

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis: A Study with a Reference to Arab EFL Learners' Errors

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Abstract

This study was designed to provide information regarding Arab EFL learners' grammatical errors. It pays attention to some areas in English grammar which may represent difficulty for Arab EFL learners due to the differences between Arabic and English. It surveys briefly the history of contrastive analysis hypothesis and its significance in the field of applied linguistics and then it compares some grammatical aspects of English and Arabic to show examples of some differences between Arabic grammar and English grammar which cause difficulties for Arab learners of English such as verbs, Articles, copula, word order and prepositions.

Keywords: *Contrastive analysis hypothesis, Arab EFL learners, grammatical errors*

1. Introduction

Composing a text free of grammatical errors is not an easy task that every student can achieve. It requires a hard study of grammar with more practice in writing and orally. Grammar is viewed as the fifth skill when talking about language skills since language four skills cannot function effectively without a good level of grammatical knowledge. A speech or piece of writing that has poor grammar seems to be ambiguous because a simple grammatical error may create a big ambiguity which leads to a very completely different meaning. It is for this reason that traditional methods such as grammar-translation method made grammar at the centre of language learning and teaching process and equaled language learning to the learning of grammatical rules and vocabulary. With the emergence of communicative language teaching approach that has emphasized communication as the centre of language teaching and learning, grammar has not been ignored as some teachers may think. Grammatical competence has constituted one major part of the major aim of language learning which is the communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Ahmed & Pawar, 2018).

Due to the significance of grammar in language, bilingual studies and contrastive analysis studies have attempted from early ages to compare grammar different languages as a way to facilitate grammar teaching and expect areas of difficulties. It is for this reason that this study was designed to highlight some differences between Arabic grammar and English grammar which may cause difficulties for Arab learners of English.

1.1. Objectives of the study

This study aims at investigating differences between Arabic grammar and English grammar in terms of verbs, copula, prepositions, articles and word order which may result in students' negative transfer and making errors when constructing English sentences.

2. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)

According to Keshavarz (2011), contrastive analysis (CA) is “the systematic study of a pair of languages in order to identify their structural differences and similarities, usually for translation and teaching purposes” (p.5). It aims at comparing learners' mother-tongue with their target language in order to find out the differences between the first language and the target language of the learner and how to overcome such difficulties in the teaching process. In this regard, Keshavarz (2011) argued that:

Modern contrastive linguistics intends to show in what ways the two respective languages differ, in order to come up with some solutions to tackle practical problems. That is, two languages are compared and contrasted with the aim of assisting second-language learners by identifying the probable areas of difficulty they may encounter in learning the target language. (p.5)

It was influenced by the behaviorist theory of language learning and it rests, according to Dulay and Burt (1974), on two major assumptions rooted in the behaviorist theory of language learning:

1. *Language learning is habit formation.*
2. *An old habit (that of using one's first language) hinders or facilitates the formation of a new habit (learning as second language) depending on the differences or similarities, between the old and the new. (p. 97)*

Since the contrastive analysis hypothesis based on the behaviorist view of language learning, its proponents believe that through the contrastive analysis they can expect learners' potential errors or potential areas of difficulty through studying the similarities and differences between the habits of learners' mother language and his/ her target language. Those language habits that are similar will be easier to learn while those that are different can be of potential difficulty for the learners. In this regard, Lado (1957, p. 2) argued that:

When the learners are exposed to the language, they find that some features are easy to them to grasp and others are difficult. Those elements that are similar to their native language will be simple for them, and those elements that are different will be difficult.

2.1. Historical Background of Contrastive Analysis

The history of studies comparing languages goes back to 18th century and it has become more prominent as an integrated part of language teaching in the 20th century. During the Second World War, the military personals were in need to communicate with their allies and enemies and there was a huge need to learn languages quickly. Therefore, language teaching methodologists and applied linguists collaborated to find methods that help them in teaching foreign languages. Since the advocates of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis claimed that the most effective materials for teaching foreign languages are those based on contrastive studies, such materials were introduced in language teaching and the CA was recognized as a crucial part of foreign language teaching and the ultimate solution for all language teaching problems.

Literature in this field has shown two types of comparative studies, namely theoretical contrastive studies and applied contrastive studies. The theoretical contrastive studies, according Fisiak (1985), "give an exhaustive account of the differences and similarities between two or more languages, provide an adequate model for their comparison, and determine how and which

elements are comparable” (p. 2). On the other hand, the applied contrastive studies are viewed as a part of applied linguistics since this analysis has been concerned with practical problems of foreign language teaching, particularly, how to assist interlanguage transfer and avoid interlanguage interference. In the words of Keshavarz (2011) “a major task of applied contrastive studies is explaining why some features of the target language are more difficult to acquire than others” (p. 6).

