

Research article

A Contrastive Analysis of English and Arabic from a Syntactical perspective

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Abstract

The researcher in this study concentrates on Analysis of English and Arabic from a Syntactical perspective, the researcher chooses some examples from English and Arabic Language to explain the findings of the study. According to the results of this study teachers are advised to apply modern teaching techniques such as guided discovery and task-based learning in order to avoid negative transfer, and use Arabic syntax as a reference to allow positive transfer. As a matter of fact, we can't ignore the rule of professional development by providing a series of training sessions and workshops on modern teaching techniques to raise teachers awareness of similarities and differences among Arabic and English syntax.

Keywords:

Introduction:

Language is a unique feature of humans. Languages are different from one another. Standard Arabic and Standard English languages, for example, are different but alike. That is, these languages are originally different from one another (Semitic & German) but they do share at least generally some linguistic features at all levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatics' level. Fields known as Contrastive Linguistics, Comparative Linguistics and Universal Grammar have a lot to do with these areas. In this research-paper, the researcher tries to find how English and Arabic differ from each other from different angles, and how this affect Arab students who learn English as a foreign language. Finally, I try to find some teaching methods to avoid such problems

Language is a means of communication among people, societies, communities, regions, countries, etc.. This is to say that the major aim of each language is the same, but this or that language will be necessarily either completely or partially different from another language. Instead, one language can be partially similar to another language but not necessarily completely similar to that or this language.

Linguists made many attempts trying to name one language as the origin of all languages. Moreover, their researchers aimed at formulating or mapping the languages of the world. However, they may achieve something, but their results and findings remain all questionable since they lack enough evidence. Strictly speaking and universally, other linguists, led by Chomsky, attempted another aspect of language that is looking for universal features/aspects of all the languages of the world. Namely, this theory is known as Universal Grammar (UG). Comparatively, other linguists would prefer to approach languages from the point of view of the similarities they share or they have in common. Mainly, what is called Comparative Linguistics (CL); researches in this area conduct their researches comparing two or more languages, dialects, etc., attempting to find out similarities between/among them.

There was another approach that appeared in the early 1940s and prospered in the 1960 and over, called as Contrastive Analysis (CA) or sometimes as (Contrastive Linguistics), (Light own: 2006). Contrastively, (researchers working in contrastive analysis area) attempt from an educational point of view to contrast two languages, concentrating on the differences between them to be taught for second language (L2) (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) learners to solve their problems hindering the process of learning this or that particular foreign or second language. In regard to (CA) and principally, Fries, Lado and James are considered as the proponents of CA theory or field study. The basic hypothesis of this theory, however is that where differences exist, difficulties of learning do exist. On the other hand, where similarities do exist, ease of learning does exist. Put another way, the more the languages are similar the easier to be learnt and taught, and the more different they are, the more difficult they are to relearnt and taught, (Lado: 1957).

The language of a certain country is an integral part of its society whether that place is a developed country, a developing country or even under-developing country. Basically, both Arabic and English are two major languages in the world. For Arabic, this may be due to the large number of its speakers but more importantly for being the language of Islam. English, on the other hand is recently being the international language, language of technology and language of academic and higher education even in some Arab Countries and other foreign countries in Europe and other places in this world. Generally, Arabic is a language spoken and used as a native language by at least one hundred million in different places distributed in the middle east and Arabian peninsula. Additionally, it is being used as either a second or foreign language in places nearly all over the world. Yet, people from all over the world mostly students and tourists come to Arabian countries to learn/acquire Arabic language.

Politically, Arabic language is one of the official languages admitted by the United Nations, (Chejne: 1969). As a language, Arabic is divided into three types: Classical Arabic, Standard Arabic and Spoken Arabic. Briefly, classical Arabic is usually referred to the language used before Islam, language of poetry, literature and golden ages of Islam and Arabic Sciences. Later on, after nearly, the European Renaissance, a new age appeared along with a new version of Arabic has been called Standard Arabic or sometimes as Modern Standard Arabic. More importantly, what has been called as Classical Arabic is being only used for the Holy Quran and ancient Arabic books. Similarly, Standard Arabic language is being only used for official states, academic writings, school materials, news and broadcasting, etc, (Owens: 2006).

