Error Analysis: A Case Study of High Basic Stage Students in Latin Secondary School in Zarqa, Jordan

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Abstract

Errors made by Jordanian school students due to transfer from Arabic to English were analyzed in an attempt to help them overcome their weakness. The subjects of the study are private mixed school students in Zarqa. They are in the tenth grade and have been taught English mainly by Arab teachers. The study consists of 32 students who were asked to write a paragraph consists of 100 to 150 words. They were given sufficient time and asked to write freely and to express their points of view about the given topic. Errors from the scripts were analyzed on the basis of models given in literature. All types of errors were committed by the students which suggest that attention should be devoted to writing at high basic stage .

Keywords: Error Analysis; Sources of Errors; Error Identification and Categorization

1.   Introduction

Communication is the chief purpose of using language by which individuals exchanged information through the use of some symbols, signs or behavior (AbiSamra, 2003). English communication has always been a source of great difficulty for non-native speakers regardless of his or her mother tongue. This is may be due to the fact that non-native speakers when trying to learn a second language tend to think in their mother tongue as they communicate orally and/or in writing. They fail to correctly use the rules that are automatized for English native speakers. In this sense, they are more prone to making mistakes or committing errors.

During the past few decades the Ministry of Education in Jordan has focused its attention on teaching English as a foreign or second language for both secondary as well as elementary cycles students. It is expected that elementary school students should be able to write short English passages which are grammatically correct with proper punctuation. While, according to Jayyusi et al (1990), all Jordanian secondary school graduates are expected to communicate spontaneously, effectively and confidently about a broad range of topics. However, the research studies (Abdul Haq, 1982; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984; Rababah, 2003) have been carried out to investigate errors committed by Jordanian school learners of English reveal that the secondary cycle students encounter serious problems in speaking and writing. Since most of the secondary school graduates join either national universities or associate colleges as English language majors or English language earners, hence the aforementioned problems are extended to higher education in Jordan. Indeed Mukattash (1983) has reported that Jordanian university students not only unable to express themselves when dealing with academic topics or common everyday topics, but also they make some basic errors in pronunciation, spelling, morphology and syntax. In general, this weakness of Jordanian university students in learning English, according to Mukattash (ibid) and other researchers (Suleiman, 1983; Zughoul, 1983; Ibrahim, 1983) has been attributed to school and English language departments curricula and teaching methodology.

As mentioned earlier writing errors is one of most important problems that are made by Jordanian students. In this regard, the present work is an attempt to analyze writing errors made by students due to transfer of Arabic linguistic structures into English, although they have been studying English since the first grade. Therefore, studying of errors which learners make is quiet important because several researchers (AbiSamra and the references therein, ibid) consider them as a device the learner uses to learn. Error analysis is based on the model suggested by Corder (1967). This model consists of three important stages: Data collection, description and explanation. Moreover, Gass and Selinker (2001) introduces a model of 6 steps that should be followed in conducting an error analysis: Collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analyzing source of error, and remediating for errors. Sources of errors were classified by Corder (1974) into language transfer, overgeneralization or analogy, methods or materials used in the teaching. James (1998), however, exposed three main diagnosis-based categories of error: interlingual/transfer errors, intralingual/ developmental errors and induced errors. In view of these models, the present paper is addressed to analyze errors made by Jordanian students in writing due to transfer from Arabic to English. After categorizing the errors, I will try to determine the areas of difficulty facing Jordanian students in writing and how one can help them to overcome such difficulty.

2. Method

2.1. Data Collection

The subjects of the study are a private school students in Zarqa (Latin secondary mixed school). They are in the tenth grade. They've been studying English since their first grade and have been taught English mainly by Arab

teachers. They speak Arabic outside class in school and at home. They practice their English only inside class. They were asked to write on the topic *pollution* in 100 to 150 words. They were given sufficient time to produce a final draft. The study consists of 32 students.

2.2 Error Identification and Categorization
Based on the above mentioned models for error analysis and for simple explanation, errors were categorized as follows: *Grammatical* (agreement, prepositions, articles, and singular/plural words), *syntactic* (coordination and word order), *lexical* (word order), *semantic and substance* (spelling and capitalization). All of which are brought about by the influence of the mother tongue (negative influence) which is in this case Arabic.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1 Grammatical errors
3.1.1 Agreement
Arabic verbs agree with their subjects in person, number and gender. Therefore, Arabic students (Jordanian) make few subject-verb agreement errors in their essays except where the subject's number is confusing. However, another kind of agreement error occurs: that of adjectives or adverbs agreeing with nouns they modify. In English, few adjectives show agreement with the nouns they modify, such as " this-these" and "that-those". Other adjectives are used to modify singular as well as plural nouns. In Arabic, however, the situation is different in the sense that adjectives agree in number with the nouns they modify. As a result, agreement errors of this type occur in the writings of Jordanian students, for example:
- I went to others places.

Instead of: I went to other places.
- People should use others killers of flies.

Instead of: People should use other
- The hairs spray

The underlined word takes the plural form in Arabic.
3.1.2 Articles
In English, abstract words referring to ideas, attributes, or qualities are used without the article "the" to refer to the idea or attribute, etc. which belongs to everybody or everything. In Arabic, however, such abstract words are preceded by a definite article equivalent to "the" in English. Hence, errors pertaining to the misuse of "the" occur (AbiSamra)(ibid). For instance, the students write in their scripts the following:
- The pollution is a very dangerous problem.

Instead of: Pollution is a very dangerous problem.
- The water is not clean now.

