

# My Mother Tongue Pulls My Leg Arabic Language Interference in the Acquisition of English Language: An Attempt to Know How

Dr. Muna Mohammed Abbas Alkhateeb  
Faculty of Basic Education, Babylon University, PO box 4, Iraq

## **Bio.data**

Muna Mohammed Abbas is a Lecturer holding Ph.D. in Education from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India where she has also got her M.phil in Education. She is teaching English at the faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Basic Education. Before that she's got a MA in teaching English as a Foreign Language from Babylon University, Iraq where she is teaching undergraduates the English Language. Her research interests include TEFL, Curriculum and syllabus design, Education Policy, testing and assessment, and teaching English for young learners.

Postal Address in Iraq: P.O. 4- English Department - College Of Basic Education-University of Babylon- Hilla-Babylon-Iraq

## **Abstract**

English has a very dynamic status today. One can literally witness its circle widening day by day, engulfing in it a wide spectrum of varieties. English is a pluri-centric language, i.e. language with more than one accepted standard and set of norms for creativity. The spread of English across the globe took place due to two reasons: first, the displacement of the native and second, the establishments of colonies across Afro-Asian countries. In the presented research paper L1 (also is known as mother tongue and native language) is Arabic and L2/FL is English. The focus is made on phonological and grammatical problems and how the interference of L1 affects the acquisition of L2. There are many alphabets of English which do not have their equivalent in Arabic. Learners try to substitute them with the English alphabet which is closer in pronunciation in Arabic. They, particularly the learning community, do some unusual mistakes in English spelling and pronunciation. The aim also is to review some linguistic terms and literature related to Language interference. At later stage, data were collected and analyzed to come out with the conclusion that the learners' environment of living, the exposure he/she gets to the language, the teaching-learning process are also a part of the culture along with the L1.

**Keywords:** L1 (Arabic), Interference in Learning L2 (English), Mother Tongue, Second/Foreign Language Acquisition.

## **1. Introduction**

Arabic is a descendant of Semitic languages, whereas English is an Indo-European language primarily originated from the Anglo Frisian dialects. As for the number of alphabets, Arabic has twenty-eight letters. "Hamza" the glottal stop is sometimes considered the twenty ninth letter. In contrast, English has twenty six letters. Orthographically, there is no distinction between upper letters and lower case letters in Arabic as it is always written in a cursive form. In English, the matter is different where there is a clear distinction between upper case letters and lower case letters. English words can be written in both cursive and uncial. One of the most noticeable differences between the two languages is that Arabic is written from right to left whereas English, on the other hand, is written from left to right. Most importantly, there are distinctive differences between Arabic and English in almost all syntactical, morphological, phonological, lexical, semantic, rhetorical and orthographical aspects. (Ali, 2007:3).

## **2. Expense of English In Arab Countries**

The phenomenon of learning different languages distinguishes the communication of human beings from animals. Knowledge of more than one language is required to survive in the modern age. It is an admitted fact that English has emerged as an International Language of the world. Many nations of the world are striving for learning it as a second language. Learning a new language is not a simple task. When we learn a new language, many interesting horizons of research and knowledge arise. The first language interference is one of them. We also name this occurrence as mother tongue interference. L1 has some other titles as well, like primary and native language. Similarly, L2 is termed as 'foreign language'. When a new language is acquired, the first

language is used as a tool and medium to learn it and L1 influences the learning of L2; therefore, in this situation, L1 interference is quite a normal phenomenon. L1 interference can evolve in any area of the target language such as grammar, spellings, pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary, accent and so on. The utility of English gave rise to world Englishes. Today we find that each geographical area is unique in its grammatical innovations and tolerance, lexis, pronunciation, idioms and discourse of the English language. The varieties of English across the world have their own significance and acceptability. Today, Standard English is also held as one of the many varieties of English.

Referring to the three circle model of Kachru (1992), we can state that the awareness of the global significance of English in the outer circles is building at a substantial pace. Arabic speaking countries are soon planning to march from the expanding circle into the outer circle of English users in the world.

Arabic speakers have accepted English as an indispensable global language, with all their native impact. Abbas (1993) says that "[We] do need English to be members of the world community... 'the world of nations'".

Before proceeding further, the discussion of some key terms of this research paper will provide better understanding of the topic in hand.

### 2.1. Mother Tongue

We use this term to refer to the first language (hence after L1) of a child. Normally, a child is exposed to a language immediately after his/her birth. A child starts learning a language that has been surrounding him/her since his/her birth. With the passage of time this learning of language goes on cognitively and time comes when he/she can speak, read and write that language perfectly. So, mother tongue is the first language of a child which he/she has learnt first and uses it for communicating of his/her needs and desires. Mother tongue is also termed as the native or primary language. It is the basics of one's recognition and origin. It's the language which occupies one's thought process and conscience.