Standard Arabic is the language used by Arabs or any of its users for academic purposes, official purposes and more accurately the language that appears in print: newspapers, books, teaching materials, etc, (Thackston: 1994). It is different from the classical Arabic in that diacritics or case markers do not necessarily appear in all the words except in the ambiguous words and sentences whether in written or spoken cases. On the other hand, Standard English is also one of the major languages of the world as it has been mentioned above and one of the official languages of the United Nations as well. English language is used as a native language by about three hundred million people including countries such as United Kingdom and United States of America, (Quirk, et al: 1985). Regardless of the number of its speakers, English is distinguished more by its huge number of learners, those who learn or acquire it as either a foreign or second language in all over the world. For that matter, it is considered as the most widely used language in the world. Like Arabic, English has some dialects but not many as Arabic.

Similarities between the two languages in comparison:

One of the grammatical pattern that is the same in Arabic and English is the conditionals. In Arabic, students study the conditionals as hypothetical and comes in an if-clause and a main clause. In English, it comes as a main clause and a subordinate clause that is similar to the syntactic structure of Arabic. This makes it easy to Jordanian students to learn conditionals by transferring their knowledge from Arabic.

In considering possible teaching techniques for teaching the 'conditional if' found in English, we need to first look at the differences between English and standard Arabic when it comes to 'conditional if' usage.

English has two kinds of ‘conditional if’ sentences, the unreal conditional and the real conditional. The ‘unreal conditional if’ is translated as /law/ in Arabic, whereas the ‘real conditional if’ is translated as /Iḏa:/ and /in/. Furthermore, in Arabic, both above mentioned ‘conditional if’s are followed by the past tense verb (Catford and et al: 1974). That is, the verb of the conditional clause which follows all of the above mentioned Arabic particles are always in the past tense (Khalil: 1999), for example:

Iḏa: ḏahab is literally translated as ‘If he went’, however in English it would read ‘If he goes’.

‘insaalanifa-saujeebuhu’ is literally translated as ‘If he asked me then I will answer him.’, however in English it would read as ‘If he asks me I will answer him.’

Alternatively, law ḏahab is literally translated as ‘If he went’, however in English it would read, ‘If he were to go’ (Catford and et al, 1974).

Hence, Arabic speaking students tend to use in the past verb for both real and unreal conditional sentences when speaking and writing in English.

Furthermore, in English the ‘conditional unreal if’ is followed by a past tense clause, followed by ‘would’ indicating unreal conditional, whereas in Arabic, the only indicator is the word /law/. Hence, Arab learners tend to omit the word ‘would’ in speaking and writing.

‘If they were here, they would pay her.’ is often produced by Arabic speakers as ‘If they were here, they pay her’, omitting ‘would’ as it is not used in this context in Arabic.

In teaching this grammar point, the teacher will first create an appropriate context in order to explicitly show the meaning and structure of the real and unreal conditional sentences respectively. The teacher would then highlight the meaning and then the structure by use of the context and inductive teaching techniques, ultimately guiding the students to figure out the meaning and correct structures of these sentences. Thereafter, they would be guided to notice the differences between the two kinds of conditional sentences.

They would then be instructed to translate in groups each of the conditional sentences into Arabic and note down key differences between the English and Arabic structures. They would then present their findings to the class and subsequent feedback would be given by the teacher.

Another common feature between Arabic and English syntax that makes learning easy for Jordanian students is the use of conjunctions. In Arabic, students can produce correct sentences using (and, but and so) that has the same meaning when they transfer it literally in English. Therefore, their knowledge of Arabic assists their English learning in this specific area. There are three kinds of connectives, namely simple connectives, contrasting connectives and connectives of consequence.