Instead of: Water is not clean now.
3.1.3 Prepositions
According to Scott and Tucker (1974) prepositions pose a great difficulty for an EFL learner since there are various prepositions in English that have the same function. This is the reason why some researchers (Kharma and Hajjaj)(1997) considered prepositions' errors as an everlasting problem for EFL Arab learners. Often, this is because when they want to write a certain sentence they compare it with its Arabic equivalent, giving a literal translation of that Arabic preposition in English. Below are some examples from the scripts of the students who are the subject of this study:
- I mean in this example.

  Instead of: I mean by this example.
- In a high level.

  Instead of: At a high level.

  Since the Arabic version is equivalent to "in"
- We are not ready to the problem.

  Instead of: We are not ready for the problem.

  Since the Arabic version is equivalent to "to".
- Don't do anything from this sort.

  Instead of: Don't do anything of this sort.

  Since the Arabic version is equivalent to "from".
3.1.4 Singular vs. plural words
Most of the students who are the subject of this study were unable to determine whether a certain English word is singular or plural. Some English words that end with an "s" are actually singular. Other words indicate a singular or plural while maintaining the same form. Some examples are given below:
- Statistics are done

Instead of: Statistics is done …(The word statistics ends with "s" and is a plural word in Arabic explains why students mistake it for a plural word in English).
- You can find <u>informations.</u>
Instead of: You can find information. (It takes the plural form in Arabic).

3.2 Lexical Errors

Due to their limited English vocabulary, students frequently translate from Arabic to English to express a certain idea. Their balance of vocabulary might not help them to find the suitable word for a certain context, so they resort to translation from Arabic. For instance:
- Killers of flies. The students didn't know a word in English to express the idea, so he/she translated from Arabic to English to explain what he/she means. His/her vocabulary balance didn't include a word like "insecticides" for example.
- Pollution is the most important problem we have to <u>treat</u>.
  Instead of: we have to solve. The student translated from Arabic to English to illustrate his/her point.
- Nature is a <u>merit</u> of God.
  Instead of: Gift
- The <u>leftovers</u> of factories.
Instead of: Waste

When I read students scripts, I noticed that some of them weren't even able to translate from Arabic to English. Some resorted to transliteration as in the following examples:
- Nature is treated and used wrongly such as water in <u>Al-Zarqa Sail.</u>
  The student didn't know the equivalent term in English 'Zarqa Valley' so he wrote it in Arabic but using English alphabets.
- Full of diseases like <u>sill</u>.
  The student didn't know the name of the disease in English 'Tuberculosis' so he wrote it in Arabic using English letters that represent the sound of it.

Some students went far beyond that and wrote the words in Arabic:
Seem like غير لائق. (means inappropriate)
Make محطة تنفية. (means water purification plant)

3.3 Semantic errors

Semantic errors occur when students use literal translation to convey Arabic expressions, idioms or proverbs. They hope that it will enrich their writings. The following are illustrative examples:
- We <u>fell in the fault</u>.
Instead of: make mistake.
- One can't change <u>between one night and the other</u>.
Instead of: One can't change overnight.

3.4 Syntactic errors

It is well known that (Abishamsi and the references therein, ibid) in English, items in a series are separated by commas, and the coordinate conjunction "and" is used just before the last word. On the other hand, in Arabic, each item in a series is preceded by conjunction "wa" which is equivalent to "and ". Accordingly, Jordanian students when naming items tend to apply the Arabic way. The following are illustrative examples:
- It makes the environment polluted and it pollutes the area and the food we eat and the water we drink. (repetition of "wa" conjunction).

Other common syntactic error that Jordanian students commit as a result of transfer is faulty word order. In English, adjectives precede the nouns they modify, whereas, in Arabic they follow them. An example of this sort of error is given below:
- Here are three rules very helpful.
Instead of: Here are three very helpful rules.

A similar mistake occurs with the use of adverbs since an adverb that modifies an adjective or other adverb usually precedes that adjective or adverb, as in the following example:
- Every person <u>almost</u> has an idea. (following the Arabic word order)
Instead of: Almost every person has an idea.

3.5 Substance
3.5.1 Spelling
It should be mentioned that the problem of spelling has nothing to do with L1 transfer since Arabic is extremely

different from English. It is reported (Brooks et al, 1993) that English native speakers make serious spelling mistakes. This is was concluded by the National Foundation for Educational Research in England (NFER), who looked at essays written by 1492 secondary school students at the two ages of 11 and 15. However, they found that a good improvement occurs between the ages of 11 and 15. I noticed that all types of spelling mistakes such as insertion of extra letters, omission of letters, substitution of different letters, and transposition of two letters were observed in the student's scripts. Therefore, we can say making spelling mistakes is a common problem among school students and we have to train them to write properly.

3.5.2 Capitalization

There is no capital letters in Arabic and hence no distinction between upper and lower case. The following are illustrative examples:

- in our world many people live on it and …

Instead of: In our……..(They fail to apply the rules of capitalization when writing in English- They don't begin sentences with capital letters)

- in jordan we have environmental pollution.

Instead of: In Jordan ……(They write names of places with the lower case)

4. Conclusion

According to this study, Jordanian students are facing problems in writing due to the influence of their mother tongue. What should we, teachers, do then? It would be very useful to increase the number of assignments which will force the students to do a lot of research during their free time, hence they would be reading a lot of English materials and thinking of English, especially if they have to make oral presentations.   Besides, teachers should incite our students to speak English at home and with their friends to reduce the number of errors due to first language transfer.

In this work, an attempt is made to identify and categorize errors made by Jordanian students as a result of transfer from Arabic. Results of this study indicate that most of the committed errors are grammatical, spelling, and semantic. The main conclusion of the study is that greater consideration should be given for writing at the high basic stage stage.

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