### 2.2. Second Language

An online dictionary defines the second language as "a language other than the mother tongue that a person or community uses for public communication, especially in trade, higher education and administration" (*The Free Dictionary by Farlex*). Another definition of the second language in the same dictionary is "a non-native language officially recognised and adopted in a multilingual country as a means of public communication." The second language is also called the target language.

### 2.3. Language Learning Theories

The occurrence of errors can be explained by referring to learning theories and language theories. The effect of Proactive-Retroactive Inhibition (PI/RI) is the learning theory in this case. The storage of new experiences interferes with memories encoded earlier in time. Therefore, it is hard to learn a new phone number and car registration because the old ones tend to compete and come to mind instead. Proactive Inhibition PI is the effect of prior learning inhibiting new learning (Ellis, 2006:174). This reflects interlingual errors. On the other hand, Retroactive Inhibition (RI) refers to the difficulty in recalling old information because of newly learned information. This reflects intralingual errors (Ellis, 2006). On the other hand, three language theories are used to illustrate why errors are made by Arab learners of English. The Interference or Transfer Theory is one of them. Ellis (1997:51) refers to interference as "Transfer", which he says is "The influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2". According to Jie (as cited in James, 2007), transfer is „the carrying-over of learned responses from one type of situation to another." 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. Another language theory which is used to explain language errors is the contrastive analysis. It is the systematic comparison of two or more languages, with the aim of describing their similarities and differences (Johansson, 2008:9). If the two languages are drastically different, learners will use the linguistic patterns they have learnt in their native language to help them do tasks in learning L2. A third theory that has been used by many researchers to identify the errors made by second language learners is "Error Analysis". Richards and Schmidt (2002:184) define "error analysis as the study of errors made by L2 learners, with the purpose of identifying the causes of these errors." Researchers suggested different taxonomies for error analysis. Keshavarze (1994) cited in Shekhzadeh and Gheichi, (2011) suggest a taxonomy of the inter-lingual errors: phonological errors, morphological errors, grammatical errors lexo-

semantic errors, and stylistic elements.

#### *2.4. Language Interference*

Language interference occurs when a speaker or a writer applies knowledge of his/her native language to a second language. Language interference is also known as language transfer, linguistic interference, L1 inference and cross-meaning (*The Free Dictionary by Farlex*). There are several factors that lead students to make errors. One of which is the interference of the learner's native language. Nunan (2001:89) states "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." Language interference can be positive or negative. It is positive when relevant units or structures of both languages are same and result in correct production of the target language. On the other hand, it is negative when different units or structures of both languages interfere in the learning of the second language. One overlaps with the other and the linguistic interference occurs in polyglot individuals. ). If the two languages are drastically different, learners will use the linguistic patterns they have learnt in their native to help them do tasks in L2 as people are usually pattern seekers. Then one could expect relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L2 (Ellis, 1997; Richard & Schmidt, 2002).

Another cause of making errors is the inadequate teaching methods. Methods that encourage translation, cause students to make mistakes (Yule, 2009; Al-Buainain, 2010). Students' personal affairs play a role in this field. For instance, their physical, psychological, social and cultural circumstances may lead them to make errors. Ellis (1994) identifies areas where the learners' external factors as social contexts are related to making errors.

The other source of errors are related to the target language (TL) the student is learning. These errors are called the "intralingual/developmental errors. These are errors caused by some processes that learners recourse to when learning the TL. These include generalization, substitution and other processes. The learner, in this case, tries to "derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language" (Richards, 1970 ).

#### *2.5. Acquisition and Learning*

As learners of the English language, Arab speakers, like other ESL/EFL learners have their own set of problem areas. Being foreign language learners deprives them of the natural environment of learning. Acquisition of a language is something that happens unconsciously. Absolute exposure to the language allows the learner to acquire it without hindrance. Apart from the external factors, linguistic ability takes shape due to continuous creative construction through interaction, in the process of acquisition. It picks up through developmental errors and mild corrections unlike second/foreign language learning. The Artificial and formal structure of L2/FL learning is far from the innate experience of language acquisition. Examinations and assessments make L2 learning even more difficult.

The study of the difference in learning language and acquiring it, was done in detail by Krashen (1976 &1987), Brumfit(1984) and Rivers(1972).According to them acquisition of a language happens in natural situations. It is an unconscious activity where language goes in, in the form of utterances and not as structures, as implicit and not explicit knowledge, as an ability to use the skill and not to get it.

