

# Mother-Tongue Interference in the Acquisition of English Articles by L1 Arabic Students

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## Abstract

Native speakers of Arabic face a number of problems in their attempt to acquire the English language. One of these problems is encountered in their attempt to use English articles. According to earlier studies, learning English articles by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic is one of the most frequent and significant difficulties Arab learners of English come across. This paper supports and highlights such findings. Arab learners of English encounter difficulties in their use of the English articles because of the differences between the article systems in both languages. The Arabic language has an article system that functions differently, the notion of definiteness and indefiniteness are encoded differently than in that of the English language. Given the fact that articles are one of the most frequent words used in the English language, this paper has aimed to pin down such an important issue. The aim of this paper is to pinpoint previous researchers' findings regarding English articles. This is done by illustrating how the differences between the Arabic and English languages in concern to the article system cause Arab learners of English to make mistakes or even errors in their English learning process.

**Keywords:** English expression, Mother-tongue, Arab learners

## 1. Introduction

Learners of English, despite their different backgrounds, face difficulties when it comes to learning English as a second or foreign language. Nonetheless, it is found that native speakers of English encounter shared difficulties when it comes to using English articles. This is found to be so because of the nature of the Arabic article systems and its influence on Arabic English learners. It is found that the cause of such problematic issues is due to mother-tongue interference. Mother-tongue interference means the effect of the learners' native language on second/foreign language learning. Therefore, it is found that the Arabic language interferes with Arab learners of the English language, especially when it comes to using English articles. Due to the differences between the Arabic and English article system such problems arise. This paper, lists these problems, discusses, explains and analyzes them.

## 2. Literature Review

Mother-tongue refers to one's native language or parent language. ("mother tongue," 2015). Mother-tongue interference refers to the influence of the native language of the learner on her/his acquisition of the target language. What we mean by the target language is the language the learner is aiming to learn (L2). ("Contrastive analysis," 2015).

When teaching English as a second language, problems of mother-tongue interference arise. One of these problems is mother-tongue interference in Arabic-native speakers' acquisition of the English articles.

Contrastive analysis is concerned with the study of a pair of languages with the aim of discovering their structural similarities and differences. Contrastive Analysis is a method that was widely used in the 1960s and early 1970s to explain why some features of a target language were more difficult to learn than others. (Mozlan, 2015)

Contrastive analysis is used to explain why certain features in second language acquisition are more difficult to learn than others. This method is based on the idea that the more difference between the learners' mother-tongue and the target language, the more difficulty the learner will face in acquiring these structures or items. ("Contrastive analysis," 2015).

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) is based on the claim that the difficulty of second language acquisition could be discovered or foretold depending on the degree of difference between the learners first and second language. However, there are certain problems with this hypothesis. One problem, for instance, is that this hypothesis does not predict many of the errors the learner makes in second language acquisition. Another problem is that this hypothesis predicts interference errors where none would arise. (Eric, 2008)

According to Lado's Linguistics across Cultures (1957) those items of a target language that are similar to the learners first language will be easy for her/him to learn. And, those items of a target language that are different than the learners first language will be difficult for the learner to acquire. This is what the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis suggests. (Mozlan, 2015)

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) comes in two versions the strong version and the weak version. The strong version suggests that the number of errors a learner of a target language will face could be

equated to the degree of difference between the learners L1 and L2. The weak version suggests that errors a learner of a target language faces depends on the degree of interference a learner faces. ("Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis," 2015)

Arab learners of English tend to make errors when they try to use the article system in ESL/EFL. These errors, as mentioned before, are attributed to the difference between the two article systems in both Arabic language and the English language. I.e., these errors are made due to the interference of the learners' mother-tongue (Arabic) on the learners target language (English). Interference of the mother-tongue is also known as "Transfer". Transfer is defined as the effect of the learners first language upon the learners target language. It is important to mention, though, that there are two types of transfer, in language learning. According to Sabbah (2015, p. 271) "Transfer can be of two types: positive transfer and negative transfer. The positive transfer refers to the process of using rules from L1 which facilitates or has a positive influence on learning L2. This transfer is mostly due to similarities between L1 and L2. In contrast, negative transfer is the transfer of rules from L1 which impedes or has harmful influence on the command of rules of L2. This is due to differences between L1 and L2".

The cause of errors can be explained by referring to language theories and learning theories. Among these theories are the Contrastive Analysis Theory and the Error Analysis Theory. As declared earlier, the Contrastive Analysis Theory is used to explain learners' errors. Contrastive Analysis studies the similarities and differences between two languages or more. It asserts the claim that learners will tend to depend on and refer back to their native language when they encounter target language items that greatly differ with their mother-tongue. The other theory that is used to explain learners errors is "Error Analysis", which studies learners errors in the target language with the aim of recognizing the reasons behind such errors and their causes.

