

The Effect of Negative Transfer on English Writing of Sudanese EFL Learners

Dr. Gamar Albooni

Associate Professor, Department of English, College of Arts, Jouf University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Khartoum, Sudan

Abstract: *This study tries to describe and analyse the effect of negative transfer on English writing of 50 Sudanese EFL learners studying in their third year of Offices Management and Information Systems at the Faculty of Technological and Developmental Studies, University of Khartoum. The Students were enrolled in a low- intermediate general English course for the whole year. Written samples of grammatical errors were taken at the end of the year. Grammatical errors were categorized into three types: omission, addition, and substitution, and analysed in terms of mother-tongue interference. The data provided a rank ordering of the subjects' areas of difficulty due to negative transfers. Prepositions, articles, nouns: wrong number and verbs to be are the main areas affected by negative transfer. The results provide useful information for researchers investigating the phenomenon of second-language acquisition and valuable information for teachers of Arabic speakers studying English about the systematic errors that occurred as a result of negative transfer.*

Keywords: Negative transfer, Interference of the mother tongue, Error analysis

1. Introduction

The problem of negative transfer in second language learning is considered one of the serious issues in learning English among Sudanese EFL learners. It is noticed that most of Sudanese EFL learners encounter problems in writing as a result of negative transfer when writing English sentences or short English paragraphs. This problem has been tried to be eradicated by teachers and instructors. Syllabuses, textbooks, and other methods have been changed, but students continue to make some basic and frustrating errors due to negative transfers in English writing. This study empirically and objectively attempts to answer the following questions: How does negative transfer affect the English writing of Sudanese EFL learners? And which areas of grammar are highly affected by negative transfer? Thus, the main objective of this study is to describe and analyse the grammatical errors caused by the negative transfer of Sudanese EFL learners in English writing.

2. Conceptual Background

This section reviews the following topics: theory of contrastive analysis, which is directly related to language transfer; definitions of language transfer; types of language transfer, and a literature review on transfer. Van (1984:46), defined contrastive analysis as "a scientific description of the target language in relation to a parallel description of the native language of the learner." Contrastive analysis theory sees the first language of the learners as either an obstacle or an aid to L2 learning. In other words, language learning is a matter of transfer. Positive transfer facilitates learning, and negative transfer leads to interference, which hinders learning. Thus, errors are caused by interference. According to Wardhaugh (1970), contrastive analysis has two versions: the strong version and the weak one. The strong version stated that all errors can be predicted by identifying the difference between the target language and the learner's first language, while, weak version claimed only to be diagnostic.

Language transfer is defined by Odlin (1989), as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired." In this sense, both Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) assumed that learners tend to transfer the characteristics of their native language and cultures into the foreign languages and cultures that they have learned. Transfer is defined by Faerch and Kasper (1987:27-34), "as the process by which L2 learners' active L1 knowledge in developing or using their inter-language (linguistic system between L1 and L2), and they also pointed out that the process may either support (positive transfer) or defect (negative transfer) from learning." O'Malley and Chamot (1990:89-97), believed that transfer is "the use of previous linguistic or prior skills to assist comprehension or production."

Corder (1973:132), stated that where the nature of the two tasks happens to be the same, the tendency to transfer 'positive' facilitation. This means that the first language habits help in target language acquisition. This view is supported by Zhao (2019), who believes that similarities between the target language and mother tongue can promote the learning of the target language. In contrast, negative transfer, as stated by Gass & Selinker (2001) refers to the use of native language patterns or rules that lead to an error in the target language. In the same line, Zhao (2019), pointed out that negative transfer occurs when the learning tasks of the two languages are different. The learner of a foreign language uses the expression and understanding expression of the mother tongue to replace the way of the foreign language.

Contrastive analysis theory assumes that L2 learners tend to transfer to their L2 utterances the formal features of their L1. However, James (1980), believes that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meaning of their native language to the target language. Gass & Selinker (1983), observed cases where those of the native language were transferred to the foreign language. This transfer occurs so subtly that learners are not aware of it unless it is called to their attention.

Volume 13 Issue 2, February 2024

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

www.ijsr.net

Ringbom(1987),believes that transfer depends on how closely the L1 is related to the L2. The closer the two languages, the greater number of cognates, and the congruence of the grammatical systems will facilitate learning the target language. However, Nunan (2001:89), believes that negative transfer is considered one of the main factors that lead students to make mistakes. He stated that “where the first and second language rules are not the same, errors are likely to occur as a result of interference between the two languages.” This goes in line with Ellis, (1997); Richard & Schmidt, (2000). If the two languages are drastically different, learners will use the linguistic patterns they have learned in their native language to help them do tasks in L2, thus negative transfer occurs.