#### *2.6. The Teaching-Learning Process*

Another factor that strongly influences L2/foreign language learning is 'the teaching-learning processes'. In an education system where teacher is the sole authority in a class and the teacher's word is the ultimate for the students, interaction or deliberation on any subject between the teacher and the student is an absolute 'no'.

In some countries there is an appreciation of an open exchange of thoughts in the classroom. They welcome informal talk in order to acquaint learners with the utterances and the idiomatic use of language. Both these systems have their respective advantages and disadvantages. Second and foreign language learning probably need a good mix of both these methodologies. This blend of methodologies could be called ' cultural understanding and sensitization' to a certain extent.

#### *2.7. Cross Cultural Awareness and Sensitization*

At this point let us talk about how awareness of cultures of different regions, of the mental and social make up of the learners help teachers plan their methods. For being L2/Foreign language learners ,we need to keep ourselves sensitized about so many cultures, for example, people from Korea and Thailand are generally shy and introvert, whereas West Asian learners are loud and extrovert in nature. How status of man and woman in their society influences their participation in activates is also something to note. The use of certain words is banned. For

example, Persians feel offended by the expression "shut up". Arabs feel awkward to use words like "unique" or "zip" or "kiss". They would never call their sisters by their names!(Sabbah,2015:270)

Thus it is necessary that the teacher realizes these practices and avoids commenting on them or avoids planning lessons on such sensitive topics.

### 3. Problems of Arab Learners in EFL Learning

There are 28 letters in Arabic language; all are consonants apart from the first letter. Last two letters can act as both consonants and vowels. The pronunciation and spellings of Arabic varies from country to country. Like all Semitic languages Arabic is read and written from right to left, on a horizontal line. English belongs to Germanic languages, a language family, that is a direct descendent of Endo-European language family. English has 26 alphabets/letters and 44 sounds. There are 20 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds.

With all these cultural considerations, another major influences on L2 learning is their mother tongue. There is a major difference in the concept of difficulty and difference in L2 learning. In case, there is some similarity and there is positive transfer according to behaviorists. But any difference in the syntactic patterns and word order leads to confusion, difficulty, and interference in L2 learning. There is no evident similarity between English and Arabic. The problems; therefore, are varied in nature with respect to phonology and grammar. Let us discuss some problem areas. First, we will tackle the **phonological problem areas**:

**1. The harshly pronounced /h/ sound:** The Arabic language has a typical way of pronouncing /h/, which creates interferences in their English as well. It sounds like creating a sound "uhhh" in place of "h" making it harsh. There is a lot of vibration while producing this kind of a sound.

Examples: Hesitation, Inhale, Hard, Hurry, Honey, Heavy, etc. A few Arabic words, to illustrate are- Hamama, Hebah, Lehm, Leham, and Mohammed. You can hear the harsh/h/ sound typically in these words and can see their interferences clearly too.

**2. Over pronounced "r" in the post vocalic position:** It is also carried from their mother tongue i.e. Arabic. It is a motor-like sound that has a rattling effect. It is not like the American rolled pronunciation or like the British one which is almost absent in case of the final position of the sound. This interference is seen in any position of the sound in an English word. Some words in Arabic for instance are-Ramadan, Rami, Rahmah,geri, surah. These words show the over pronounced /r/ and the reflection of the same is seen in the interference in English, for example, car, park, father, mother, energy, torn, teacher, very, etc.

**3. Interference in Pronunciation of Different Sounds:**

a. /b/ for /p/: Blis (please) blay (play) di (the) tib (tape) teacher.

b. /i/ for /e/: Rid for red: Di (the) flower is rid in colour.

c. /i/ for /ei/: Fis and face: His fis (face) is very bale (pale).

d. /e/ for /ei/: Mek for make: I'll mek it teacher.

In **3a**, you can see /p/ sound replaced by /b/ sound. This is again because; /p/ sound is not there in the Arabic language. If a word starts with 'p', it is replaced with 'b' before consonants and mostly before the consonant 'r'. If a word begins with 'p' and it is placed before vowel sounds, 'b' is spelled instead of 'p'. There is another noticeable phenomenon that when 'p' comes after 'm', it is substituted with 'b' in words like *impediment:/imbediment/, companion:/companion/, champion:/chambion/, and examples:/exambles/*. On the other hand, it is also observed that when 'b' comes after 'm', it is superseded by 'p' which is a reverse case as in *ambitious:/ampitious/*. It is a very prominent and strong interference. It is very peculiar of Arab students to use /i/ for /e/ as seen in **3b**. There are two reasons for this error.

