



Crosslinguistic Influence on EFL Students' Writing: A Contrastive Analysis Study of Interlanguage Errors

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Introduction

One of the basic tenets in language learning is native language interference. Every language has its unique structure; which is usually brought on while learning a new language. This notion has been unequivocally recognized and accepted, for example, individuals can easily distinguish a French speaker of English from a native speaker. However, it was not until the 1960s that this notion began to be driven towards a more scientific analysis. Corder was the pioneer in error analysis; he developed a new vision in dealing with errors. Corder (1982) ascribed most of the errors committed by non native learners of languages to language interference. He explained in detail how learners of other languages avoid language errors by conveying messages successfully. Learners tend to use two procedures; the first is message adjustment; where learners tailor their messages to fit the resources they already acquire. This procedure also entails "topic avoidance"; which is a refusal to deliver or convey any message due to linguistic inadequacy. Some learners may attempt to hover around the question and give a rather different but relevant response. Corder defines this procedure as "semantic avoidance". The second type of strategy is resource expansion strategies; where learners attempt to increase their resources to deliver meaningful messages. This idea is supported by Kavaliauskiene (2009) who explained that lack of resources may lead to error transfer; in which a learner may resort to native language structure to keep a conversation going.

There are two types of language transfer: positive (facilitation) and negative transfer (interference). The former occurs when the native language (NL) and the target language (TL) have parallel structures while the latter, negative transfer (interference), occurs when the NL and the TL have diverse structures (Wilkins, 1972). Selinker (1972) was the first to coin the term interlanguage. To Selinker, interlanguage refers to the language produced when the learner attempts to articulate sentences of a target language; this type of utterance is different from the target language structure; the variation of structure is attributed to the learners' native language; hence, the language produced in this situation is called "interlanguage"; which serves as a mediator between the learner's native language and the target language.

The learner in the interlanguage mode tends to keep some of the native language rules and uses them in the target language. Selinker (1972) referred to this process as "fossilization", which is not bound to a certain age or a specific linguistic competence. Interlanguage errors can be attributed to misconceptions or insufficient knowledge of the target language (Ridha, 2012). It occurs when the learner attempts to build up his/her understanding of the target language; due to their limited experience and lack of sufficient knowledge of the nature of the target language, learners tend to lean to their native language structure (Edrogan, 2005).

Literature Review

Several researchers have examined students' language errors. The conclusion reached places language transfer errors as the dominant errors (Al-Jarif, 2000; Bennui, 2008; Corder, 1982; Hammad, 2016; Lim, 2007; Liu, 2013; Ridha, 2012; Silva, 1993). Interlanguage errors can appear in different language forms: phonological, grammatical, semantic and mechanical. Phonological errors are mainly prominent in speaking; phonemes that do not have equivalence in the native language can be replaced with a similar phoneme in the NL. Grammatical errors have various aspects, such as, use of verb tense, word choice, modality, prepositions, singular/plural forms, fragments, pronouns, transitions and parallel structure (Bennui, 2008; Edrogan, 2005; Liu, 2013; Ridha, 2012; Silva, 1993; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013; Hammad, 2016.). Lexical errors are attributed to literal translation (Bennui, 2008; Gibriel, 2017, 2019; Hammad, 2016; Ridha, 2012) where students tend to use direct translation which causes interlanguage errors, while mechanical errors emerged from the variations between the NL and TL in the process of punctuation, essay structure and spelling. Since the present study is concerned with EFL written texts, these three areas (grammatical, lexical and mechanical) will be examined.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that interlanguage holds a primary effect on the development and refinement of the learners' target language (Al-Jarf, 2000; Bennui, 2008; Corder, 1982; Hammad, 2016; Lim, 2007; Liu, 2013; Ridha, 2012; Silva, 1993). According to Ellis (1999), interlanguage is a process that EFL language learners have to go through to master any language. By contrast, very few studies have examined the influence of Arabic as a native language on EFL learners. These studies have focused their research on a more specific area focusing on limited errors related to negative transfer, such as article use and grammatical agreement errors. Hammad (2016) focused on Arab students' writing problems and how teachers perceive them. The most frequent error in their essays was grammatical errors. Although students know the rules quite well, they still cannot use them properly in writing. Hammad (2016) added that another obstacle in their writing lies in the lack of vocabulary knowledge. Another study examined Arab students' writing errors and results revealed that students committed four types of errors the most prominent type was language use due to negative language transfer and overgeneralization. The researchers recommended further studies to identify and classify these type of errors (Murad & Khalil, 2015). Thus, the present study attempts to examine the errors caused by negative language transfer and why such errors occur. The study further attempts to relate the findings to the students' native language. The results and recommendations of the study will enlighten teachers of English on the common errors Arab students make and therefore errors caused by negative transfer can be addressed and given more emphasis in the learning environment.

