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Contrastive Analysis of Interlanguage Features of an Arab English as a Second Language (ESL) Speaker

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***Abstract*—This study was an attempt to analyze a collection of data from a second language speaker of English. The data was collected through an interview with an informant, who was an Arab male student in his first year of graduate studies at an American university. The interview lasted about 15 minutes and was recorded in English. The purpose of the interview was to pinpoint the utterances, phrases, or dialogues that contained interlanguage features and explain why those forms might exist. The interlanguage utterances were categorized by topic depending on the type of feature produced. The groups were classified in the following manner: the use of the 3rd person singular *-s*, the use of the plural *-s*, and the use of articles. These forms were then analyzed by considering the possible underlying rule for each feature and developing a pattern by comparing each feature to its correct counterpart. The resulting patterns revealed two main reasons for interlanguage data: attributions to the informant's native language and particular sentence structures in English. The study concludes with suggested future experiments and investigations of the most noticeable interlanguage features as well as suggestions for English language instructors and general teaching practices.**

***Index Terms*—interlanguage, English language learners, ESL, L2 speech, teaching practices**

I. Introduction and Literature Review

In learning English as a second language or a foreign language (ESL/EFL), learners face linguistic challenges in the early stages of their language learning. One of the most prominent challenges is the learners' knowledge of the correct use of grammatical structures. Grammatical errors made by ESL/EFL learners occupy the largest part of their interlanguage utterances and are the most difficult to master. Therefore, analyzing such errors is useful because it shows the level of learners' language acquisition and provides a detailed picture of language learning problems and the reasons for them (Tomlinson, 2011). In addition, understanding these challenges can help language instructors to pinpoint problematic areas, plan their materials accordingly, and provide their students with appropriate feedback—areas of improvement that the current study aims to present.

The contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) is the basis of the second language learner's distinct linguistic forms. The CAH concept was first addressed in Lado's *Linguistics across Cultures* (1957). Lado observed that by systematically comparing the language and culture of the first language (L1) to that of the second language (L2), researchers can describe and account for the patterns that cause difficulty in learning (1957). Lado elaborated on the concept (1957, pp. 1–2):

> In the comparison between native and foreign language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning … Those elements that are similar to [the learner's] native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.

The CAH originates from a behavioral psychology perspective and emphasizes Skinner's (1957) view of language learning as primarily a formation of habits. This habit formation is expressed as the learner's tendency to transfer certain forms from L1 to the production of L2. As Lado (1957) stated, "individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meaning of their first language and culture to the foreign language and culture" (p. 2).

"Interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972) refers to the language produced by L2 learners as they develop distinctive language features in their progress to native competence. This concept has also been described as "language-learner language" (Corder, 1978) and "approximative systems" (Nemser, 1971). These distinctive language features have become important indications of the development of L2 learners' interlanguage (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Systematic errors in L2 production are specific to L2 learners' utterances that distinguish them from those of native speakers of the language. Because L2 learners are not aware of such errors, they are unable to correct them (Corder, 1981). Once these errors are specified, they need to be analyzed and accounted for—a process known as error analysis (Richards, 1985).

A number of studies investigating L2 learners' interlanguage features have been conducted, particularly those involving Arab English language learners. Zughoul (2002) examined the interlanguage syntax of Arabic-speaking learners of English by investigating the noun phrase. That study included 25 Arabic-speaking students learning English, and the data was collected orally. The results showed that the most frequent noun phrase errors involved the redundancy

and omission of both the indefinite and definite articles in different contexts and the confusion in using quantifiers with count and noncount nouns. In another study, Mahmoud (2005) examined collocation errors made by Arab learners of English. Mahmoud collected data from 42 essays written by Arabic-speaking university students majoring in English. The findings revealed errors made by Arab students when producing English collocations, particularly involving lexical combinations. The study revealed that most of these errors were due to interlingual transfer from Arabic. Crompton (2011) investigated the role of L1 transfer in students' use of English articles in writing. The participants were tertiary-level Arabic-speaking students, and the study compared the frequency of article use in corpora between native English speakers and non-native English speakers. The study revealed that the most common error was the incorrect use of the definite article for generic reference. After a comparison of the generic articles' use of English and Arabic, the results of the study that these errors were caused by L1 transfer. Muftah and Rafik-Galea (2013) conducted an error analysis study that focused on the use of the 3rd person singular *-s* by Arab learners of English. That study included Arab undergraduate students learning EFL, and the data was collected using a grammaticality judgment task and an elicited written production task. The findings suggested that Arab students learning English have difficulty using the 3rd person singular *-s* due to L1 interference. The study also showed that the most common types of errors committed by students were substitution, omission, phonological similarities, and incorrect suffixation.

