The Effect of Learners' first language on their Writings in English

Dr : Intesar Elwerfalli•

Abstract

Writing is a complex task for learners particularly when one writes in a second language (Al Buainain, 2007). A number of studies (e.g. Hussein and Mohammed, 2010) revealed that many L2 learners are influenced by their first language when writing in English. This study aims at exploring L2 learners writing skills difficulties through analysing their errors and identifying whether their first language has a key effect in their writings in English. To achieve the aims of the study, English writing samples of 30 Libyan students from the College of Education in Benghazi were examined. After errors were collected, they were categorized according to the following classifications: mechanic, semantic, grammatical, and word order errors.

Key words: Learners' first language – Transfer - Errors

Research Objective

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1- What are the common types of errors in the writings of Libyan learners of English?

2- Is negative transfer a cause of errors in the writings of Libyan learners of English?

Introduction

The impact of the first language (L1) on studying English as a second language (L2) has been a subject of debate over the past few decades. Various studies have been conducted to examine the effect of learners L1 on producing L2. Mother tongue interference (L1 influence) could be a main cause in committing errors. For some researchers (e.g. Norris, 1987) learning a language is a matter of habit formation. That is, when learning a new habit, the old habits will interfere with the new ones and cause making

• The English department, Faculty of Arts, University Of Benghazi.

errors. Besides, it might be difficult for L2 earners to express ideas in another language. As a result, they may rely on their L1 to express their ideas.

Positive Effects of Learners' First Language L1

Positive transfer of L1 means transferring a native form from learners L1 and use it in the production of L2. It is part of the L2 norm and hence, facilitates learning process.

A learner's L1 has great impact on his or her L2. Recent studies focus on transfer from learners' L1 and how it affects the process of learning. In addition, some theoretical approaches toward transfer (e.g. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), Universal Grammar (UG) and Perceptual Assimilation) are produced in the literature. For example, Universal Grammar, which was developed by Chomsky (1965), posited innate constraints on transfer. Learners use appropriate L2 because they are guided by UG and they use appropriate L2 parameter values through the input.

However, learners' use of inappropriate parameter values is due to the L2 parameter values which are already fixed in the learners' first language. Thus, when the target parameter values are similar to those of L1, the input confirms them easily. Likewise; when the target parameter values differ from those in L1, the learners reset them and incorrectly transfer their L1 parameters.

According to CAH, positive transfer takes place when learners transfer similar forms from their L1 and employ them into L2.

Some L2 teachers believe that the best way for students to develop native-like language proficiency is to think in that language. In order for students to avoid errors caused by L1 interference, they are encouraged not to use their L1 while learning the target language (TL). However, second language acquisition researchers (e.g. Johnson & Newport, 1994) have revealed that not all errors are completely attributed to interference by the learners' first language. In a study conducted by Dulay and Burt (1973), it is revealed that only 3% of errors came from L1 interferences and 85% of errors were developmental in nature. .

Generally, as mentioned above, the use of learners' first language may facilitate the process of learning when there are similarities between learners' first language and second language. Yet, when there are differences between the two languages, transfer from L1 may cause errors. This transfer is negative as it causes making errors.

Negative Effects of Learners' First Language L1

Negative transfer refers to the use of previous linguistic knowledge in producing a second language which results in undesirable forms. It occurs when the L1 form used in L2 production is not part of the L2 norm, and the resultant utterance is erroneous. This kind of transfer hinders learning.

According to a number of researchers (e.g. Corder, 1981; Lakkis & Malak, 2000 and Krashen, 2002), negative transfer of learners' first language can be one of the major causes of errors. For instance, Corder stated that:

> One explanation of second of second language errors is that the learner is carrying over the habits of his mother tongue into the second language. This is called interference and the implication of this term can only be that his mother tongue habits prevent him in some way from acquiring the habits of the second language (Corder, 1981, p.24).

Additionally, the results of a number of studies (e.g. Corder 1981; Cook, 2001; Upton, 2001; Sarko, 2009; Ionin & Montrul, 2010) reveal that transfer has a role (positive or negative) in L2 acquisition. These studies show that L1 has an impact on L2 in the fields of phonology, morphology and semantics. When L2 learners transfer L1 properties which are different from L2, learning problems may arise. For instance, the result of Sarko's study (2009), which was conducted on Arabic and French learners of English, reveals that both Arabic and French learners use the definite article in a similar manner to English native speakers. Their transfer of L1 patterns to L2 was positive, the reason being that both Arabic and French languages have similarities with English in the use of article systems.

Therefore, they may transfer grammatical patterns from their L1 to L2 and this transfer result is positive when there are similarities between the two languages and negative when

there are differences. Hence, such studies claim that transfer plays a significant role in the process of acquisition.

