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# COMMON ERRORS IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR MADE BY ARAB LEARNERS: ANALYSIS AND SOLUTIONS

الأخطاء الشائعة في قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية التي يقع فيها المتعلمون العرب: تحليل وحلول

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### الملخص:

تركز هذه الدراسة على بعض الأخطاء الشائعة التي يرتكبها طلاب برامج دورة اللغة الإنجليزية المكثفة. وكانت أهداف هذه الدراسة هي: التعرف على الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعاً التي يرتكبها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية العرب، وتسليط الضوء على المشاكل، وقد استرشدت الدراسة بنظرية التحليل التقابلي لروبرت لادو ومعرفة السبب وتقديم بعض الاقتراحات للتغلب على المشاكل. وقد استرشدت الدراسة بنظرية التحليل التقابلي لروبرت لادو (1957). حيث استخدمت الدراسة طريقة نوعية لتحليل اللغة الإنجليزية المكتوبة للمتعلمين لتحديد أنواع الأخطاء النحوية التي يرتكبونها عادة. كان المشاركون في هذه الدراسة 50 طالبًا منخرطين في برامج دورات اللغة الإنجليزية المكثفة في الأكاديمية الليبية للدراسات العليا وتم جمع البيانات عن طريق الاختبارات التشخيصية المصممة خصيصًا لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية الناطقين باللغة العربية. يمكن لهذه الاختبارات تقييم كفاءتهم في المجالات النحوية المختلفة وتحديد الأخطاء

المتكررة. وقد تم تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها بشكل متباين وتم حساب الأخطاء. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى وجود العديد من الأخطاء التي يرتكبها المشاركون في الجوانب النحوية، منها أن المتعلمين يواجهون صعوبات في التعامل مع قواعد اللغة الانجليزية كالغة مستهدفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخطاء الشائعة، دورة اللغة الإنجليزية المكثفة، الأكاديمية الليبية، الجوانب النحوية

#### Abstract;

This study focuses on some common errors made by the students from intensive English course programs. The objectives of this study were to: identify the most common errors made by Arab-learners of English language, highlights the problems, finds out the cause and provides some suggestions to overcome the problems. The study was guided by Contrastive Analysis Theory by Robert Lado (1957). The study utilized a qualitative method to analyze the learners' written English to identify the types of grammatical errors they commonly make. The participants of this study were 50 students who are involved with intensive English course programs at the Libyan Academy for postgraduate studies. The data were collected by means of diagnostic tests which specifically designed for Arabic-speaking learners of English. These tests can assess their proficiency in various grammar areas and identify recurring errors. The data collected have been analyzed contrastively and errors have been counted. The study found out many errors committed by the participants in the grammatical aspects. Learners have difficulties in dealing with the grammar of the target language.

Key words: common mistakes, intensive English course, Libyan academy, grammatical aspects

#### 1. Introduction

Arabic speakers face certain challenges when learning English grammar, resulting in common grammar errors. These errors can arise due to differences in sentence structure, verb tenses, word order, and the use of articles and prepositions. Understanding these challenges and the most prevalent mistakes can help Arab learners improve their English grammar skills. According to Al-Humidi (2016), one of the challenges is the interference of the Arabic language structure, which

differs from English grammar rules. This interference often leads to mistakes in sentence structure, verb tenses, and word order. (1)

Additionally, Arab learners may struggle with the correct use of articles, as Arabic does not have an equivalent system of definite and indefinite articles like English does (Al-Khresheh, 2014). (2) This can result in errors such as omitting or overusing articles in English sentences.