An example of simple connectives is ‘and’ which is translated as /wa/ in Arabic. As in English the Arabic connective ‘wa’ is used to connect both words and clauses (Catford and et al, 1974). However, in English, when listing a number of words, ‘and’ is used to connect the last word in the list of words, whereas in Arabic, /wa/ is used before every subsequent word following the first word in the list, for example:

English: The man, woman and child was killed.

Arabic: Qutila Arrajl walimra a wad tifi

With regards to the connective ‘but’ translated as /*lakin*/, it indicates to the listener that more is to follow (Catford and et al, 1974). According to (Swan: 2005), in English “we use *but* to mean ‘except’ after *all, none, every, any, no, (and everything, everybody, nothing, nobody, anywhere etc.)*.” An example of ‘but’ meaning ‘except’ is:

‘They play every day, but Fridays.’

It is also used to mean ‘only’, such as:

‘Sam is but an intermediate school student; he can’t possibly know about quantum physics.’

In teaching ‘but’ to a group of elementary learners, the different meanings of ‘but’ would be presented to them in English by means of specific reading contexts created by the teacher to reveal each of the different meanings. Thereafter, with the guidance of the teacher, the students are instructed to translate the target language into Arabic, thus reinforcing the different meanings of ‘but’, relevant to the context. They would come up with Arabic words such as *lakin, illa, faqat* etc., thus ensuring correct usage of ‘but’ in English.

Another conjunctions is the connective ‘so’ which is translated as ‘fa’. Swan (2005:529) states that “So and then can both be used in replies, to mean ‘since that is so’, ‘it follows from what you have said’. For example, if someone tells me that he’ll come visit me tomorrow, I’ll reply ‘So / Then I’ll see you tomorrow.’

Differences and difficulties between the two languages: Errors made by students:

No one can deny that students can transfer some grammatical patterns from their first language while learning a second language. In Arabic, students learn some grammatical features that are the same in English. This is called positive transfer that some grammarians rely on and teachers can use as an advantage while introducing students to English grammatical patterns.

Experience of teaching second language to Jordanian students showed that the grammar translation method is widely used by teachers. This method aims to provide students with detailed analysis of English grammar rules as accuracy is strongly emphasized and teachers tend to focus on form rather than meaning and use. Students were taught their first language (Arabic) by focusing on form and being exposed to a set of pedagogical examples for the purpose of memorizing grammatical patterns. Therefore, teachers tend to teach second language grammar explicitly through using grammar charts that are not reflecting enough authenticity. Consequently, students were exposed to a large number of grammar rules to memorize in order to be able to answer MCQs in their final exams. This type of test-oriented-teaching is very popular among schoolteachers. Therefore, students come to the university with expectations of studying grammar in the same way; they face many problems coping with the advanced level of grammar taught at this stage. Therefore, Jordanian students used to face problems learning the syntactic features of a second language such as English.

First, one of the major problems that students might face is negative transfer from their first language. In Arabic, the adjective-noun order is noun+ adjective (*qalamazraq*) while in English the order is (adjective + noun) (*blue pen*). Consequently, Jordanian students produce wrong word order at some stages of their learning especially

elementary and pre-intermediate. Negative transfer is also clear in literal translation as students make mistakes in translating some expressions to English relying on their Arabic alternatives such as translating (ThroufQahera) into (Cairo Envelops) rather than (compelling circumstances).

Second, another problem that Jordanian students may face due to different syntactic features of Arabic and English is that Arabic is a null-subject language. In Arabic, it syntactically correct to produce nominal clauses and verbal clauses while in English only verbal clauses are correct. Arabic learners normally drop the subject in English as they used to create correct statements in Arabic without a subject such as (sā3id '3ayrak, yusā3idk), the correct equivalent in English is (help others so they help you). However, Arab learners translate it to (*help others, so help you). Dropping the subject here is clearly due to the Arabic syntactic feature that accepts it as correct without the subject. The subject in Arabic structure is covert while in English structure the subject is overt and comes before the verb, this is another word order issue.