Research Questions

1. What are the common interlanguage errors among EFL students?
2. What are the sources of such errors?
3. How far do interlanguage errors affect the writings of EFL students?

Participants of the Study

50 intermediate students participated in this study. All participants were Prep year students in an Egyptian university majoring in Pharmacy and Engineering. Twenty-six students majored in Engineering and 24 in Pharmacy. They were all Egyptians studying English as a foreign language. The number of males was 30, and the number of females was 20. According to university regulations, all students must take an English placement test. Based on their scores, they were grouped into three different levels:

Intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. In the intermediate level, students needed to score 4.5 on the IELTS exam or its equivalent.

Tools of the Study

The researcher marked 50 students' essays. The type of essay was a compare and contrast essay. Students had to compare travelling with friends to travelling with family. The four-paragraph essay had to be more than 250 words in length. Formality was not included in the rubric to allow students to write spontaneously and without constraints. This task was part of their coursework mark and comprised 7% of their course grade. The researcher used Chen's (2006) classification of errors to specify the error type as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Classification of Students' Errors (from Chen, 2006)

Error Type	Category	Sub-Categories
Grammatical	Nouns	Singular/plural wrong forms
	Articles	Article omission
		Unnecessary articles
		Wrong article
	Pronouns	Unnecessary pronoun
		Wrong pronoun
		Pronoun omission
	Verb	Wrong tense
		Wrong S/V
		Wrong verb
Unnecessary Verb		
Verb omission		
Lexical	Single Type	N/A
Mechanical	Punctuation	N/A
	Spelling	
	Topic Sentence	
	Thesis statement	
	Indentation	

Results and Discussion

Errors were classified into three types: Grammatical, lexical and mechanical. Figure 1 shows the criteria used for marking students' errors. The errors were all interlanguage errors; errors that occurred due to negative transfer from Arabic (NL) to English (TL). Figure 1 shows that there were 543 errors in total. Mechanical errors were the most frequent (n = 217) followed by grammatical errors (n = 211) and lexical errors (n = 115).

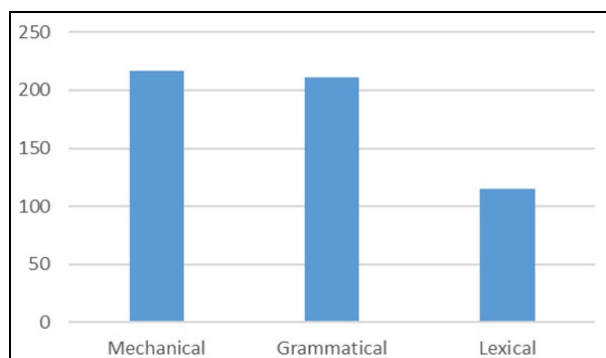


Figure 1. Interlanguage errors.

Mechanical Errors

Mechanical errors were the most dominant errors among the students. Mechanical errors represent punctuation, spelling, topic sentence, thesis statement and indentation. Figure 2 shows that indentation errors were the most prevalent at 69 errors. This can be attributed to the lack of this feature in Arabic. There is no indentation in Arabic; all paragraphs should be aligned equally.

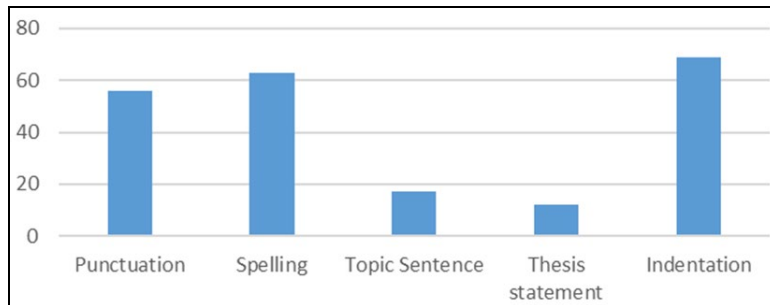


Figure 2. Frequency of mechanical errors.

In the Arabic writing system all written letters are pronounced; there are no voiceless letters. Accordingly, some students write English words with the Arabic allography concept. Students made 63 spelling errors. Some examples of their errors can be found in Table 2. In Arabic the sound /p/ does not exist, so students confounded the p with b as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Examples of /p/ Errors

/p/ Errors
Habby (happy)
habbened (happened)
gab (gap)

In Arabic all pronounced sounds should be reflected in the spelling; therefore, students wrote the words as they sound (voiceless letters were not added) in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Examples of Silent Letters Errors

Silent Letter Errors
attak (attack)
Forien (foreign)
obay (obey)
athores (others)

In Arabic writing, there is no upper casing; capitalization is not a feature of the Arabic language. All letters whether preceded by a full stop or at the beginning of a paragraph should be lowercase. Some students when writing in English forgot to capitalize the relevant word due to negative transfer. The number of errors in this regard was 56.