### 3. Results

According to previous research, learning English articles by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic is asserted to the significance of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. This paper supports and highlights such findings. Due to the difference between the Arabic article system and the English article system, many Arab learners of English encounter difficulties while trying to learn the correct use of articles in English language. The difficulty in learning English articles if faced by L2 English learners whose native language has no article system or whose native language has an article system that functions differently. According to the Arabic language, the notion of definiteness and indefiniteness are encoded differently than English. The English language system uses the definite article "the", the indefinite articles "a"/ "an", and the zero article "Ø". While the Arabic language uses the definite article "al" which is used in a superficially similar way to the English definite article. That is because the Arabic language encodes the notions of definiteness and indefiniteness in a different way than that of the English language. In the Arabic language, the definite article is "al"/ " ال ". Whereas, the definite article has no equivalence in the Arabic language. I.e., there is no indefinite article in Arabic. Furthermore, because of the uniqueness of the English article system, Arabic L1 learners of the English language face significant difficulties in learning the English article system all over the world. Given the fact that articles are one of the most frequent words used in the English language, this paper has aimed to discuss such an important matter. (Hassan, 2011, p. 3)

The aim of this paper is to pinpoint previous researchers' findings regarding English articles clarifying how the differences between the Arabic and English languages in concern to the article system cause Arab learners of English to make mistakes or even errors in their English learning process. These mistakes or errors are unconsciously or involuntarily made by Arab learners of English due to the differences between the article system in the two languages.

It should be recalled, here, that mistakes and errors are unlike according to Ellis, Corder and Brown among others (as cited in Sabbah, 2015, p.270). Mistakes are considered slips of the tongue and can be self corrected. Mistakes are made due to lapses in the learners performance. Whereas, errors are deeper. They are made because of ignorance of the correct rule or structure, are made repeatedly and cannot be recognized by the learner of the target language. I.e., errors cannot be self-corrected, as in the case of mistakes. Errors are problems in the learners knowledge of the target language and only teachers can recognize them, not the learner herself/himself. Mistakes are lapses in the learners performance. As for errors, they are gaps in the learners competence or knowledge. (Sabbah, 2015, p. 270)

### 4. Discussion

Arab learners of English tend to make noticeable errors when encountering articles in English. Arab EFL/ESL learners tend to misuse articles in English. According to Diab (as cited by Sabbah, 2015, p. 273) Arabic speaking learners of English tend to make three types of errors when using the English articles. The first error is the omission of the definite article. For example, "School library is open" instead of "The school library is open" due to the interference of the Arabic language " مكتبة المدرسة مفتوحة " , where there is no use of the definite article. Instead zero article is used. In the previous sentence, the definite article should have been used but is not because

it is not used in Arabic. The second error Arab learners make when facing English articles is the Omission of the indefinite article "a". For example, the Arab learner of English would say "My sister works in hospital" instead of "my sister works in a hospital". In such a sentence, the learner would drop the indefinite article "a" and not use it maybe because such an article does not exist in the learners mother-tongue (Arabic). Wherein, the Arabic translation of such a sentence is "تعمل أختي في مستشفى". The third error Arab learners make when using English articles is the wrong insertion of the definite article "the" in front of nouns, which are not usually preceded by "the".

Such an error is made because in the Arabic language such a noun would be preceded by the definite article "the". For instance, the definite article "the" in Arabic would be used in nouns referring to names of diseases, names of places, names of days and also in many idiomatic expressions. For example, "I live in the Bahrain" instead of "I live in Bahrain". In this sentence, the definite article "the" is incorrectly inserted before the noun "Bahrain" because the equivalent sentence in Arabic does so. As in the translated sentence "أنا أسكن في البحرين". Another example is the sentence "My friend studies the Arabic", where the definite article "the" is inserted before the noun "Arabic" because it is done so in the Arabic translation of the sentence, as in "تدرس صديقتي العربية". (Sabbah, 2015, p.273)

Making mistakes and errors when learning a new language is something inevitable. However, teachers should not discourage students by correcting every single error. It is also needed that teachers highlight common errors learners of a target language make in their learning process. It is suggested, here, that teachers correct frequent errors made by students and not frustrate students by correcting every single error. Mistakes and errors should lead to improvement, progress and not lead to frustration. As well, teachers should learn how and when to correct these errors. Also, the suggestion, here, to teachers of second and foreign language classrooms is to show respect to students' native language. It is also needed that teachers highlight to Arab learners of English the areas where the native language would be a source of error, if the teacher was knowledgeable of the learners native language. If not, teachers could ask their Arabic L1 speaking students how a rule is used in their native language. (Sabbah, 2015, p. 273).

## 5. Methods

A qualitative approach is being followed in this paper. Through the study of previous case studies, accomplished researches, and pre-existing tests and questionnaires, a thorough analysis of data is reached. As such, this paper depends on the study and analysis of pre-existing data. Through the comparison between Arabic and English article systems certain cases are observed also.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper concludes that learning English articles by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic emphasizes the importance of Contrastive Analysis. This is due to the fact that Arabic L1 speakers encounter huge difficulty while attempting to use English articles. The source of such difficulty is based on the degree of difference between the Arabic article system and the English article system.

The difficulty in learning English articles by Arabic L1 speakers is because their native language has an article system that functions differently. Thus, it is concluded here that teachers of English to L1 Arabic speakers should take such matters into consideration and attempt to clarify areas of expected difficulty with regard to the learners first language.

This, in turn should help learners overcome such problems and lead to better target language acquisition.

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