Based on the findings of previous studies on ESL/EFL interlanguage features (particularly those conducted in the Arab context), there appear to be common areas of difficulty facing Arab learners of English. The most salient interlanguage forms investigated were related to syntactical structures and phonology. This might indicate that these areas of interlanguage forms are unique to a particular group of L2 learners of English, such as Arabic-speaking learners. Therefore, researchers should investigate additional instances of these syntactical structures and phonology in particular. This study will focus on some of the syntactic aspects of ESL/EFL interlanguage utterances; namely, the use of the 3rd person singular *-s*, the use of the plural *-s*, and the use of articles. These areas of ESL/EFL interlanguage present a challenge to Arab learners of English that might hinder the correct use of syntactic structures. The form of language production used to collect the data for the study was an oral interview. The purpose was to pinpoint interlanguage features and analyze them to determine their contributing factors. Therefore, the study aimed to:

1- Determine the most salient interlanguage features based on data from an oral interview.
2- Conduct an error analysis of these features and provide an account of factors behind such language forms.
3- Provide suggestions for English language instructors and teaching practices in general.

II. Methods

The study's informant was a 30-year-old Saudi male graduate student attending classes at an American university. He had spent approximately 10 years learning and using ESL. He used English in the classroom for the purpose of his studies as well as outside the classroom, as he was living in the United States at the time of data collection. The data was collected from an oral interview conducted in English. The interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and involved topics such as university courses and learning a new language. The interview was digitally recorded following the informant's consent. The interview was designed to simulate a casual conversation and provide as many opportunities as possible for the informant to talk. The initial purpose was not to elicit particular language forms but to give ample time for the informant to talk freely.

After the recording, the data elicited from the informant's L2 speech was examined to identify interlanguage features. These features were then placed into categories based on their frequency of occurrence and type of ungrammatical use. The data revealed that the informant's most frequent ungrammatical uses in his L2 speech were the use of the 3rd person singular *-s*, the use of the plural *-s*, and the use of articles.

III. Results and Discussion

A. Use of the 3rd Person Singular -s

The interview started with the informant speaking about his courses for the semester—specifically, his language course. The purpose was to focus on his interlanguage utterances and any ungrammaticalities in his speech. The present tense was used correctly almost all of the time, especially for the *-ing* forms. However, for the simple present tense, there were a few instances where the 3rd person singular *-s* was dropped. For example, in *"*Homework surprise me,"* the *-s* was omitted from the verb "surprise" in a simple SVO sentence. In other instances, the informant stated, *"*He want you to take the advantage…"* (which is in a similar structure), *"*What's in his heart, he throw it by his tongue,"* and **"He mean it in a nice way."* Although it is not initially clear what causes such errors in making the present tense with the 3rd person singular *-s*, comparing grammatical utterances with the same tense might account for the errors. The informant used the "BE" forms of the verb correctly, as in **"I am second language learner"*[1] and *"He is the best!"* as well as with short answers in the present tense with auxiliaries, as in *"Yes. It does."* Although these were irregular verbs, their frequent and correlative use might explain the informant's grammatical use. However, more data is necessary to provide instances of the systematicity of their use.

[1] This sentence is marked with an asterisk because it is missing the indefinite article (Discussed in Section *C. Use of Articles*).

On the other hand, the informant failed to use the 3rd person singular -*s* with other regular verbs when they were used as the main verbs in the sentence (as seen above). This was especially apparent when the subject of the sentence was "he" or "she." However, when the informant used "it" as the subject, it yielded a grammatical sentence such as *"It takes a lot of time!"* This could be attributable to the frequent nature and use of the expression *"It takes…"* as a fixed unit at the beginning of the sentence, but, again, more examples and elicited responses are required to confirm this speculation, as it was the only instance of this use obtained from the data.

Considering these examples, it can be inferred that the informant deviates from using the 3rd person singular -*s* in the present tense with verbs other than the BE forms or regular verbs. This is yet to be confirmed in all of the informant's utterances because the information from the interview does not provide enough sentences to determine if this pattern is systematic. However, these findings are in line with a number of previous studies (Assubaiai, 1979; Al-Buainain, 1988; O'Brien, 2003; Muftah & Rafik-Galea, 2013).

A more focused experiment targeting the use of this tense would help identify a clearer pattern and context of the simple present in general. For example, administering a grammaticality judgment task and comparing its result with an elicited written production task targeting the use of the simple present could reveal clearer results of the underlying grammatical knowledge on different levels of language use. This type of experiment would also be essential in comparing other 3rd person singular -*s* with other present tense verbs to try to identify a pattern.