Furthermore, the use of prepositions can be problematic for Arab learners. Al-Athwary (2017) explains that Arabic prepositions do not always have direct equivalents in English, leading to confusion and mistakes in prepositional usage. (3)

Another common mistake made by Arab learners is the incorrect formation and use of plurals (Al-Jumaily, 2020). Arabic plurals have different patterns and rules compared to English plurals, so learners may struggle to apply the correct plural form in English. (4)

To overcome these challenges and improve grammar skills, Arab learners can benefit from various strategies. Al-Darwish (2019) suggests studying English grammar rules systematically and practicing them through exercises and conversation. It is also helpful to seek feedback from English speakers or teachers to identify and correct specific mistakes. (5)

### 2. Literature Review

Arab learners face various challenges when learning English as a second language, particularly when it comes to grammar. This literature review aims to identify and analyze the most common grammar errors made by Arab learners of English. Understanding these errors can assist teachers and learners in implementing effective strategies to enhance grammar proficiency.

An article by Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Maamari (2014) identified the frequent misuse of articles (i.e., definite and indefinite) by Arab learners. The study suggested that the interference of Arabic grammar rules, where articles are not as extensively used, leads to this error. (6)

Al-Jabri et al. (2017) investigated verb tense errors among Arab learners. The study discovered that Arab learners often struggle with verb tense consistency, especially when faced with the complex English tenses system. Factors such as limited exposure to English and the influence of Arabic grammar rules were identified as potential causes. (7)

Alnasser (2018) explored sentence structure errors made by Arab learners and found that the improper placement of adverbs and adjectives was a frequent issue. Arab learners tend to follow Arabic syntax rules, resulting in misplaced modifiers and incorrect word order. (8)

Elshafie and Zoghi (2020) conducted a study on preposition errors committed by Arab learners. The findings indicated that Arab learners often struggle with selecting the appropriate preposition to convey the intended meaning, as Arabic grammar rules differ significantly in this aspect. <sup>(9)</sup>

Abdelgadir and Al-Alawi (2016) focused on the errors in subject-verb agreement made by Arab learners. The study revealed that mismatches between subjects and verbs are common due to differences between Arabic and English grammar rules, specifically in terms of number agreement. (10)

# **Contrastive Theory**

A contrastive theory, also known as a contrastive analysis or contrastive linguistics, is a linguistic theory that compares and analyzes the differences and similarities between languages or language varieties. It aims to identify and explain variations in the structure, phonology, semantics, and other linguistic aspects

across languages. Contrastive theory is a linguistic approach that focuses on comparing and contrasting different languages or language varieties to understand the similarities and differences between them (Shishido, 2018). (11)

One of the primary goals of contrastive theory is to identify areas of divergence or convergence between two languages (Hasselgren, 2004). (12) By highlighting these differences and similarities, contrastive analysis can provide valuable insights into the structures and systems of each language (Shishido, 2018). (13)

In a study conducted by Akar (2015), contrastive theory was applied to investigate the syntactic differences between English and Turkish. The study found that while English prefers subject-verb-object word order, Turkish follows a subject-object-verb pattern. This contrastive analysis helped shed light on the syntactic structures of both languages. (14)

Similarly, Zhang (2012) utilized contrastive theory to explore the phonological characteristics of Mandarin Chinese and English. The study revealed significant differences, such as Mandarin having a larger inventory of tones compared to English. By analyzing these phonological variations, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of the sound systems of both languages. (15)

In addition to syntactic and phonological aspects, contrastive theory has also been applied to investigate semantic differences between languages. In a study by Chomsky (2006), contrastive analysis was employed to compare the lexical semantics of English and Spanish. The analysis identified numerous lexical differences, such as Spanish having multiple words to express the English word "love." This research highlighted the importance of considering cultural and linguistic factors when translating between the two languages. (16)

Overall, a contrastive theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing and understanding the differences and similarities between languages. By examining various linguistic levels, including syntax, phonology, and semantics, researchers can gain insights into the underlying structures and systems of different languages (Hasselgren, 2004). (17)

# 3. Methodology

Qualitative methods allow researchers to capture the subjective experiences and perspectives of second language learners, shedding light on the individual nature of language acquisition" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). The researcher employed a qualitative based research so as to explore the common grammar errors committed by the students from intensive English course programs. For this purpose, the researcher selected the Libyan Academy for postgraduate studies (Tobruk branch) as a research site where fifty students (25 males and 25 females) were chosen whose ages between 30-40 years.