Topic sentences and theses statements have no equivalence in Arabic. Some students began their paragraph without including topic sentences. Errors in topic sentences were 17, and 12 essays had missing thesis statements.

The results of the present study were different from Ridha (2012) who reported that paragraph format had the least number of errors; whereas, spelling and punctuation had the highest number of errors.

This may be attributed to the distinct nature of the students' English level and the task they were requested to perform.

Grammatical Errors

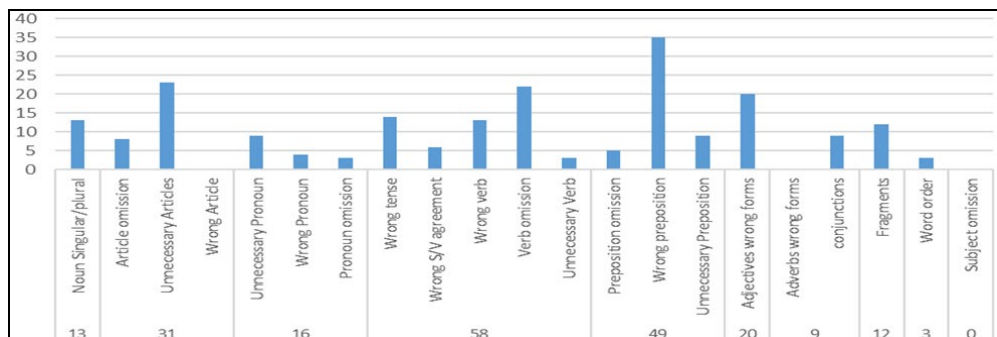


Figure 3. Frequency of grammatical errors.

Figure 4 shows that errors in verb use were the most frequent type with 58 errors. Students used either the past or the present tense. The perfect tense was rarely used in their writing. In Arabic, perfect tenses do not exist; either present or past tenses are used throughout. Another characteristic in Arabic tenses is that the progressive tense can give the meaning of the present simple. Therefore, as the examples below show students erroneously used the progressive tense when describing the present; on the other hand, when shifting to the past, students used the past forms of the conjugated verb to be.

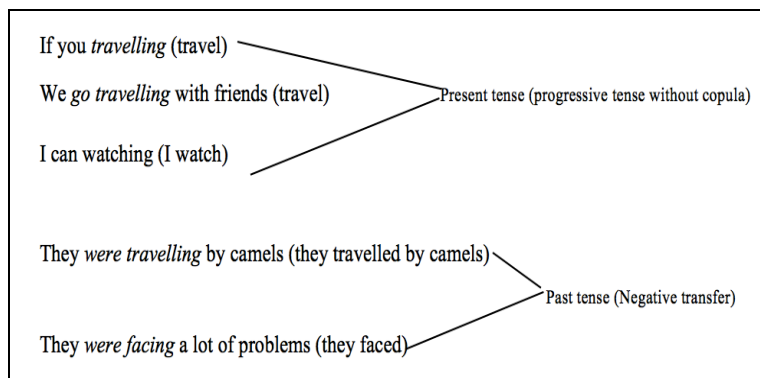


Figure 4. Examples of verb tense errors.

As for subject /verb agreement errors, Table 4 shows that students rely on Arabic to specify the agreement type.

TABLE 4
Examples of Subject/Verb Agreement Errors

Subject Verb Agreement Errors
There <i>is</i> many similarities
There <i>is</i> some few things
There <i>is</i> differences
Both <i>is</i> good

Table 5 shows that when choosing a verb or omitting a verb, students referred to Arabic.

TABLE 5
Examples of Wrong Verb Use and Verb Omission Errors

Wrong verb use	
You have more comfortable (become)	Make shopping
They not become free	That will be person happy
Verb omission	
We should interested in	You will responsible about them
You will able	If you with your family
With your family you not joke	That you alone
Travelling with friends different	If you still young

Preposition errors were the second most common error type with 49 errors. These errors are categorized as follows: Omission of preposition (5 errors), Wrong use of preposition (35 errors) and unnecessary preposition (9 errors). Most of these errors are caused due to translation from Arabic to English. As the examples in Table 6 show, students resorted to Arabic to determine whether a preposition was needed or not, and this is where errors exist.