Contrastive analysis was applied as an integrated branch of applied linguistics by the mid of the 20th century and among its proponents were Charles Fries and Robert Laddo. In this regard, Al-khresheh (2013) argued that the contrastive analysis hypothesis was developed by Charles Fries (1945) as an integral component of the methodology of foreign language teaching. It based on the idea that foreign language learners bring with them a set of knowledge from their first language and such knowledge should be taken into consideration in the foreign language teaching. Based on this hypothesis, the description of the target language to be learned in comparison to the first language is crucial for the target language learning and teaching. Such a description tells us the similarities and differences between the first language and the target foreign language which help us in predicting the problematic learning areas for the learners. That is, where there are similarities between learner’s first language rules and the rules of his target foreign language, learning will take place easily and smoothly while the areas which represent differences between the first language and the target foreign language can be expected to be of some potential difficulties.

To put it simply, language learning was viewed as a habit formation through the behaviorist perspective that was dominating language teaching in that period and foreign language learning was viewed as transferring of habits from the first language to the second language with forming new habits. Thus, contrastive analysis was expected to be an effective method that tells teachers how the transfer of linguistic habits from learners’ first language to their second or foreign language helps or interrupts the target language learning. Transfer can be defined as the influence of the learner’s mother tongue on the acquisition of the target language (Al-khresheh, 2013). This transfer can be considered as a strategy in foreign language learning and the contrastive analysis is the method by which learners and teachers can predict the difficulties the learners may encounter in their learning of their foreign language and to provide some solutions

in the teaching materials. In other words, the contrastive analysis hypothesis is a method by which a foreign language learning will be enhanced as teachers and syllabi designers can predict the difficult areas to be encountered by students and such areas will be then given more attention in the teaching materials and classroom teaching to overcome such difficulties.

2.2. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Behaviorist Theory

As shown in the historical background above, the contrastive analysis was applied in language learning by the mid of the 20th century. It was extensively applied during the 50s and 60s of the 20th century when the behaviorist theory was dominating the field of teaching generally and foreign language teaching particularly. Then, it went down when other theories came out and showed that foreign language learning cannot be explained by habit formation and transferring of habits. Behaviorists viewed language learning as habits formation and foreign language learning as transferring habits from first language to foreign language with building up new habits through imitation and repetition drills (Hutchinson & Water, 1987, p.40). This assumption for foreign language learning was highlighted by Lado (1957) where he argued that:

Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture, both productively when attempting to speak the language and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language. (p. 2)

Thus, one question that occupied the minds of the behaviorists and structuralists was how to explain the fact that some foreign language features are more difficult to be acquired than others. They therefore collaborated with the researchers in contrastive studies to get an explanation for this question and their efforts led to integrating contrastive analysis hypothesis as a pedagogical technique in the field of applied linguistics. This technique helps in identifying the differences between two languages which can represent areas of difficulties and their causes to suggest some solutions through highlighting such issues in the teaching materials. In this regard, Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005, p.52) argued that:

CA involved describing comparable features across the two languages, identifying the differences and, then, predicting what errors learners would make. It served two

major purposes: first it provided an explanation for why learners make errors, and secondly it served as a source of information for identifying which structural areas of the TL teachers needed to teach (i.e., those where negative transfer was likely).

Contrastive analysis was therefore viewed as an effective technique for predicting foreign language learning difficulties and facilitating foreign language learning. In this regard, Lado (1957, p. 9) argued that those foreign language features that are similar to learner's native language will be simple for the learner, and those features that are different will be difficult. He claimed that "the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning lies in the comparison" (p.1). In this regard, Fisiak (1985, p. 7) also highlighted that contrastive analysis followers suggest that teachers should do contrastive analysis between the native language and the target language so as to predict the learning problems that will be faced by their students. Rustipa (2011) has pointed out some assumptions for making language teaching effective with the help of the contrastive analysis:

to make foreign language teaching more effective, to find out the differences between the first language and the target language based on the assumptions that: (1) foreign language learning is based on the mother tongue, (2) similarities facilitate learning (positive transfer), (3) differences cause problems (negative transfer/Interference), (3) via contrastive analysis, problems can be predicted and considered in the curriculum. (p. 17)

To conclude the discussion on the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH), it can be said that CAH was widely influential in the field of second and foreign language teaching during the 1950s and 1960s, then it began to decline by the 1970s due to the criticism targeting its underlying theories, namely structural linguistics and behaviorism. New perspectives came out in the 1970s which viewed language as a system of communication and language learning as a cognitive process which emphasizes the creativity of the learner in the language learning. We do not say here that contrastive analysis has become of no use after this date but it has been viewed as covering only one portion of learner's errors so-called interference errors. Studies like Richards (1974) challenged Lado's contrastive analysis by showing errors in learner's performance in the target language that cannot be explained by the interference but reflect a kind

of “faulty generalization” or “an incomplete application of rules” (p.174). These studies highlighted the insufficiency of the contrastive analysis hypothesis and the need for a new approach that analyzes errors caused by other factors than interference. Consequently, error analysis has come into existence and become a branch of applied linguistics which covers all types of learner’s errors, including interference errors.