#### 3.1 Instrument

Diagnostic tests are an essential tool for identifying areas of weakness and strengths in second language learners, allowing teachers to focus on targeted instruction to address their language development needs" (Hughes, 2003, p. 112). To identify the most common errors made by the students from intensive English course programs, a diagnostic test has been applied. The test consists of six categories. 40 multiple choice questions, singular and plural questions, ten questions about punctuations and the capitalization question has been designed and administered by the researcher to test the subject ability to understand and use the below mentioned categories correctly.

### 4. Results and Discussion

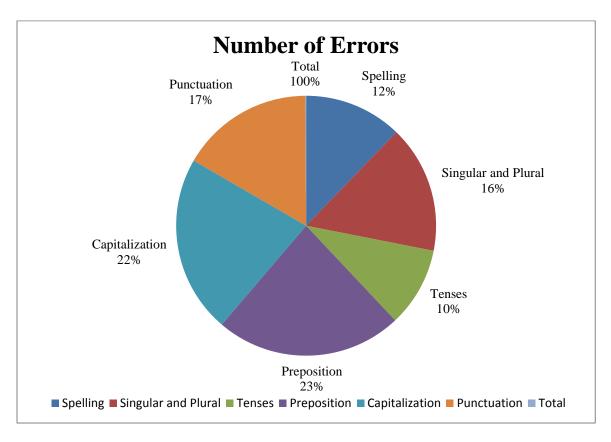
The diagnostic test includes the following items:

- 1- Spelling (10 questions)
- 2- Singular and plural (10 questions)
- 3- Tenses (10 questions)

- 4- Prepositions (20 questions)
- 5- Capitalization (5 sentences)
- 6- Punctuation (10 questions)

Two groups consisted of 50 students are from the intensive English course program who study English as a second language in the Libyan Academy for postgraduate studies were chosen as the participants for this study. They were asked to answer a test. The data were analyzed by the researcher in terms of identifying and classifying of the grammatical errors which were found in spelling, singular and plural, tenses, prepositions, articles, verbs, capitalization and punctuation. A total of 2,354 grammatical errors were found.

As stated above, they were classified into 6 major linguistic categories. The Pie Chart given below shows the number and percentages of these errors:



#### 4.1 A Detailed Classification of Errors

The errors, which are stated above into grammatical categories were classified in a more detailed way. The error command in the compositions of the students is presented as follows:

### 4.2 Spelling Problem

Arab learners of English often face challenges with spelling due to the differences in writing systems between Arabic and English. Here are some common spelling issues they may encounter:

- 1. Vowel sounds: English has various vowel sounds that may not exist in Arabic, leading to difficulties in accurately spelling words. For example, distinguishing between long and short vowel sounds in words like "bit" and "beat."
- 2. Silent letters: English words often contain silent letters, such as "k" in "knee" or "w" in "wrist." These can be confusing for Arab learners, as Arabic words are generally pronounced exactly as they are written.
- 3. Double consonants: English words sometimes have double consonants, like "happening" or "commit." Arab learners may struggle to remember when to double a consonant or omit it.
- 4. Irregular spellings: English has many irregularly spelled words, which makes it challenging for Arab learners to apply spelling rules consistently. Examples include words like "friend" or "receive."

To address these spelling problems, Arab learners of English can utilize the following strategies:

1. Practice phonetics: Focus on understanding the different sounds in English and how they correspond to specific letters or letter combinations. This can help in accurately spelling words based on their pronunciation.

2. Memorize spelling patterns and rules: Learning common spelling patterns and rules can provide a foundation for correctly spelling words in English. Regular practice and exposure to correctly spelled words are crucial for reinforcement.

### 4.2.1 The Addition and the Omission of Some Letters

There are some words in English which end with the vowel letter (e). The letter (e) in the final position usually omitted by the students because it does not affect the pronunciation of the word when it comes in the final position. As an impact of the mother tongue, the students got used to write what they pronounce, so they just write what they pronounce.