TABLE 6
Examples of Prepositions Errors

Examples of Preposition Omission	
To go beaches	One most important thing
Listen music	They like sleep early
Want go there	We go the places
I go it	
Examples of wrong use of prepositions	
Go <i>with</i> the beach	They care <i>of</i> me
Enjoy <i>with</i> travelling	To go <i>in</i> club/ <i>in</i> beach
Travelling <i>in</i> new places	Responsible <i>on</i> myself
Opposite <i>with</i> friends	
Examples of unnecessary prepositions	
Many <i>of</i> people/ Most <i>of</i> people/ Some <i>of</i> people	Do anything <i>in</i> anytime
<i>In</i> both don't affect your decision	I feel <i>with</i> peaceful
Travelling <i>in</i> sometimes is good	

Article use was affected by students' native language. As Table 7 shows 31 errors in article omission and the use of unnecessary articles were detected in students' writings.

TABLE 7
Examples of Articles Errors

Article Errors	
1- <i>Nature</i> of the journey (the nature)	2-To make travelling <i>easy</i> thing (an easy)
3-the life/the safety/ the travelling/in the both	4-Travelling is the thing that most people like <i>it</i>
5- Similarities which <i>there</i> are	6-In <i>this</i> points
7- All of us need to spend some time with <i>his</i> family	8-Makes you <i>more</i> happiness
9- Travelling with your family is so <i>comfort</i>	10- Is <i>more</i> crazy/ <i>More</i> safe/ <i>More</i> funny
11-To evaluate <i>what</i> the similarities and differences	12- <i>Whatever</i> you are in your country
13- Find food not like with friends (meaning, eating with friends is an enjoyable experience)	14- You are a little family (you have a small family)
15- And back to your job or school active	16-A problem attack you or fall in it

Pronouns are a problematic area for Arab students because some pronouns do not exist in Arabic such as the pronoun "it". In English "they" refers to the plural whether males or females; whereas in Arabic, each Gender has its own pronoun. Examples of these errors are shown in Table 6.

Table 7 (examples 8-10) show that students had errors in adjective use. They were confused between nouns and adjectives in the comparative form. In Arabic, nouns can indicate comparison. Conjunctions were affected by students' negative transfer; errors in conjunctions are due to literal translation from Arabic to English (as shown in Table 7 (examples 11 & 12)). Fragment errors can also be attributed to

negative transfer and are represented in Table 7 (examples 13-16).

Studies which investigated grammatical errors that occurred due to negative transfer reported that errors in verbs were the most frequent among students (Bennui, 2008; Lim, 2007; Ridha, 2012; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). Errors in tenses, the verb to be and verb agreement were common among the participants. Although students who participated in these studies had different native languages verb errors were dominant in their writings.

Lexical Errors

Students had 115 lexical errors. Some errors occurred due to lack of vocabulary. The range of these error types are shown in Tables 8 and 9. Table 8 indicates that when students lacked the necessary vocabulary to have a meaningful exchange they resorted to Arabic to find a synonym of the word.

TABLE 8
Examples of Lexical Errors related to Vocabulary

Lexical Errors
You must be <i>obligatory</i> (committed)
Travelling can <i>exit you</i> from the pressure (release your pressure)
The best thing in this <i>travelling</i> (trip)

Table 9 shows that the majority of errors committed by the students were due to mere translation from Arabic to English. The students used the equivalent Arabic word unconscious of the difference in meaning.

TABLE 9
Examples of Lexical Errors related to Translation

Translation Errors	
<i>Take gap</i> (take a break)	<i>We think by the same mind / We have the same thinking</i> (we share the same thoughts)
<i>According to the fun.</i> (it depends how interesting the trip is)	Go back by his memory (remember)

These findings are similar to Bennui (2008) and Ridha (2012) who concluded that negative lexical interference occurred due to translation from the native language to the target language, or using words from their native language.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to investigate the type of errors caused due to negative NL transfer. From the results here, it can be concluded that mechanical errors were the most dominant; indentation and punctuation had the highest number of errors. Grammatical errors came next. Verb errors and preposition errors were the two most frequently recurring errors. Lexical errors were the least frequent. Most of the interlanguage errors occurred due to literal translation from Arabic to English. This goes in line with other studies examining the effect of native language on the target language (Al-Jarif, 2000; Bennui, 2008; Edrogan, 2005; Hammad, 2016; Lim, 2007; Liu, 2013; Ridha, 2012; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). Students relied on literal translation in vocabulary and structure. The present study revealed the errors that Arab students encounter in written contexts; a remedial strategy should, therefore, be implemented to resolve this problem.

The Author

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(Received August 14, 2020; Revised August 26, 2020; Accepted September 12, 2020)