Sources of Errors

Kaweera (2013) divided errors in terms of interlingual and intralingual.

Interlingual (Interference) Errors

Interlingual errors are those which result from transferring L1 rules into L2 (Chelli, 2013). Those errors are attributable to negative interlingual transfer. Al-khresheh (2010) states that interlingual errors could occur because learners translate their first language idiomatic expressions into the target language word by word. As learners rely on their first language and there are differences between the two languages, errors are made.

Intralingual (Developmental) Errors

According to Richards, intralingual errors are:

> Items produced by the learner which reflect not the structures of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. The learner in this case, tries to derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language (1974, p. 6).

To clarify, Richards means that the errors result as an outcome of the development of interlanguage by the learners; thus, all L2 learners may make such errors regardless of their L1. He believed that these types of errors should be called developmental errors due to similarities discovered in errors produced by children when they are acquiring TL as their first language.

Krashen (1982, p.171) believed that intralingual errors "reflect the mental mechanisms underlying the learner's general language development which usually coincides with the type of strategies employed by children learning the target language as their first language". Thus, he argued that intralingual errors may result from applying the wrong hypotheses to

L2 because of insufficient exposure to it. Intralingual errors include: overgeneralization, simplification, communication- based and induced errors. Overgeneralization errors, for example, refer to the deviation of structures on the basis of the learner's experience of certain TL structures. An example of this can be seen in the addition of the plural sign (s) to nouns such as **childs* and **informations*.

Methodology

The participants

The participants in this study were 30 Libyan students from the Department of English, College of Education for the academic year 2017.

The participants were asked to write on ONE of the three following different topics [Facebook generation (an argumentative essay), a classmate story (a narrative essay), the qualities of a good teacher (a descriptive essay)].

The students were informed that their writings are going to be analysed.

Results of the Study

The errors in this study are classified as follows: Grammatical errors, mechanical errors, semantic errors, and word order errors.

Regarding the first question of the study, the results showed that there are two types of errors: interlingual and intralingual. This study is concerned only with the first type (i.e. interlingual errors).

Interlingual Errors

Interlingual errors were higher than intralingual errors. The frequency of the former was 1050 out of 1720 total number of errors.

The following table (Table 1) shows types and frequencies of interlingual errors.

Table 1 Frequency of Interlingual errors

Grammatical errors	Semantic errors	Mechanical errors	Word order
501	298	160	91

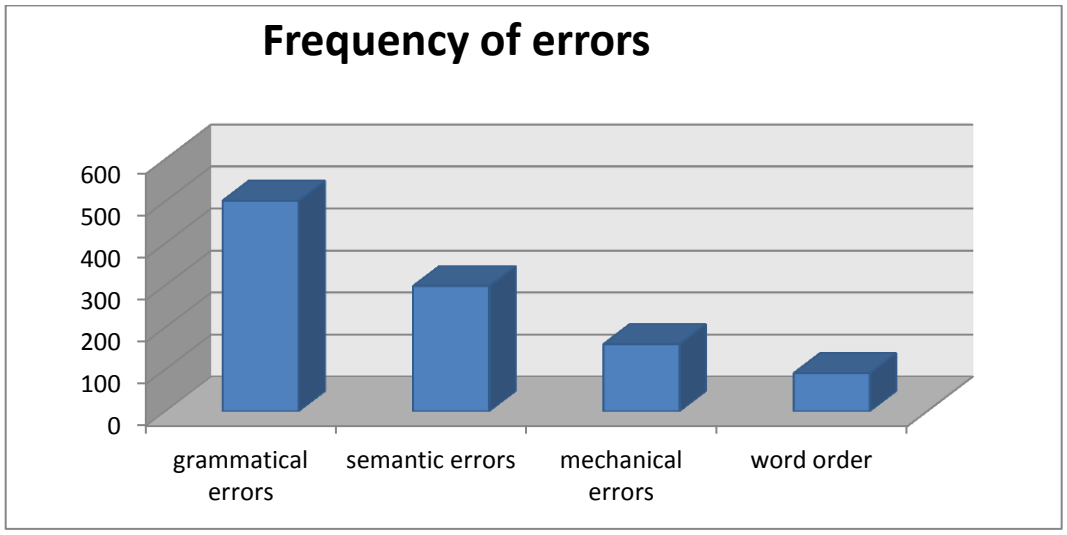


Figure 1 Frequency of Interlingual Errors

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent type of errors is grammatical errors: ***501*** of all errors. In second place come semantic errors (e.g. to use *teach* instead of *learn*) with **298**, followed by mechanic errors, i.e. spelling errors at **160**. Finally word order errors (e.g. subject/verb order) are **91** of the total.

Grammatical Errors

The grammatical errors analysed in this paper include:

- Tenses
- Prepositions
- Articles
- Pronouns
- Singular/Plural Nouns

Table (2) illustrates frequencies and percentage of grammatical errors found in this study.

Table 2 Frequency of Grammatical Errors

Tenses	Prepositions	Articles	Pronouns	Singular/plural nouns
160	112	109	80	40
32%	22%	22%	16%	8%

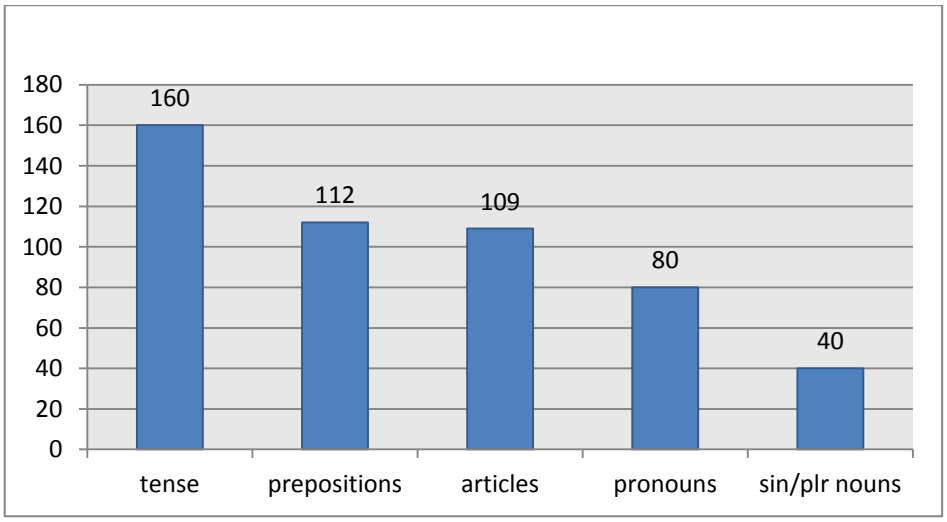


Figure 2 frequency of Grammatical errors

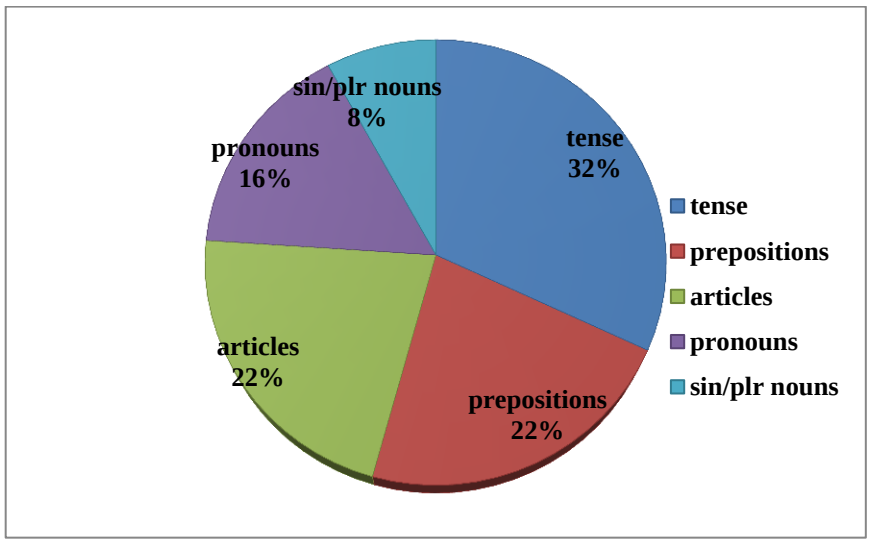


Figure 3 Percentages of Grammatical Errors

The table above shows that tenses errors are the most prominent feature in Libyan students' writings. Such errors can be explained in terms of some reasons.

1. Because there is not equivalent of auxiliary verbs in their native language, Students might not apply interrogative and negative sentences appropriately.

   **He was not study in high school.*

   ** Are they live near our house?*

2. Students tended to omit auxiliary verbs in places require their presence. This might be because they think in Arabic and translate their thoughts into English.

   **They good teachers.*

   **She absent from class yesterday.*

3. In Arabic, simple present tense replaces both simple and continuous tenses in English. Such a difference may confuse Libyan learners of English and causes making errors.

   **He working in good company.*

   **they useing facebook much time.*

Moreover, such errors occurred because learners' first language has no mirror equivalent forms of continuous tenses in Arabic.

Prepositions

Another problem that faces L2 learners of English in general and Arab learners of English in particular is prepositions. In English there are various prepositions which have the same functions. As a result, learners might not be certain which preposition to use appropriately.

**He is doctor and he works at Hikma hospital.*

** They were flying above us.*

As shown above, learners did not use the right proposition (in) when referring to occupation. Although learners might be influenced by their native language in the use of (in), such an error can be attributed to the L2 because of learners' lack of knowledge about English prepositions.

The Article System

The use of the English Article system is also misused by students in this study. Errors of articles occurred due to some reasons. First, it could be that learners are affected by their first language in which the definite article *al-* is used in various cases. Learners overuse the definite article *the* in situations that require zero article ∅. For example, a sentence like *Milk is useful for infants* may be written by an Arab learner of English as *The milk is useful for infants*. As a result, learners change such a sentence from generic reference to a specific one which might cause misuse and misunderstanding of a context.

In addition, they use the indefinite article (a/an) with uncountable nouns. This problem could be attributed to the reason that learners are affected by their native language, as mentioned above, or that they do not have sufficient knowledge to recognize that certain nouns are uncountable.

**She always give advices to her friends.*

** The life is very interesting for her.*

Moreover, in some cases, errors committed in this study revealed a direct transfer of L1 rules to L2. For example, some students used the definite article ***the*** with days of the week and with names of countries or cities.

**In the Friday, they stay at the house.*

**He went to the Morocco.*

Pronouns

Pronouns were problematic for Libyan learners of English. The reason can be attributed to the fact that pronouns do not have equivalent matching parts in students' first language, for instance, the pronoun ***it*** as a neutral pronoun does not exist in Arabic. Consequently ***he*** or ***she*** might be used for inanimate objects or concepts.

Moreover, another problem that faced students in this study is that they confused in using object and possessive pronouns. They used them interchangeably.

**they have a small house that them can live in.*

**I told their that.*

Singular/ Plural Nouns

With regard to singular/plural nouns, in English plural is made by adding's' to the singular noun. Although it is very straightforward for students, they tend to overgeneralize and add ***'s'*** even to irregular plural nouns as *'people'* and '*children*'. Moreover, students sometimes omit the plural morpheme'**s**' from a sentence even when clear plural quantifiers such as ' *many* and *few* ' were present. This problem could be due to learners' lack of knowledge of what to use with quantifiers.

**Facebook is not good for childrens.*

**He has eleven car and twenty flat.*

**Others sites may be bads.*

**The informations are good.*

Semantic Errors

A semantic error is the use of a wrong lexis (word) which has been inappropriately used in a statement. According to Llach's (2005, p. 49), a lexical error is "the wrong word use of a lexical item in a particular context by comparison with what a native speaker of similar characteristics as the L2 learner (age, educational level, professional and social status) would have produced in the same circumstances."

Lexical errors in this study occurred when learners translate directly from L1 to convey their thoughts in English.

**She wifed in 2003. (married)*

**The flowers in her hands started to open suddenly. (bloom)*

**He is very long man. (tall)*

It is obvious that students transferred their first language thoughts and applied them into their writings. For example, in Arabic the verb tazawjat (married) is derived from the Arabic noun zawja(h) (wife) and as learners may not know the English word *marry*, they think that the Arabic rule of verb derivation can be applied to the English word *wife*.

Mechanic Errors (Spelling Errors)

The Arabic phonological system has an effect on English spelling system (Al-jarf, 2010). This study showed that Libyan learners got confused with phonemes that do not

exist in Arabic such as (p/v). In addition, the students faced difficulty in distinguishing between /b/ and /p/, and between /f/ and /v/.

Some spelling errors occurred due to the fact that some grammatical rules have exceptions. So, if these rules are not taught carefully to students, they make spelling errors.

**He left the countery last week to Baris.*

Word Order Errors

Word order could be defined as the syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence, clause, or phrase. Word order differences in Arabic and English represent one of the causes of the problems encountered by Arab learners of English. Arabic shows more flexibility in the movement and distribution of its components (Diab, 1996).

Errors of word order are common syntactic errors that students commit as a result of L1 transfer. This kind of error includes subject/ verb order, adjective/ noun order and possessive adjective/ noun order.

**visited he the park.*

**Facebook is habit bad.*

Regarding the second question of this study, it can be concluded that negative transfer is a cause of errors. Learners' first language has a role in the process of learning English as a second language. Learners transfer rules from their L1 to L2. This transfer is positive when there are similarities and negative when there are differences. Errors made by Libyan learners in this study showed that learners transferred rules from their L1 which are different from L2 and applied them inappropriately.

Although some errors in this study were intralingual, interlingual errors were higher.

Conclusion

This study attempts to analyse and identify the errors in English essay writings of 30 Libyan students from the College of Education. The results revealed that most of the learners transfer rules from their L1 and applied them into L2. The types of errors presented in this study were classified as: Grammatical errors, mechanical errors,

semantic errors, and word order. Grammatical errors and semantic errors were the most frequent types.

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