Here are some of the participants' errors in their test:

Com \_\_\_\_\_ Come (omission of e)

Dat \_\_\_\_\_ Date (omission of e)

Sit \_\_\_\_\_ Site (omission of e)

# 4.2.2 The Word is spelt completely wrong depending on the pronunciation

There are some words which the students do not know the spelling forms, so they just try to guess the spelling form through the pronunciation of the word which is a feature of Arabic language but it cannot be applied in English.

In this case, the spelling of the word is usually wrong. Here are some examples made by the participants:

College became collage Conversation became conversation Information became infomation

These are the most errors that have been observed in the participants writing which are mostly done because of the mother tongue influence and that lack of the knowledge about the target language.

# 4.3 Singular and Plural Forms

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In this area of study, the participant did not make as too many mistakes as prepositions. The singular and plural constitute 16%. This minority of mistakes was because of students' understanding of the English rules of the singular and plural nouns but most of participants made mistakes in the irregular nouns like (wolf to wolves). The errors of singular and plural are illustrated below:

### 4.3.1 Irregular Nouns

There are English irregular nouns that have different form when they are in plural forms. This confused the participants. Some of the participants just add "s" or "es" to the word. Below are some of the students' errors:

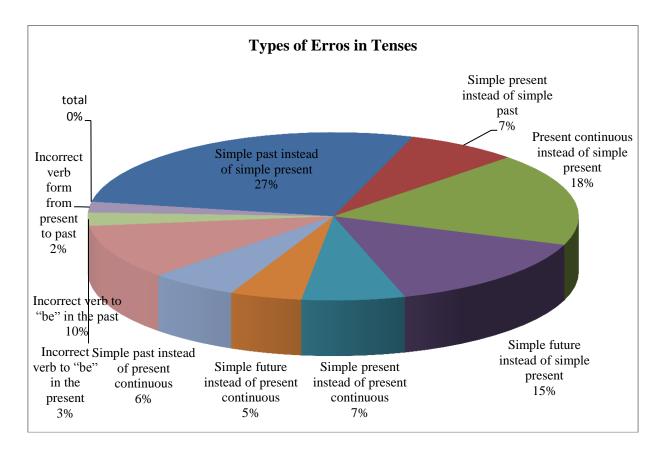
Foot became foots

Child became childs

#### 4.4 Tenses

The number of errors in tenses is 233 which comprise 10% of the total errors. These errors are divided into subcategories as stated below:

The pie chart 2: The percentage of errors in tenses.



This category is considered as a low number of errors among the linguistic categories in this study. This minority of the errors in this category is due to the students who do not use various types of tenses in their writing. Another reason for the minority of the errors in this category is the certain rules about the usage of tenses and the participants do not make so many errors because they have learnt these rules. Some of these errors are below:

- 1. They buyed a car yesterday. (incorrect verb form)
- 2. She comes next week (Simple future instead of simple present)

A possible reason for such errors may be the lack of equivalent of tense in Arabic language. Such errors may be due to the interference, unlike English requires a sequence of tenses but Arabic language does not.

# 4.5 Prepositions

This category forms the most problematic area for the participants. Most of the participants made some mistakes with prepositions. This category is the one

that comprises a number of errors which are 548 in total. The following samples are the misuses in preposition:

Incorrect: He is interested on mathematics.

Correct: He is interested in mathematics.

Incorrect: It gets cold in night.

Correct: It gets cold at night.

Related to the samples above, the error type is the misuse of preposition. The students used "on", "in", instead of "in", "at". Based on the samples, the errors occur because the students do not practice the correct form of preposition itself. In these samples, the students who still get interference from the first language that can be seen from the first samples "interested on mathematics" rather than "interested in". The students use metaphrase translation in transferring their mind.