3. Contrastive Error Analysis with a Reference to Arab Learner’s Errors in English

Arab learners usually make several errors which results from their negative transfer from Arabic into English. This part of this research article will highlight some of areas of potential errors made by Arab learners of English based on the researchers’ experience with Arab learners of English. It will focus on some basic grammatical areas as follows:

3.1. Verb Errors

There are only two tenses or aspects in Arabic language, namely a. past tense and b. present tense while there are several tenses in English such as past tense, present tense, past continuous tenses, present continuous tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, simple future tense, continuous future tense, perfect future tense, past perfect continuous tense and present perfect continuous tense. Such differences in tenses between English and Arabic create problems for Arab learners of English. Many Arab learners of English tend to use past simple tense to express past time and the present simple tense to express all present and future actions as in the case of Arabic. This is one of the potential areas for Arab EFL learners’ errors.

3.2. Article Errors

In Arabic, the definiteness is usually identified by adding the definite article ‘AL’ before the noun such as in (AL-Qamar, AL-Aradh) which mean (The moon, The earth), while the indefiniteness is identified by the omission of the article ‘AL’ as in (Shagra, Madrasa) which means (tree, school). As the case is different in English while the article ‘The’ is used to express definiteness and the articles ‘a and an’ are used to express indefiniteness, we find that some Arab learners of English tend to omit the indefinite articles ‘a and an’ as in the case of Arabic.

3.3. Word Order Errors

Word order is one of the most difficult areas for Arab learners of English due to the differences between Arabic and English. The subject, for example, comes before the verb in English as in ‘John goes to school’ while in Arabic there is a tendency to use verbal sentences in which the verb comes before the subject as in ‘Yazhab John to school’. The adjective also comes before the noun in English such as ‘ a beautiful garden’ while in Arabic the adjective comes after the noun as in ‘Hadiqah gamilah’.

3.4. Copula Errors

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983), the verb ‘to be’ functions as both an auxiliary verb and as a copula. It functions as an auxiliary verb when it is used with another main verb while it functions as a copula when it is a main verb in a sentence and it is used to connect the subject of the sentence to its complement. As far as copula errors made by the Arab learners, the researchers found that many Arab learners tend to omit the verb ‘to be’ in their English sentences. This omission results from students ‘ negative transfer from their Arabic. For example, they write English sentences such as (He a doctor., They teachers., The garden beautiful) which are literal translation for the Arabic sentences (Hwa tabib. Hom modarsoon. and AL-Hadiqah gamilah).

3.5. Preposition Errors

Prepositions are one of the parts of speech and it can be viewed as functional words that are used to combine nouns to form phrases and to link nouns to other parts of a sentence. It is usually called functional words because it plays functional roles in sentences by showing some relationships between its elements rather than having specific meanings by itself. Hendricks (2010) stated that “learning English prepositions is notoriously difficult and a slow, gradual process for ESL students” (p. 24). This difficulty in learning English prepositions can be due to the nature of the prepositions itself in English or/and to the difference between the prepositions in English and the prepositions in the other languages.

The prepositions in English are many and their uses can be different based on the relationships they express in a sentence or a phrase. Among their uses are to indicate place such as (*'I am at the university', 'The cat is under the table', 'He lives in New York'*), time such as (*'I go to school at 7 a.m.', 'She was born in 1998', 'I will meet him on Sunday'*), and possession such as (*The legs of the table ...etc'*).

As far as prepositions errors made by Arab learners of English are concerned, the researchers will provide here some examples of students' errors concerning three preposition '*in, on and at*'. These three prepositions are usually used to indicate place and time and each of which has its specific use in English to indicate time and/or place which can be somehow different from that of Arabic. For example, when indicating time, their Arabic equivalence is the preposition letter (في) and it is sometimes hidden in Arabic as the Arabic phrase can be written without a preposition such as (*Ana walidtou a'am 1998 1998* أنا ولدت عام 1998 1998 or *Walidtou fi 1998 1998* ولدت في 1998 1998) which can be translated into English like this '*I was born in 1998*'. In the case of place, the equivalent preposition letter for the English propositions *in* and *at* is the Arabic preposition (في) while the preposition *on* has the Arabic equivalence (*Ala* على).

4. Conclusion

This study revisits the contrastive error analysis hypothesis with a reference to Arab learners of English. It goes through the history of contrastive analysis hypothesis and its significance in the field of applied linguistics. It then implemented this hypothesis on Arab learners of English to show examples of some differences between Arabic grammar and English grammar which cause difficulties for Arab learners of English such as verbs, Articles, copula, word order and prepositions.

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