3. Methodology

The participants of the study were 50 third -year students chosen randomly from the intermediate diploma of Offices Management and Information Systems at the Faculty of Technological and Developmental Studies at Khartoum University. The participants enrolled in a preintermediate general English language course for the whole year. All the participants’ native language is Arabic(Sudanese colloquial Arabic), and they learned English for 11 years. 4 years in basic schools, 3 years in secondary schools, and 3 years as a university requirement at the university. A written test was used to collect the data for this study at the end of the year. The students were asked to write a composition on “**My Family**”. Grammatical errors were categorized into three types: omission, addition and substitution and analysed in terms of mother-tongue interference. The data provided a rank ordering of the subjects' areas of difficulty due to negative transfer. Prepositions, articles, nouns: wrong number and verbs to be are the main areas affected by negative transfer.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 4.1: Numbers and percentage of Grammatical Errors due to Negative Transfer

Grammatical Errors	No. of Errors	% of Errors
Prepositions	143	41%
Articles	127	37%
Nouns: wrong number	49	14%
Verbs to be	26	8%
Total of Errors	345	100%

Table (4.1) shows the most frequent types of grammatical errors that occurred due to negative transfer in this study. As seen in Table (4.1) above, four types of frequent grammatical errors caused by interference of the mother tongue were counted: prepositions, articles, nouns wrong numbers and verbs to be.

4.1 Prepositions

As shown in Table (4.4) above, the grammatical errors of prepositions occurred due to negative transfer represented 41% of the total number of errors in this study. Essberger (2000), attributed the occurrence of this type of error among Arab learners of English to the difference

between Arabic and English prepositions in number and meaning. English has more than 150 prepositions while Arabic has a limited number of prepositions. According to Hamadalla, R. and Tushyeh, H. (1998), not every Arabic preposition has a definite equivalent in English, and vice versa. Also, not every English or Arabic preposition has a definite usage and meaning. The following type errors of prepositions were made by Sudanese EFL learners due to negative transfer.

Example: (1)

Incorrect. My mother waitedher friends to visit her.

Correct. My mother waited for her friends to visit her.

Example: (2)

Incorrect. My little brother watched a movie inTV.

Correct. My little brother watched a movie **on** TV.

Example: (3)

Incorrect. **On** last Friday we visited our uncle in Khartoum.

Correct. Last Sunday we visited our uncle in Khartoum.

In example (1) the preposition (for) was omitted due to negative transfer, because, in Sudanese colloquial Arabic in such a context, the verb (**waited**) does not require the preposition (for). For example, we say (*ummiantadharatsahibataha.....*) which is literally translated into English structure as (**waited** her friend.....).

In example (2) the preposition (**in**) was used instead of the preposition (**on**). Again, this is a case of interference of the mother tongue. In Sudanese colloquial Arabic, the preposition (on) can be translated into (*ala*) which is literally equivalent to the English preposition (**in**). Thus, a false analogy occurred.

In example (3), the preposition (**on**) was used redundantly. This error is attributed to negative transfer because in Sudanese colloquial Arabic, such structure requires the preposition. For example, we say (*fiyoumaljumaalmadi...*) which is literally translated into English (**On** last Friday....)

4.2 Articles

English has one definite article ‘*the*’ and two indefinite articles ‘*a*, *an*’. On the other hand, Arabic has only one definite article, ‘*al*’ which is attached to the beginning of the nouns and their adjectives, and no indefinite articles. (Sabbah, 2015). As seen in Table (4.1) above, 37% of errors caused by negative transfer occurred in English definite and indefinite articles.

Example (1)

Incorrect: My brother is... engineer.

Correct: My brother is **an** engineer.

Example (2)

Incorrect: My grandfather wasfarmer.

Correct: My grandfather was **a** farmer.

Example (3):

Incorrect: My two sisters study at **the** Khartoum University.

Correct: My two sisters study at Khartoum University.

The omission of the indefinite articles ‘*an*’ and ‘*a*’ in examples (1) and (2) arises from the interference of the mother tongue because Arabic has no indefinite articles. For example we say ‘*mohandis*’ and ‘*mozarie*’. Thus, a false analogy occurred.

In example (3) the definite article ‘*the*’ is redundantly used. This error is due to negative transfer because in Sudanese colloquial Arabic the definite article ‘*al*’ is required before proper nouns in such structures. For example, we say ‘*jamaatal Kharoum*’ which is translated into English as ‘*the Khartoum University*’. This error of redundancy occurred due to negative transfers.