### 4.6 Capitalization

In Arabic language, there is no capitalization of letters like in English or other languages. This is because Arabic script is cursive, meaning that the letters are connected, and the shape of a letter can change depending on its position within a word. Capitalization is not needed to differentiate between uppercase and lowercase letters because every Arabic letter has an inherent initial, medial, and final form, which vary based on their position in a word. Additionally, Arabic has diacritical marks called "harakat" that are used to indicate vowel sounds, so it is not necessary to use capitalization to distinguish between different sounds or meanings.

### 4.7 Punctuation

Arabic and English punctuation have similarities and differences. Here are a few: Similarities: 1. Both Arabic and English use a period (.), question mark (?), and exclamation mark (!) at the end of sentences to indicate a statement, question, or exclamation.

2. Both languages use quotation marks (" " or ' ') to enclose direct speech or quotes.

- 3. Arabic and English also use parentheses (), brackets [], and curly braces {} to enclose additional information or clarify a section within a sentence. However, there are some differences:
- 1. Arabic uses a different script with its own unique system of punctuation marks, while English uses the Latin script. Arabic punctuation marks are written above or below the line, whereas English punctuation marks are written on the line.
- 2. Arabic does not use capital letters like English does. However, it does use an elongated punctuation mark called "maddah" (—) to indicate vowel lengthening, similar to English using an ellipsis (…) to indicate a pause or omission.
- 3. Arabic uses a specific punctuation mark called "hamza" (\*) to indicate a glottal stop or to represent the sound of a silent or glottalized letter. English does not have an equivalent punctuation mark. These are some general similarities and differences between Arabic and English punctuation. Keep in mind that there may be additional punctuation marks specific to each language, and the usage can vary in different contexts and styles.

#### 5. Discussion

#### **5.1 The Errors**

Regarding the grammatical errors, they are classified into six types as follow:

# **5.1.1. Spelling Problems**

Arab learners of English may face several spelling problems due to the differences between the Arabic and English writing systems. Some key challenges they may encounter include:

- 1- Pronunciation, English words are not always spelled the way they are pronounced, which can be confusing for Arab learners. They may struggle to recognize the correct letter combinations and sound out words accurately.
- 2. Silent letters: English words often contain silent letters, such as "k" in "knee" or "w" in "wrist." Arab learners may find it challenging to identify and remember when to include or exclude these silent letters.

- 3. Vowel sounds: Arabic has a limited number of vowel sounds compared to English, which has around 20 vowel sounds. Arab learners may struggle to differentiate between similar vowel sounds in English words, leading to incorrect spelling.
- 4. Consonant clusters: English words frequently have consonant clusters, such as "kn" in "knight" or "ph" in "phone." Arab learners may find it difficult to identify and accurately reproduce these consonant combinations.
- 5. Irregular spellings: English has a large number of irregularly spelled words, meaning that they do not follow common spelling patterns. Arab learners may have trouble memorizing the correct spellings of irregular words.

To overcome these challenges, Arab learners of English can benefit from practicing spelling through various methods, such as memorization exercises, phonetic drills, and utilizing spelling resources and apps. Consistent exposure to English texts and audio materials can also help improve spelling skills over time.

# 5.1.2. Singular and Plural

Arab learners of English often face difficulties when it comes to learning the plural forms of nouns. First, regular plural forms, in English, most nouns form their plural by adding "-s" or "-es" to the singular form. Arab learners may find it challenging to identify when to use "-s" or "-es" and which nouns follow irregular plural forms.

Second, the pronunciation of plural forms, it can be tricky for Arab learners, particularly with words ending in -s, -es, or -ies. They might struggle to pronounce these endings correctly. Third, irregular plural forms, English has many irregular plural forms that do not follow the standard rule of adding "-s" or "-es". Arab learners might find it difficult to memorize these irregular forms and use them correctly in sentences.

Fourth, confusion with Arabic language rules, Arabic and English have different rules for forming plurals. In Arabic, plurals are often formed by adding suffixes to the singular nouns. This can lead to confusion when Arab learners attempt to apply the same rules to English nouns.

