jones &Tetroe, 1987), transfer their L1 knowledge to L2 writing contexts (Edelsky, 1982; Friedlander, 1990; Lay, 1982) and develop ideas and produce text content and organization (Lay, 1982). In short, L2 writers always make use of their L1 first, while composing in the L2 before translating it to L2. This shows that L1 influence the L2 writer in their process of writing in L2 and the influences can be positive or negative.

Several researches have focused on the effects of L1 and then translating into the L2 (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Kobayashi &Rinnert, 1992). These researches have indicated that lower L2 proficiency writers benefited from composing in the L1 and then translating into the L2, a result that highlights the importance of using L1 composing strategies for lower L2 proficiency writers. Similarly, Woodall (2002) found that L1 use is determined by the learners' L2 proficiency level, which means that less proficient learners repeatedly switch to L1 while writing in an L2 when they face task difficulty. Wang (2003) has also asserted that less proficient students frequently switch to L1 while writing in an L2 writing classes.

Writing in a second language is complex (Bowen and Mark, 1994, Kroll, 1990, Smith, 2001; Hyland, 2003). Khuwaileh (1995) found that Arab students primarily translate ideas from their native language into English. Drawn from this point was a sort of negative transfer. Hussein and Mohammad (2012) similarly contend that Arab learners tended to compose words and sentences in their L1 and then translate them into the L2, which lead the students to make different errors in grammar aspects, such as subject-verb agreement, adjective order, omit articles, choosing inconvenient preposition, misuse of tenses, etc.

Similar to other EFL writing learners, Libyan students suffer from negative L1 transfer when they write in L2. Errors found in written English are apparent among college students. Arabic and English are almost different languages. The differences are found in morphology (e.g., verb, noun), lexis (e.g., word choice, pronoun,), syntax (e.g., sentence structure), mechanics (e.g., punctuation) as well as article and noun endings (e.g., plural/ possessive). These problems, however, are not particular to Libyan students, but can be generalized to the majority of Arabic- speaking learners of English (investigations carried out by Kaplan 1966, Dudley-Evans and Swales 1980, Karma and Hajjaj 1989, AbiSamra 2003, Bennoudi 2007, Badri 2009). Such a situation is obvious when an Arab student writing in English attempts to bring his knowledge of the first language to bear on the English writing mode.

Khuweileh (1995) found that Arab students usually think to prepare their ideas in their native language and then translate them into English, which results in a negative transfer of unsatisfactorily written samples. More recently, Ridha (2012) used an error analysis study to investigate the effect of EFL learners' L1 on their written English. After describing and diagnosing the writing errors of Iraqi EFL college students, she found most of the errors could be attributed to L1 transfer, as can be seen

in the following example: "I cut a promise to help other people." Many of the learners relied on their mother tongue to express ideas.

METHODS

The participants of the study were Libyan third-year students of English Department of Al-Mergib University, and they all speak Arabic as their first language. They were chosen purposively in order to develop an in-depth understanding related to the grammatical influence of the participants' L1 in their English writing. The study conducted at the third-year of English language Department, so the participants in this study are expected to be English teachers. Thus, they should aware the interference of mother tongue in their own writing, also to help their students to avoid transferring some grammar rules from their mother tongue in the future.

The researcher prepared and administered a writing test in form of writing an essay test and fill-the-blanks test. The participants were given the freedom to choose any topic of their choice. Then, they were asked to write an essay from 120 to150 words within one hour during their English period. Each student chooses a topic to write an essay from some option topics that will be provided by the researcher, and all the students should answer the questions of fill-the-blanks by choosing one right answer between brackets. These tasks given to the participants to test how far the L1 influences their writing skill. The students' compositions were read by the researcher in an attempt to analyze the errors committed by the subjects of the present study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Since the main objective of this research is to study the grammatical influence of the mother tongue in English writing and the study seeks further to identify the implications of the negative influence errors, which committed by first-year of English language Department in Al-Mergib University when writing English essays. The results revealed that these students' essays contain many grammatical errors, caused by their L1, in the areas that the present study focus namely; subject-verb agreement, tenses forms, use of articles and use of prepositions. The results found out that there were other grammatical errors such as: missing verb to be, use of word order, wrong spelling and plurality case. These results concur with the previous results mentioned in the previous studies part since many researchers claim that the reason of committing writing errors among non-native speakers of English is the L1 interference. The reason for these results might be related to Arabic interference and negative transfer of the mother tongue rules as well as the overgeneralization of rules.

While discussing the influence of first language 'Arabic' over the second language 'English', it is appropriate to mention what Lado (1971) who had said that those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult. In this context, it is evident that the language teacher and language learners should ideally know the structures of both the mother tongue and the second languages. Such knowledge can help the language teacher to identify the areas of influence of mother tongue on the second language and also to develop some teaching techniques to rectify the interference.

The findings in the data showed that there was interference and negative influence of mother tongue in the writing of L2. The writing analysis clearly showed that majority of the sentences constructed in the writings were to the grammatical patterns of the mother tongue.

CONCLUSION

As a result, a number of different grammatical errors were found in their English essays. These were limited to four major errors: tenses form, subject-verb agreement, prepositions and articles. After analyzing the errors, it has been found out that the students make grammatical errors due to two main reasons: inter-lingual reasons.

It can thus be concluded that Al-Mergib University students still have a long way to go in writing satisfactory English writing. The way they composed their writing clearly shows their weak grasp of the basic tenets of English grammar. It is the responsibility of both syllabus designers and teachers of English to cater for the students' writing skills. The teacher of the university should include more free and controlled writing exercises that would help improve students writing abilities. Teachers should then be more aware of these types of errors that caused by L1 influence and provide the necessary follow up work to check the problem areas as discussed earlier. Hence, it is needed to draw the students' attention on the difference between Arabic and English in the areas where the errors due to negative transfer are recurrent. It implies that some of the participants' problems in English writing can be linked directly to Arabic influence. However, this study dealt with a limited number of the linguistic aspects involved in writing due to the limitations of space and time. Clearly, there is a great deal of work to be done in this area in the future.

The researcher suggested that the teacher can overcome those grammatical L1 influence if the teacher considered the influence of the L1 language throughout the process of writing learning, by using some techniques and procedures. Then the teacher will raise English writing proficiency among the Libyan students of first-year of Al-Mergib University and train students in the classroom about how to think in the foreign language, in this case English, in order to minimize the influence of their mother tongue so as to improve their production in the target language and give students more activities to review grammar items.

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