The difficulty of using 3rd person singular -*s* by Arab ESL/EFL learners in particular is due to L1 interference: the corresponding present tense verbs in Arabic do not require such an inflectional morpheme in the suffix position—although "compared to English, words in Arabic are highly inflected" (Ryding, 2014). The 3rd person singular form of the verb in Arabic (the present imperfect tense) requires the inflectional morpheme as a prefix;يـ /ya/ for masculine and تـ /ta/ for feminine. For example:

يكتبُya-ktub-u - He writes (masculine).
تكتبُ ta-ktub-u - She writes (feminine).

B. Use of the Plural -s

It was difficult to uncover the underlying rule for the informant's use of plural nouns. The interview included a number of utterances in which the informant used the plural correctly in one sentence but incorrectly in another. The examples found in the informant's L2 speech showed the use of plurals in sentences with a similar structure. For example:

1. *"We only attended three classes."*
2. *"I only went for three days."*
3. **"I got two disc in my back."*

All of these examples contained a number followed by a count noun. In the first two sentences, both nouns were pluralized. In the third sentence, however, the informant did not include the plural -*s*. It is possible that the informant uses the plural when the noun is the final word in a sentence or to express a thought that he used in other sentences, such as *"I decided to take these classes."* and *"…. to the native speakers."* Another possibility involves the informant's L1. The word "disc" (when pluralized, "discs") will have two consecutive and distinctive sounds; namely, /k/ and /s/. In Arabic, these two sounds rarely occur consecutively, especially in the word's final position. Thus, the informant had two choices for making the plural for this word and for similar words: either to make an epenthesis of a vowel sound between the two, such as */*diskis*/, or to simply not use it at all, which he chose.

Another set of examples reveals an additional error in making plural nouns: using different quantifiers and nouns in the sentence. A possible pattern is apparent in the following examples, in which the nouns that follow quantifiers were not pluralized:

4. *"I have a lot of thing to do"*
5. *"…to learn too much thing"*
6. *"Most of my classmate…"*

In the above sentences, the informant failed to make plural nouns when they followed plural quantifying expressions. In a different instance, the informant ungrammatically used a singular quantifying expression to form a plural sentence:

7. *"One of my friend…"*

The errors may be because the informant's use of quantifiers, even ungrammatically (as in Sentence 5), is a sufficient tool to deliver the plural meaning of the sentence. Another explanation for this interlanguage feature could be that the informant unconsciously constructed the previous sentences, as suggested by the informant having corrected himself, which indicates some attention to speech:

8. *"There are some word, I mean some words…"*

Likewise, the correct use was made in another instance:

9. *"…many similarities…"*

In fact, plural mistakes in the interview were more than their correct equivalents. The most notable difference among these utterances was in the informant's use of one-word quantifiers versus multi-word quantifiers. The informant dropped the plural -*s* when a multi-word quantifier was used, which was not the case with one-word quantifiers. The interview did not provide enough sentences to establish that this was consistent, but this piece of evidence might be an indication. Also, it is uncertain whether this type of error is connected to the informant's L1, particularly because

Arabic does not have an inflectional ending for plurals equivalent to that in English. A lack of frequent exposure and use of the English plural forms could also be a reason for such mistakes. Yet another reason could be the difficulty in understanding and using the different cases of plurals in English and the conditions required for each case, such as using *-s* and *-es* at the end of a noun. These possible explanations require additional responses through elicitation tasks and interviews to formulate a consistent pattern based on sufficient data. For example (and for the purposes of the current study), it would be useful to elicit spoken responses by providing wordless pictures and asking the informant to provide a narrative for them. This approach could identify plural nouns in the informant's L2 speech in their many cases, particularly those related to the use of the plural *-s*, the use of quantifiers, and any phonological features that might appear, and it could help researchers develop a pattern that would explain why such interlanguage features might occur.

C. Use of Articles

This section's focus is on the use of the indefinite article *a*, as the data provided more interlanguage instances of this article than its definite counterpart *the*. The interview data did not involve any use of *an*. There were some sentences where the informant did not use the indefinite article *a* and other sentences in which he used them correctly. The following examples show the indefinite article missing from the sentence:

10. **It's kind of motivation*
11. **It's nice place!*
12. **I have to take third language*
13. **I'm second language learner*
14. **I don't have full idea…*

When compared with correct utterances using the same article, a potential pattern can explain this error. First, the above examples include combinations of prepositional phrase + noun, adjective + nouns, and noun + noun or compound nouns. It appears that the lack of the indefinite article, at least in these examples, only appears in certain structures. In other words, the informant used an interlanguage rule that restricted him from using the indefinite article before these combinations. However, this restriction was not applied in the following sentence:

15. *"He mean it in a nice way!"*

Although it has a similar structure to sentences 10 through 14, this sentence is different in terms of the precedent of the article, which is a set phrase. Unlike the previous sentences where the article was missing after verbs, in this sentence, the article was used after a preposition; notably, it was used in a prepositional phrase rather than in an initial position in the sentence. Another possible explanation is an underlying phonological rule in which the informant inserted a vowel (in this case, the article itself) to separate two same sounds: *"in"* and *"nice."* This is the only example in which the informant used the article correctly in this structure.

Second, the informant correctly used the indefinite article in other sentences that have a different structure than the earlier one. By comparison, these sentences have a less complex structure, which could trigger the correct use of the article. These sentences involve the use of generic nouns:

16. *"He had a conference…"*
17. *"I have seen a video on YouTube…"*

The data also involved a use of the definite article *the* in **"and the English language…."* Although this is the only example of this use in the data, it is notable because of the informant's interlanguage rule that overgeneralized the use of *the* with the proper noun *English.* This could also be attributed to the informant's L1 because the Arabic equivalent of the definite article *the* is normally used with the word *English.* The definite article in Arabic (ـأل) */Āal/* is used at the beginning of the word and prefixed to it to render the noun definite. Therefore, since the word "English" only refers to the widely spoken and known language, it is used with (ـأل) in Arabic to give the definite proper meaning of the noun.

IV. Recommendations for Future Research

This study involved an attempt to analyze the most salient features in the informant's interlanguage data. The analysis focused on three areas: the use of present tense forms, the use of the plural *-s*, and the use of articles. The sentences were chosen based on errors found and whether they had an L1 influence. They were then analyzed by comparing them with correct utterances and trying to develop a pattern for each interlanguage feature.

However, based on a 15-minute interview and due to the limited number of applicable utterances, it is premature to report that the results of the analysis are consistent in the informant's L2 speech. It is also possible that other sociolinguistic, semantic, or pragmatic factors operated during the informant's speech production in general, since each of these areas may be the cause of interlanguage utterances. Future experiments should analyze other forms of interlanguage production, such as writing. It would be useful to determine if the informant's writing skills differ from his speaking skills if he has enough time to plan and produce the language in a written form. This would help answer questions about the types of interlanguage rules in the informant's particular case and about interlanguage in general.

V. Suggestions for English Language Instructors

The findings of the current study showed some interlanguage features in the speech of an Arab L2 speaker of English and provided insight into some of the most common language difficulties facing Arab ESL/EFL speakers. A number of activities can help address these issues and correct errors made by this specific group of English L2 learners:

1. More emphasis should be placed on the use of the 3rd person singular *-s* by highlighting why—and how—to use the morpheme *-s* for the simple present tense. English language instructors can begin by explaining the purpose of using the simple present tense and then focusing on the 3rd person singular.
2. English language instructors should bear in mind the morphological and phonological factors contributing to changes in the 3rd person singular verb, such as suffixes *-s* and *-es*, and changes to the verb form, such as *try* > *tries*. Students could prepare materials, such as a list including verbs with these changes, which would familiarize them with their use and form a habit of using them correctly without thinking too much about underlying rules.
3. Drilling practices (Larsen-Freeman, 1986) are very useful for students in learning the simple present tense, particularly the 3rd person singular *-s*. Repetition and continuous visual exposure to the most common uses of the 3rd person singular *-s*, such as through lists or charts, would guide students toward the systematic and correct use of the language and minimize potential difficulties.
4. Teaching plurals in English should follow the same pattern. Instructors should teach the general plural rules in small groups and in a gradual manner. Students' exposure to plural formation rules, which were particularly problematic areas in this study, should be conducted in frequent intervals with intensive practice.
5. One of the most effective methods of language practice is reading. This is especially true for mastering the rules of the language. Teachers should encourage intensive reading using different materials and platforms. In one study, reading produced significant results in children in learning and using past tense and plurals (Long & Scott, 1976).
6. With plural formation rules, using mnemonic devices is helpful in relating similar nouns, inflections, spellings, pronunciations, and meanings (Al-Jarf, 2022).
7. Teachers should consider the differences between Arabic and English in using articles. They are also encouraged to point this out to their students to establish the boundaries in the use of articles in both languages and to avoid potential errors because these "interlingual errors" are the most common and the most significant (Brown, 1980).

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