Fifth, singular nouns ending in vowels, Arab learners might struggle with determining if a singular noun ending in a vowel should be followed by "-s" or "-es" when forming the plural. For example, words like "hero" might cause confusion as to whether it should be "heros" or "heroes".

To overcome these challenges, Arab learners of English can benefit from consistent practice, exposure to authentic English materials, and guidance from knowledgeable teachers or language resources. It is also helpful to focus on memorizing irregular plurals and familiarizing themselves with the regular plural rules in English

In this area, the learners do not commit a lot of errors, the only confusion *that* encountered by learners is the irregular words. Exceptional words like those which have irregular form in the plural form confuse the learners. Mostly those words which have plural form in Arabic but they do not have in English. Just like the word "fish" or "sheep" which has plural form in Arabic but there is no plural in English. Therefore, it is common to find Arabian learners writing a plural form for the word "fish" and "sheep". But this area has the less errors made.

This minority of errors could be due to the two languages have the plural system. This is what helps the students to not having many errors in this part unlike the other parts.

#### **5.1.3.** Tenses

This type of problem faced the students from intensive English course programs mostly in all the different stages of learning English which is because of the differences between the tenses in Arabic and English. In English, there are twelve tenses which are not all found in Arabic which confuse the learner. For example, in Arabic, there is no continuous tense which is found in English language. The learners mostly have problems in dealing with this tense (when to use it, how to use it, etc)

Most of the learners use the simple past tense instead of the simple present tense. This is the mother tongue impact in the learning of English; it might also be caused by the learning attempt to translate their ideas from one language to

another. The comparison of the new learnt language to the mother tongue causes such types of problems.

These less given attention to this part and the method adopted of teaching grammar (grammar, translation method) may be the cause of such problems.

### **5.1.4. Prepositions**

Prepositions are another grammatical category that presents an enormous challenge not only to Arabian students learning English as a foreign language but also to all English learners. Arabic and English do not belong to similar language family although the two languages use prepositions, it is true that they have the same prepositions, but sometimes they use them in different way, So that Arabian students face difficulties in using the right preposition in the right position.

### 5.1.5. Capitalization and Punctuation

The punctuation and capitalization systems are two areas that students from intensive English course programs have too many problems dealing with them. The learners have problems in dealing with the capitalization system; this is because the Arabic language system does not have capital and small letters and this could be seen in the learners' writings although it does not stand as an obstacle for learners in writing English. It can be seen in the learners writing that they start a sentence with a capital letter or write their names with capital letter. The cause might not only be the learners' knowledge of the rules, but also might be that the learners got used to have capital letter for special words in their native language.

On the other hand, there in both languages punctuation system, and nearly the same from Arabic to English, but in English, the punctuation can change the meaning of a sentence as we can see in this example,

"She walked into the room, smiled." Vs "She walked into the room and smiled."

The first sentence, with a comma, suggests that she walked into the room and then smiled as two separate actions. On the other hand, the second sentence, without a comma, indicates that she walked into the room while smiling. Unlike Arabic, the punctuation system is not given that attention as it can affect the

meaning of the sentences, it is mostly used to guide the reader where he\she must stop or where he must have a pause.

#### 6. Conclusion

This study shows the errors that are committed by the students from intensive English course programs. This study shows that the weakest area in common errors in English grammar by Arab learners of English as a foreign language was in the grammatical aspects. Learners have difficulties in dealing with the grammar of the target language (English).

Many mistakes have been committed by the participants in prepositions as a result of the slight difference between the two languages. The difference of the number of prepositions and the different usage of them were the only cause behind that.

It is found out that the mother tongue effects negatively the learners' acquisition of the foreign language. The study found out that the mother tongue effects on different aspects of acquiring the grammar of the foreign language. Both languages have tenses but the absence of some tenses in Arabic does not help fluent students to master the tenses of English. For example; the perfect tense is found in English but it does not exist in Arabic. Therefore, the learners face difficulties in using this tense and usually make errors in using it.

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