1. Short vowels are not very significant in the Arabic language and dropped in the spoken as well as written word. Whereas in English short vowels are very important. Therefore, they create great confusion.
2. The phoneme /e/ in **3c** has no equivalent in Arabic and therefore there is this tendency to shift to /i/ which is quite close a pronunciation.

Sentence **3d** shows the replacement of /ei/ by /e/: Another instance of strong interference is seen even when the phoneme /ei/ present in Arabic is wrongly pronounced as /e/, a short vowel sound.

Only some of the phonological interferences have been exemplified above. Some more interference and confusion is observed in /v/ and /f/: *very and ferry*, /θ/ and /s/: *thin and sin*, /tʃ/ and /S/: *chair and share*, and more.

**3. The Arabic Shaddah** or consonant doubling in Arabic strongly interferes with the double consonants in English.

The Arabs tend to lay extra stress on the double consonants, e.g., allow is spoken as /al-low/.

**4. Another problem area is inaccurate articulation of consonant clusters:** E.g. "climbed" wherein /b/

has a very light articulation in English is spoken as *climbed*. This example shows two problems. The three letter cluster '-bad' is difficult and hence the Arab learners find them difficult. They tend to over pronounce the consonant in the cluster in order to make pronunciation easy. In this case, /b/ is over pronounced. They also insert a vowel sound between the cluster letters to 'simplify' pronunciation. **Some more examples:** next: *nekist*, arranged : *Urindzid*, months: *monthiz* and more.

Let us look at this example: stopped: *istobid*. This shows the problem in the pronunciation of the initial cluster /st/. Arabic does not have initial clusters too. The Arab learners therefore tend to insert a vowel sound before the cluster or in between the cluster. **Some examples:** price :*pirice*, spring: *sipiring*, ground: *giround*, blue: *bilu*, etc...

After having read through these illustrations, I am sure the phonological influence of Arabic on English is clear. In order to overcome such interference, teachers as well as students need to make special efforts. Conscious listening to authentic materials, drill practice, guided loud reading are some ways of overcoming the problems. We also try funny tricks like holding a paper in front of the student's mouth. The paper vibrates on pronouncing /p/ - the aspirated English sound but does not move while pronouncing the bilabial/b/.

### Some Grammatical Problems:

The following five examples throw light on some of the grammatical problems faced by the learners.

1. I want I go out.
2. She takes book.
3. He was drink coffee.
4. He hit by a stone.
5. He drives dangerous.
6. She going to school.

We will now analyze the reasons of the prominent deviances in these sentences:

**Sentence 1:** This is very typical of an English learner. Absence of the infinitive in Arabic leads to deleting of the same in English.

**Sentence 2:** Deleting the definite article. The learner tends to omit articles as Arabic does not have articles. There is another tendency, though; they tend to insert definite article 'the' whenever it is omitted in English, e.g., "at dawn" will be "at the dawn" but "in the evening" will be "in evening"!!

**Sentence 3:** Wrong use of the past tense. Arab learners tend to use a wrong past tense form to talk about the present perfect. In the example, the speaker had to say, 'He has drunk coffee' but he ends up saying 'He was drink coffee'. This happens because there is no distinction between these frames of time in Arabic. We find a similar interference in the making of the past continuous .Arabs tend to say the same: 'He was drink coffee' for 'He was drinking coffee' when they wish to refer to an action at a point of time in the past.

**Sentence 4:** This is a typical example of the use of the active voice for the passive. Arabic does not have the passive usage. Mere change in pronunciation makes a sentence passive in Arabic. Therefore, the English passive is a difficult task for them.

**Sentence 5:** Adverbs are very seldom used in Arabic. Therefore, the learner tends to use an adjective in place of an adverb.

**Sentence 6:** Dropping of the copula: A very peculiar interference seen in the Arab learners. Arabic does not have the verb 'to be' so learners do not take cognizance of the same!