Third, Jordanian students produce a number of verbless constructions especially with the copula be. In Arabic they can drop copula be creating nominal correct statements such as (A5i muhandis) while in English it is essential to use the copula be to produce such a statement (My brother is an engineer). Jordanian students produce wrong statements such as (* my brother engineer) relying on the fact that it is syntactically correct in Arabic. It is also obvious here that Arab learners drop the indefinite articles (a/an) as they do not have an equivalent in Arabic. One of the syntactic features of Arabic language is that it does not have any indefinite articles. Consequently, learners often drop indefinite articles in English.

Finally, in Arabic language, the Equative constructions are also verb less (two definite noun phrases separated by a nominative pronoun) such as (A5i huwwa al mas2oul). This confuses Jordanian students and they create wrong English equivalent such as (* my brother he responsible). The repetition of the subject here comes from their understanding of the Arabic grammatical rule that allows then to use a nominative pronoun between two nouns to make a nominal phrase that is considered correct in Arabic. Therefore, rather than saying (my brother is responsible) they say (*my brother he responsible).

How Jordanian teachers may help students to avoid mistakes:

Experience showed that, Jordanian students learn more and smoothly when they get involved in a 'do-it-yourself activity'. Encouraging critical thinking and autonomous learning helps Jordanian students to develop especially university students. Consequently, the researcher decided on applying this approach which offers some applications; these applications can be done by both teachers and learners as argued by Chambers (2010) that an inductive learning process "in which the learner plays an active part in the learning process, is the essence of it".

Teaching grammar in Jordan in particular and in the Arab countries in general, suffer from using the deductive teaching approach that adopts the technique of giving grammar rules to students as an abstract rather than allowing students to discover grammar for themselves. Therefore, teachers need to focus on learners' type and modern theories of teaching language while teaching grammar.

One of the modern techniques that allows Jordanian learners to acquire English syntax easily is using task-based learning as argued by Richards and Rodgers (2001). This approach highlights the nature of language, language learning and introduce a set of principles for language teaching in order to allow for individual interpretation and application of target language. Applying such an approach provides an easy and communicative environment for leaning language in general and grammar in particular. For instance, teaching syntax areas such as verb less constructions and word order needs communicative techniques rather than using the traditional grammar translation method. Therefore, the researcher suggests task-based learning approach in order to allow students to figure out rules for themselves rather than dictating grammar rules to them. Teachers may create a context that allows personalization (family members). Then ask students to complete a task such as describing a family member. This allows students to figure out the correct structure for themselves. By the end of such an activity, students will be allowed to use the target language and acquire this specific grammar pet unconsciously. This technique helps students to avoid negative transfer and understand meaning and use of grammar points correctly.

Another possible technique is make use of the positive transfer element in both languages (Arabic and English) by allowing students to notice and understand similarities between Arabic and English syntax. For examples, in teaching conditionals, teachers can use students' awareness of Arabic structure to build and support their awareness of this English structure. In Arabic, students use both clauses (If clause and main clause) to form hypothesis. In this case, it is easier to refer students to their knowledge of Arabic and ask them to use it in English. This allows positive transfer to take place and avoid misunderstanding. Consequently, in order to make learning English easy for Jordanian students, teachers need to be aware of similarities and differences among both Arabic and English syntax.

In conclusion, teachers are advised to apply modern teaching techniques such as guided discovery and task-based learning in order to avoid negative transfer, and use Arabic syntax as a reference to allow positive transfer. As a matter of fact, we can't ignore the rule of professional development by providing a series of training sessions and workshops on modern teaching techniques to raise teachers awareness of similarities and differences among Arabic and English syntax.

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