

From My Two Eyes Teacher!

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Abstract

EFL students often commit errors in expressions due to the interlanguage influence of their first language. This study illustrates the importance of these errors and how the EFL teacher can utilize them by enhancing the student's language production. It is based on data collected over a three year period for a study that investigated semantic lexical errors committed by tertiary level male Saudi students. The 200 participants were university mixed ability students enrolled in a preparatory year program. The lexical errors made by the students were projections of the immediate literal translation of the Arabic (the native language – L1) words/phrases due to the interference of their interlanguage that gets expressed incorrectly semantically in English.

This study reflects on several common examples of interlanguage transfer errors. It also reflects on the understanding of those errors. It also presents some recommended approaches to correct them and map out ways to improve the students' self monitoring and understanding of those lexical errors as well as how they can also learn from these mistakes in the process. The end result is that both the students and the teacher can benefit from discussing these errors in the classroom.

Keywords: lexical errors, interlanguage transfer, EFL Arab learners, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), error analysis, Pedagogical Implications.

1. Introduction

Throughout the Arab world, English is needed for the purposes of establishing good communications with other countries throughout the world in addition to its need in business, education, technology, medicine....etc. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is becoming so much in demand that the majority of Arab governments have introduced it as a compulsory subject into the school curriculum and in the Preparatory Year Programs (PYP) at university level.

Students, who join the PYP at the majority of universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, must pass English as a compulsory subject in order transfer to the first year undergraduate courses. Students in the Arab world are fully aware of the importance and practical benefits of learning English. Rababah (2003) states that “attitudinal studies conducted on Arab students, consistently shown that Arab students are instrumentally motivated to learn English and that they are well aware of the utility of knowing English, the main stimulus for learning English is instrumental, i.e. to achieve a goal, e.g. a career” (188).

Several difficulties face EFL Arab learners and one of those difficulties is the interlingual transfer from Arabic (L1) to English (L2). In Random House Dictionary of the English Language, “Interlanguage” is defined as “the linguistic system characterizing the output of a non-native speaker (NNS) at any stage prior to full acquisition of the target language”, and language transfer is “the application of native language rules in attempted performance in a second language, in some cases

resulting in deviations from target-language norms and in other cases facilitating second-language acquisition” (1988).

Interlingual transfer is considered a major issue that Arab EFL learners fall back on when trying to achieve correct communicative end. This study aims at discussing the errors made by EFL Arab learners when directly transferring idiomatic expressions from Arabic L1 into English L2. The study also aims at giving error analysis and provides some background information into such errors. In addition, few pedagogical approaches which EFL teachers can try out in their classrooms are presented.

2. Background

Until recently, semantic errors researches have not received much attention compared to syntactic, morphological and phonological errors researches (Wray, 2000) to an even less extent, the transfer of proverbial and idiomatic expressions from Arabic into English. The lack of researches into the latter could be due to the fact that EFL learners will only be able to understand and use idioms in L2 (English in this case) if he/she has attained an advanced level of proficiency in the foreign language. The frequent and spontaneous use of idiomatic expressions indicates native or near-native command of the language. Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) state that the EFL learner who tries to avoid using idiom will immediately single himself out as a foreigner (73).

Most EFL learners aim to achieve a high level of proficiency in English which is sometimes indicated by the use of idiomatic expressions in English. However, as this study will empirically show, low proficiency of English amongst Arab EFL learners

coupled with the aspiration to achieve idiomaticity, they tend to resort to the interlingual transfer strategy as a compromise.

2.1. What is an Idiom?

An idiom is defined as an expression consisting of two or more words having a meaning that cannot be deduced from the meanings of its constituent parts in the American Heritage Dictionary (2001). In another definition: “an idiom is a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words” (Larson, 1984). Idioms are language-specific combinations of words that cannot be understood from the meaning of the individual words forming a phrase. They cannot be translated literally because their meaning won’t be predicted from the usual meaning of their constituents. