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Language Transfer: The case of Arabic as a Foreign Language.

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Abstract

The field of Arabic as a foreign language has not been thoroughly researched. Many foreigners, especially Americans, come to Morocco to study Arabic for many reasons. The difference between learners' mother tongue (L1) and Arabic as a target language (TL) makes the learning process lengthy and challenging. This article tries to investigate how language transfer pushes Arabic L2 learners to produce ungrammatical sentences. To put it succinctly, what is the role of L1 in learning Arabic as an L2/ L3? The results show that learners transfer their L1 setting into the target language. That is, the major source of errors made by Arabic L2 learners is caused by language transfer (overgeneralization and interference).

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Introduction

A wealth of studies in the literature, especially EFL or ESL, have been focused on the role of L1 (or L1 interference) in the process of learning a second language and how much the L1 could influence this process. However, research talking about the role played by L1 transfer (both positive or negative) and UG in learning Arabic SLA is almost rare or absent at all. Most of the time, language transfer has been examined within the context of learning or teaching English language. It may also be addressed when learning any language and in any linguistic circumstances when non-native learners are involved as in our case with Arabic L2 learners. The richness of morphological and syntactic property of Arabic language makes it a perfect

field to be investigated in the area of SLA research. Thus, to bridge this gap in both SLA literature in general and Arabic SLA in particular, this article builds upon the available previous studies, even they are few, and further scrutinizes how Arabic L2 learners are influenced by their L1 in their learning process.

1. The literature review

Language transfer is the study of how learners create a new language system with only limited exposure to a second language (Selinker and Gass, 2013, p. 80). To put it succinctly, it is the process of using past knowledge and experience in a new situation.

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Many researchers (Slabakova, 2000; White, 2003; Alamry, 2014; Alhawary, 2018) agree that L1 transfer has a negative or positive effect on learning an L2 at least in the initial stages. This part will try to focus on how Arabic foreign learners, especially Americans, are influenced by their L1 and showing the impact of Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA) in the learning process. According to Hakansson:

The concept of language transfer has always been linked to other linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena, including but not limited to typological distance, degree of markedness, processing load, and learners' individual strategies. (Hakansson, 2001, cited in Alamry, 2014, p. 8)

This concept, language transfer, has two types, the first one is positive and the second is negative. The positive transfer is the result of the similarities that match between the learner's L1 and the TL, while the negative transfer is the result of the differences between the two languages (L1 and TL) which make the learning process more challenging and lengthy. That is the more similarities, the fewer difficulties, and the more differences, the more problems.

In this regard, it is worthy to mention that six hypotheses try to reveal the role played by language transfer and UG in L2 learning. But we will stick ourselves only to three of them and others will be summarized in the table below. The first hypothesis is named no transfer, which claims that L1 does not affect L2 learning. Some researchers (Platzack, 1996; Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono, 1996) claim that L2 grammatical development takes place via UG and that what makes it possible for L2 learners to reach a final state as natives. Other researchers (Clahsen and Muysken 1986) claim that L2 achievement is attributed to general solving problems strategies, they concluded in their study that L1 is not involved in L2 learning. The partial transfer which is the second hypothesis states that only some properties of L1 is used or transferred into L2 by learners at least at the initial stage either via lexical categories (verb, noun, adjectives, preposition...) only or via both lexical categories and functional categories (complementizer, inflection, gender, tense...). According to the Minimal Trees Hypothesis (MTH) proposed by Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994, 1996), only L1 lexical categories can be transferred not functional categories because of the lack of morphological markings and syntactic movement. Furthermore, Vainikka and Young-Scholten claim that the functional categories are believed to be increased gradually in stimulus to L2 input and UG-constrained structure building. However, this hypothesis was challenged by the findings of some researchers (White, 2003) who showed that functional category parameters of L1 were adopted in the L2 grammar. After that, the Valueless Features Hypothesis (VFH) of Eubank (1994, 1996) came as a proposal in favor of the partial transfer hypothesis. The VFH claims that L2 initial state involves both lexical and functional categories of L1. Eubank also insists that these functional features are neither strong nor weak but they are valueless or 'inert' in the initial

state. According to Alamry (2014), these functional features are said to be acquired during the phase of development, and, at the end stage of acquisition, L2 learners are expected to convert to the L2 grammar (p. 11). The third hypothesis is the full transfer, which is the opposite of the first one, proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1994, 1996) it claims that all features of L1 are involved or transferred into the grammar of L2 (at least at the initial stages). To say it differently, the entire L1 grammar is transferred and not just the L1 parameter settings. That is, the final state of L1 grammar constitutes the initial state of L2 grammar. White (1989) – the first researcher to introduce this position – claims that “L2 learners start initially with L1 parameter values and then reset them according to L2 values; that is, she argues that L2 learners have access to UG (cited in Alamri, 2014, p. 11). As far as what we have seen we can summarize UG access and language transfer as in the following table:

1.1 Contrastive and error analysis in Arabic L2

The problem of linguistic errors among Arabic language learners can be classified within the framework of what is known as contrastive linguistics (CA). Which is a systematic way of comparing two languages, sometimes more, to determine areas where learners may face difficulties (differences) and areas where they will not in an L2 learning situation (similarities). According to Gass (2013) “CA is assumed that learners tend to transfer the habits of their native language structure to the foreign language and it is also assumed that this is the major source of difficulty or ease in learning the structure of a foreign language” (p. 86). CA predictions were tested empirically, but they showed two challenges. Firstly, many predicted errors did not exist in L2 learning. Second, it was unsuccessful to elaborate how learners with different L1 knowledge would end up making the same errors in L2 learning.

1. After CA researchers used what is called Error Analysis (EA) that was used to pinpoint, based on the output production (verbal and written) of L2 learners, errors according to different categories and to predict the causes and the sources. Alhawary (2009, p. 22) classified these errors as followed: Interlingual errors (caused by LI interference).
2. Intralingual errors (made by L2ers regardless of their L1).
3. Developmental errors (caused by the L2er's constructed hypotheses of the L2 system according to the extent of exposure to L2).
4. Overgeneralization errors, simplification errors, and induced errors (caused by instructional lapses or errors).

It is worthy to state that the first Arabic SLA studies were conducted by Al-Ani (1972-1973), then Rammuny (1976), both of them were carried out under the umbrella of EA. In

Table 1: UG Access and Language Transfer Positions

Approach	Hypotheses of transfer and Access	Explantation	Pionniers
No transfer	No transfer/no access (NTNA)	There is no effect of L1 in learning L2. Learners resort to general problem-solving strategies	Clahsen and Muysken, (1986); Meisel, (1997)
	No transfer/full access (NTFA)	L2 learners rely on their UG. To simplify, the starting point is the UG.	Platzack, (1996); Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono (1996)
Partial transfer	The MTH	The functional categories are believed to be increased gradually in stimulus to L2 input and UG-constrained structure building.	Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994, 1996a, b)
	The VFH	L2 initial state involves both lexical and functional categories of L1	Eubank (1993/1994, 1996)
Full transfer	Full transfer/full access (FTFA)	The starting point of L2 learning is the final state of L1.	White (1989); Schwartz and Sprouse (1994)
	Full transfer/partial access (FTPA)	The initial state of L2 learning is the final state of L1 final state. Thus L2 learners have a fully formed grammar. If UG principles are not found in L1, they will not be available in L2 learning therefore they recourse to general problem-solving strategies	Schachter (1989, 1990); Clahsen and Hong (1995)
	Full transfer/Partial access	L2 learners learn their TL grammar through parameter settings of L1. The principles of UG are available but L2 learners cannot reset parameters	Tsimpli and Roussou (1991), and Smith and Tsimpli (1995).
	The Failed Functional Feature (FFFH)	Adult L2 learners are unable to acquire features of functional categories that differ from those realized in the L1 (White, 2003, p. 276).	Hawkins and Chan (1997)

Al-Ani study, he concluded that these errors are caused by three reasons such as:

1. Interference from learners' L1 (the mismatch of the definite article with nouns and from gender and number agreement).
2. Overgeneralization (using the definite article with proper names).

3. Performance errors (using the article on the head noun in (idafa) /**ال-idafa**/ constructions).

For Rammuny (1976) study, he researched deeper than Al-Ani (1973) in which he analyzed data from written Arabic proficiency test and he attributed the errors made by Arabic L2 learners, the same as Al-Ani, into four categories:

1. Orthographic errors
2. Phonological errors
3. Lexical errors
4. Stylistic errors

Rammony subdivides these categories into four causes such as inefficient learning strategies adopted by L2 learners, interferences between learners' L1 and the target language, unfamiliarity, and finally, socio-psychological causes.

1.2 Markedness in the Arabic language

Before going further, the concept of markedness should be mentioned and explained because of its significance in L2 learning, according to Eckman (1977, p. 320) "markedness is when a phenomenon A in some language is more marked (more distinctively marked) than B (less distinctively marked) if the presence of A in a language implies the presence of B, but the presence of B does not imply the presence of A". He based his definition on the relative degree of difficulty that exists at any given language (universal) and which is not context-dependent. This relative difficulty is simplified by Eckman in terms of typological markedness and implicational relations between linguistic features. For example, we can use the passive structure in Arabic syntax to elaborate Eckman's markedness, that is, some languages do not accept the agent (doer) to be expressed at the passive structure while in Arabic the agent is accepted at the passive structure as in the following example:

The water is drunk /šoriba ʔl-māʔ/ شرب الماء 1

Ahmed drinks water /yšrabu ʔhmadu ʔl māʔ/

2 يشرب احمد الماء

The doer in sentence 1 is not mentioned, but in sentence 2 is expressed. Eckman (1977, cited in Husseinali, 2016, p. 21) claims that sentence 2 implies sentence 1, but not vice versa. In other words, a language that can express passive with an expressed agent (2) can also express passive without an expressed agent (1). Therefore, (2) is more marked than (1). Applying this definition of markedness to L2 learning, Eckman (1977) proposes the following principles that would predict difficulty in L2 learning:

(a) Those areas of the target language that differ from the native language and are more marked than the native language will be difficult.

(b) The relative degree of difficulty of the areas of the target language that are more marked than the native language will correspond to the relative degree of markedness.

(c) Those areas of the target language that are different from the native language, but are not more marked than the native language, will not be difficult.

In the same frame, White (1987) in her study of learners of French as a second language (FSL), tried to know if the acquisition is learnability or developmental. The subjects were native English-speaking children and adults speaking different L1s but both of them studied ESL previously. White presents a learnability definition of markedness in which the mother tongue (L1 transfer) plays an important role. That is to say, marked structures are those that depart from the core grammar requiring specific evidence during L1 acquisition. In the developmental framework, L1 structures do not transfer automatically to L2. That is, learners commence from the least marked structure then they move towards the most marked regardless of their L1s. Briefly speaking, white deduces that the marked forms may be transferred from the L1 or other languages known to the language learner" (p. 278, cited in Husseinali, 2016, p. 23).

Syntactically speaking, Arabic sentences have two principle elements, the subject and the predicate. It is known for its rich agglutinative morphological system. Additionally, it is known that Arabic has a highly productive and complex morphological system. All languages differ in their signaling markedness, for example, English and Arabic have different markedness devices because of the differences in word order, to illustrate, Arabic has a complex inflection system and this complexity offers vast freedom in word order. Thus we can state that there is no canonical word order in which both SVO and VSO are widely used. As in the following example:

1. دعت عائشة احمد /daʔat ʔāʔšatu ʔhmada/
2. دعت احمد عائشة /daʔat ʔhmada ʔāʔšatu/

Both the two sentences have the same meaning, they differ only in markedness (either marked or unmarked). Example 1 is marked because the object comes before the agent. However, these sentences (1 and 2) are totally different in English in which Aicha invited Ahmed is different from Ahmed invited Aicha because word order in English is distinctive.

Similarly, Mansouri (2000) wrote:

What differentiates Arabic from most languages is the degree of variation that both these components may exhibit. The subject can be either free-standing (i.e., an independent noun) or dependent (in the case of clitics). As far as the predicate is concerned, Arabic sentences do not obligatory include a verbal component to be grammatically well-formed. Equational sentences are those consist of a 'subject' and a nominal 'predicate' that usually provides a 'comment' about the 'subject' (p. 48).

These can be explained by the following examples:

1- in free-standing (SVO sentence):

- Mohamed studies Art
- /mohamed yadrosu ʔl-fanna/ محمد يدرس الفن

2- in dependent (VSO sentence):

- I studied Art
- /darastu ʔl-fanna/ درست الفن

3- in Equational (verbless sentence):

- the cat is sick
- القطة مريضة /*l-qitto mari:d*

From the above examples, we notice that there is subordination or co-ordination (it is not expressed). That is learners have to use either SVO or VSO structure (word order is flexible). That is Arabic language makes full of case marking (nominative, accusative and genitive) to mark grammatical relations between various components of utterances (Abboud, 1957 cited in Mansouri 2016, p. 49). Further, there is no obvious canonical word order in Arabic language in which both SV and VS are widely used

2. Conclusion

Together, the area of Arabic SLA is still an under-investigated field despite its important for Arabic and non-Arabic experts. A systematic literature review was conducted of studies that dealt with the issue of language transfer and its effect on the target language. Hence, the present research aims at investigating the effect of Arabic

foreign language learners' L1s, especially English, in the acquisition of Arabic language. The presented evidence presented in this section indicate that foreign language learners are significantly affected by their L1. That is, L2 learners subconsciously rely on their L1s to communicate or transmit ideas in the TL.

3. Methodology

This part is devoted to the methodology adopted in the present study to meet the requirements of validity and reliability of the present study. Thus, we employed a quantitative research methodology with a sample of 25 second language learners of Arabic in Morocco, all of them speak English as a mother tongue (L1) for the sake to identify the errors made by them and the source. Unlike other studies, whose target language was English, this work deals with Arabic as a target language and English as a source language.

The rationale for undertaking this study is because of the scarcity and the very few studies conducted in the area of Arabic SLA (Al-Shuwairkh, 2009; Ricks, 2015; Alhawary, 2009). Consequently, there is a need for empirical studies in Morocco to investigate EA in Arabic SLA.

4. Research problem

Arabic language has not received much attention as English and some European languages even it is considered an important language in the contemporary world. Many researchers (Winke & Aquil, 2006; Lee-Ellis, 2009) acknowledge that Arabic language does not enjoy the range of studies and validated assessment tools as most researchers do in other languages. Furthermore, some

researchers (Alhawary, 2005; Al-Batal, 2006; Al-Shuwairkh, 2009) stated that there still rooms for probing into the unsolved issues in AFL. All these reasons put forward the need for new and recent studies and research related to Arabic SLA.

6. Participants

The participants in this research are 25 L2 learners of Arabic. All of them were selected from different programs in Meknes and Ifran. They are ranged from beginners (A1-A2) to advanced (C1-C2) according to Common European Framework of References for languages (CEFR) and all of them use the same textbook *ʔl-kita:b fi: taʔallum ʔl-ʔarabiyya* / series written by Brustad, Al-Batal and Al Tonsi (2004). The participants' ages vary between 18 and 28. The participants completed a grammaticality judgment test that contains two parts. At the first part, learners are asked to translate five sentences from their L1 into Arabic and at the second part they are presented with five sentences and they are asked to identify if they are grammatical or not and to correct the ungrammatical ones. All the instructions are presented in English. Figure 1 presents more details about the participants

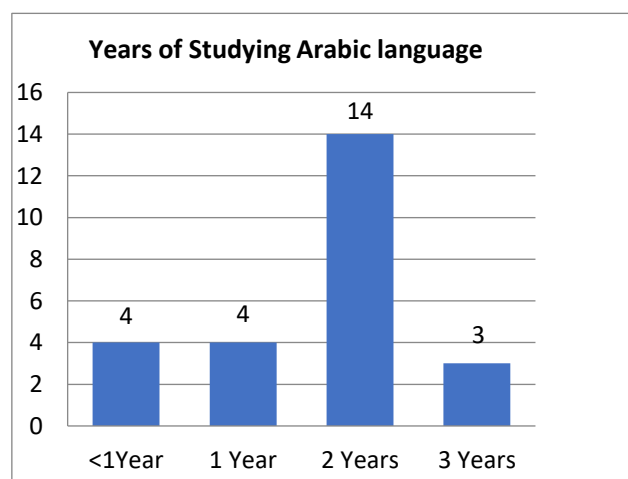


Figure 1: Years of studying Arabic language.

There are 25 participants (18 girls and 8 boys), their age range from 18 till 28. The majority of learners (56%) have about two years of experience while four of them (16%) have studied Arabic less than one year, also four have one year and three with three years of experience or more (12%). The mean is 6.25, the SD is 1.32 and the median is 2. the years of study are a crucial element because it is a considerable independent variable that significantly affected the results of learners. Most learners 90% said that they learn Arabic for cultural reasons others for economic, military, or political reasons.

7. Results and interpretation

Being aware of the road Arabic L2 learners follow in their learning process will inevitably get its place positively in

Arabic classrooms. The main purpose of this article is to know how language transfer plays a significant role for Arabic L2 learners. To analyze our data, descriptive statistics were used. We employed a quantitative research methodology with a sample of second language learners of Arabic in Morocco. The obtained results showed that errors caused by Arabic L2 learners imply that there is an influence by learners' L1 (linguistic competence). This role is called L1 transfer or interlanguage (IL), according to Shormani (2015) this IL has been seen as an indispensable learning strategy made use of by L2 learner's at all linguistic models of the grammar (p. 129). Arabic L2 learners, regardless of their age, use this strategy to resort to their L1 as a knowledge base in L2 learning. The fact that Arabic L2 learners are learning Arabic language by keeping their L1 in their mind

(parameters) which is considered as an important factor that determines their development in the target language, in this case, learners' L1 is seen as a knowledge-base that they resort either consciously or subconsciously in learning Arabic language. Certain errors are expected to be common for L2 learners because most learners have a huge foundation of grammatical structures and vocabulary in their L1. That is to say, the absence or the presence of any feature in learners' L1 plays a significant role in learning Arabic as a TL. Accordingly, Pienemann (2004) states that "L1 transfer can take place only when learners are at a phase that deals with a supposedly transferable structure".

Based on the obtained data besides the significant role of language transfer, it is mandatory to mention other external and internal factors that have a significant role in Arabic SLA learning process. Among them, is language input which is according to Gass (1994) "SLA cannot take place in a vacuum without considering having exposure to some sort of language input". Similarly, SLA theories offer various importance to language input in language acquisition, but they all agree about its strong effect on language learning.

The influence of negative transfer is noticeable when learners make sentences especially in productive skills (writing or speaking). Thus most errors, in our study, are caused either by overgeneralization or interference as in the following examples:

1. The use of adjectives in Arabic is different from English. Firstly, in English, there is no gender with adjectives while in Arabic language; the adjective follows the noun directly, agreeing with it in gender, number, case, and definiteness. That is to say, the adjective in Arabic follows the noun it modifies and it can be masculine singular adjectives, masculine dual adjectives, feminine singular adjectives, feminine dual adjectives, or non-gender adjectives, which is the opposite in English. Secondly, adjectives in Arabic do not have independent class or division as in English that is why learners, especially beginners, make errors with adjectives as in the following examples:

- Big and beautiful car

- سيارة كبيرة وجميلة /sayara kabira wa zamila /
 - * سيارة كبير وجميل
2. Both Arabic and English use the definite article (the) /al-/ but they differ in the context for example sometimes learners add it and sometimes they do not due to the influence of English as in the following examples:

- The father of Ahmed
- الأب احمد* /?bu ?hmad/ / أب احمد

In this example learners add the definite article 'the' because they think that all nouns in Arabic should be attached to it at the beginning. On the other hand, they do not use the article as in the following example:

- On Friday and Saturday
- أيام الجمعة و السبت /?yyam-?l- zomofa wa-ssabt/ على جمعة و سبت*

In this example, the names of the days of the week in Arabic language are considered definite and include the definite article. If they are modified by an adjective, it also carries the definite article which is the opposite in English that is why learners forget to use the definite article.

3. The use of prepositions: many students even advanced make mistakes when they use Arabic prepositions. As an example, they mix between the preposition (to) in their L1 and the preposition (إلى) in the TL as in the following examples:

- I am attracted to Arabic literature.

- أنا معجب بالأدب العربي /?na: moʔzab- bi -?l-adabi ?l-ʔaraby/ أنا معجب إلى الأدب العربي

4. The use of numbers: In English, the use of number one (1) does change with the gender, for example, one brother and one sister. On the contrary, in Arabic, number one takes the feminine and the masculine forms. Hence this difference leads students to make mistakes for example:

- I have one brother / I have one sister
- عندي أخت واحدة /?indy ?ht wa:hida/ عندي أخت واحد*

5. Grammatical errors with gender. The Arabic language has a complex gender system, this complexity is considered a big challenge for Arabic L2 learners especially with learners whose L1s have a different gender system or no gender system at all. Alkohlani (2016, p. 21) in her study classified these errors into two categories gender assignment to the noun, and gender agreement with the noun. For example:

- 1) Last year /السنة الماضية /?l- ssan- ?l-ma:dyah / السنة الماضي*
- 2) Big café /مقهى كبير / maqha: kaby:r /

Example one indicates that learners produce sentences that show no agreement between the noun and the adjective. In this example, the noun /ʔl-ssan-a/ year is feminine and /ʔl-ma:dyah / last, which is an adjective, is masculine. For example number two, the feminine adjective /kabi:ra/ big modifies the unmarked masculine noun /maqha:/ café. That is to say, Arabic L2 learners are aware of the gender differences that Arabic has, but they do not have a complete picture of how gender rules in the TL are structured.

6. The use of suffix personal pronouns /dama:ʔir muttasila/ as in the following example:

- But we are
- لكننا /lakinnana:/
- * لكن نحن

In Arabic language, there are two groups of suffix personal pronouns, one indicates possession and attached to a noun (suffix) and the second indicates the object of a verb.

7. The use of possessive pronouns as in the following example:

- My house
- بيتي /baity/
- * أنا بيت

For example number 2; learners replace the English possessive pronouns with the Arabic subject pronoun. They think that any word in Arabic ends with (ʔl-nnisba) is one word.

The interference between learners' L1 and Arabic as a target language has always been a significant problem in learning and teaching Arabic as a foreign language. Arabic L2 learners often make grammatical, lexical, and morphological errors due to the interference between their L1 and the TL. These results are in accordance with previous studies conducted by Mansouri (2000) and Alhawary (2018).

8. Theoretical and practical implications

Our findings can be useful theoretically and practically for many Arabic contributors in some subfields in Arabic applied linguistics. Starting with AFL learners, in which the results could help them to know how Arabic is different from their L1, the time, and the amount of input exposure to deal with any challenge in their learning process. Being aware of the importance of language transfer (positive and negative) has a significant impact on productive skills (writing and speaking). That is, permitting learners to strategically transfer some features of their L1 into the TL might encourage the limited use of known TL features without losing their meanings, therefore, to discover the mechanism of the TL (Arabic).

In addition, for Arabic SLA experts, our findings could be a profitable guide because it provides them with fruitful data about the positive and negative effects of learner's first language development on Arabic SLA. Besides, teaching bilingual learners transfer strategies could be advantageous by providing them with the necessary metalinguistic tools

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and techniques to reach target language norms and to offer different opportunities for interaction to better understand and use the target language.

9. Conclusion

The presented study aimed at investigating the effect of Arabic foreign language learners' L1 on Arabic language. The obtained results indicated that Arabic L2 learners are affected by their L1. That is, language transfer plays a significant role in the acquisition of Arabic language especially in productive skills (speaking and writing). Most learners' errors are attributed to overgeneralization or interference (negative transfer or poor knowledge in the target language). Therefore, our results are in line with Al-Ani, 1972/73 and Rammuny, 1976. This research does not claim that language transfer is the only factor that affects the acquisition of Arabic language by foreigners, but there are other factors such as UG access, input frequency, motivation, typological and structural proximity between learners' L1 and the TL. Meanwhile, we recommend further research to be conducted to confirm the same findings.

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