### 4. Conclusion

Indeed the mother tongue pulls our leg! In this paper, we deal with Arab learners and their problems, but every other language has its own influential patterns and interference in the learning of English. The learners' environment of living, the exposure he gets to the language, his teaching-learning process are also a part of his culture along with the mother tongue. Teachers need to consider these aspects also as factors interfering with the learning process. The existence of L1 is not the only factor responsible for the learners' mistakes. There are some other barriers which do not allow them to learn spelling by heart. Nowadays, the use of technology is encouraged to prepare written assignments. Almost every student has a laptop or a computer. Presenting a hand written assignment is considered old fashioned and not up to the mark. There are many programs available for auto-spelling correction. This is the prime factor for misspelt words. There is another obstacle in learning spelling which affects spellings significantly, that is, in this era worksheets are available online for the practice of language skills and nothing is prepared and done manually. Learners are given MCQs where there is no practice of writing. Only true/false or choose the correct answer type questions are given. All these factors make the



learners negligent towards spelling mistakes and they hardly take their writing skills seriously. In general, students' writing skills are put to test only during the exams and then, spelling and grammar are the main areas focused, apart from the contents. The other reason of incorrect spelling, which is related to the usage of technology, is the imperative usage of chatting over cell phones and social media like facebook, twitter and other chatting messengers. During chatting only communication is focused and mostly informal language is used. It also lessens the chance of learning spelling.

## 5. Recommendations

In this case, I feel from my own experience as an English teacher that a lot can be tried in helping the Language learners, in general, and our students, in particular, deviate from their problem areas towards the use of neutral English. Modern techniques of teaching and learning can help them get more exposure to the language apart from their traditional methods of education. A change can take place only if the learner wishes to let it happen. Overcoming interference is the onus not only of the teacher, but also of the learner. It may be phonology or grammar or same to bring out as neutral an accent as possible should be the aim of both the teacher and the student. There is a wide scope to study how cross cultural sensitization can nurture growth in the proficiency of the target language.

## 6. Acknowledgements

The researcher is involved in pre- and in-service teacher education in the Department of English at College of Basic Education in Iraq as well as she is teaching English for specific purpose at the faculty of engineering at Babylon University/Iraq. She has published widely in areas related to language teaching, and research papers and articles have been adopted in teacher education in many institutes .

## 7. References

- Abbas, Sh. (1993). The Power of English in Pakistan. *World Englishes*, Vol.12.No(2),147-156.
- Ali, N. (2007). Some linguistic problems facing Arab learners of English. Retrieved from <http://www.iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aId=33586>
- Bhela, B. (1999). Native Language Interference in Learning a Second Language: Exploratory Case Studies of Native Language Interference with Target Language. *International Education Journal*, Vol 1(1).
- Brumfit, C.J. (1984). *Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching- the Roles of Fluency and Accuracy*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Cohen, A. (1982). Researching the Linguistic Outcomes of Bilingual Programs. *The Bilingual Review*, September.
- Ellis, N. (2006). Selective Attention and Transfer Phenomena in L2 Acquisition: Contingency, Cue Competition, Salience, Interference, Overshadowing, Blocking, and Perceptual Learning. *Applied Linguistics* 27,(2),pp.164-194 Oxford University Press 2006. Retrieved from [http://www.personal.umich.edu/~ncellis/LanguageLearningLab/Publications\\_files/Selective%20Attention.pdf](http://www.personal.umich.edu/~ncellis/LanguageLearningLab/Publications_files/Selective%20Attention.pdf)
- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R. & Hymes, N. (2003). *An Introduction to Language*. United States: Heinle Thomson Corporation
- Jie, X. (2008). Error theories and second language acquisition. *US-China foreign language*, 6(1), 35-42.
- Johansson, S. (2008). *A Contrastive Analysis and Learner Language: A Corpus-Based Approach*. University of Oslo. Online book.
- Kachru, B.B., and Nelson, C.L. (2005). *World Englishes. Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*, ed. By Mackay, S.L. and Hornberger, N.H., Cambridge, CUP.
- Kahane, H. and Kahane, R. (1986). A Typology of the prestige Language. *Language*, Vol.62, 495-508.
- Al-Lami, M. (2006). Assessing EFL Students' Cultural Awareness of the English Language. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Baghdad: Baghdad.
- Nunan, D. (2001). Second Language Acquisition. In Carter, R. & Nunan, D., (eds.). *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* [C], pp 87-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Richards, J. and Schmidt, R. 2002. *Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. Pearson Education Limited. London: Longman. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/stream/DictionaryOfLanguageTeachingAndAppliedLinguistics/Dictionary%20of%20Language%20Teaching%20and%20Applied%20Linguistics#page/n119/mode/2up>

- 
- The Free Dictionary by Farlex* (second language).Internet: [www.thefreedictionary.com/Second+language](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Second+language) (27-01-2013)
- The Free Dictionary by Farlex* (Language interference).Internet: <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Language+interference> (27-01-2013)
- Thyab R. A. (2016). Mother-Tongue Interference in the Acquisition of English Articles by L1 Arabic Students. *Journal of Education and Practice*, Vol.7 ,No.(3), 2016