4.3 Nouns: Wrong Number

As shown in Table (4.1) above, noun wrong number errors caused by negative transfer represent 14% of the total number of errors.

Example (1)

Incorrect: In our house we have 13 tree.

Correct: In our house we have 13 **trees**.

Example (2)

Incorrect: Rains give us clean waters.

Correct: Rains give us clean **water**.

Example (3)

Incorrect: My young brothers usually do their school homeworks in the evening.

Correct: My young brothers usually do their school **homework** in the evening.

In example (1), the plural marker (-s) was omitted from the plural noun (tree). The omission of the plural noun marker (-s) in example (1) arises from the interference of the mother tongue because, in Sudanese colloquial Arabic, the numbers from 11 and above are followed by a singular noun. We say ‘*13 shajarah*’ Thus, negative transfer occurred.

In examples (2) and (3) the plural maker (-s) was redundantly used with uncountable nouns (*water and homework*). This error could be attributed to negative transfer because these uncountable nouns in Arabic have a plural form. For example, we say ‘*maa / miyah*’ and ‘*wagib / wagibat*’. Thus, the plural marker (-s) was added to these uncountable nouns.

4.4 Verbs to be

As seen in Table (4.1) errors of verbs to be caused by negative transfers represent 8% of the total number of errors in this study. Sudanese colloquial Arabic has no ‘verb to be’. The absence of ‘verb to be’ in Sudanese colloquial Arabicca used interference problems for some Sudanese learners of English in this study.

Example (1)

Incorrect: My family ... very happy.

Correct: My family **is** very happy.

Example (2)

Incorrect: Farms... very green

Correct: Farms **are** very green

Example (3)

Incorrect: Our neighbors... so nice.

Correct: Our neighbors **are** so nice.

As seen in the 3 examples above, the ‘verb to be’ was omitted because in Sudanese colloquial Arabic, in such a structure, a verb is not required. We say (*Ausratysaeedah, mazariekhdra, jyanlatfeen*) Thus, a negative transfer occurred.

4. Conclusion

Negative transfers have a very high effect on the English writing of Sudanese EFL learners. Prepositions (41%), articles (37%), and nouns: wrong numbers (14%) and verb to be (8%) are the most affected areas by negative transfer. The results provide useful information for researchers investigating the phenomenon of second-language acquisition and valuable information for teachers of Arabic speakers studying English about the systematic errors that occurred as a result of negative transfer.

References

- [1] **Corder**, (1973:132) Errors Analysis. In P.B. Allen and S. Pit Corder (eds). Techniques in Applied Linguistics. London: Oxford University Press.
- [2] **Ellis** (1997) Second Language Acquisition, Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- [3] **Essberger, J.** (2000) English prepositions List. An English Club.com eBook. Retrieved fromwww.englishclub.com.
- [4] **Faerch and Kasper** (1987)Introspection in Second Language Research. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [5] **Fries, C. C.** (1945) Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- [6] **Gass & Selinker**(2001), *Second Language Acquisition*. 2nd edition. E-book. http://www.amazon.com/reader/0805835288?_encoding=UTF8&new_account=1&query=p%2078#reader_0805835288.
- [7] **Gass, S. & Selinker**,(1983) *Language transfer in language learning*. Newbury House, Rowley, Mass.
- [8] **Hamadalla, R. and Tushyeh,H.** (1998). A contrastive analysis of English and Arabic relativization. *Papers and studies in contrastive analysis*. 34, pp 141-152.
- [9] **James, C.** (1980) *Contrastive Analysis*. Essex: Long man.
- [10] **Lado, Robert** (1957) Linguistics Across Cultures. Michigan, USA
- [11] **Nunan, D** (2001:89)*Second Language Acquisition*. Carter, R. &Nunan, D., (eds.). The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages [C], pp 87-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- [12] **O'Malley and Chamot** (1990:89-97) Learning Strategies in Second Language Learning. New York: Longman.
- [13] **Odlin, T.** (1989) Language Transfer: Cross- linguistic influence in language learning. Cambridge University Press.
- [14] **Ringbom,** (1987) The role of the first language in foreign language learning. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.
- [15] **Sabbah, S. S.** (2015) Negative Transfer: Arabic Language Interference to Learning English. Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Special Issue on Translation No. 4 , 269-288.
- [16] **Van, et al** (1984:46) Applied Linguistics and the Learning and Teaching of Foreign Languages. London: Edward Arnold.
- [17] **Wardhaugh, R.** (1970)" The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis" TESOL: 4,2,123-130
- [18] **Zhao, Y. N.** (2019). Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in English. Creative Education, 10, 940-946.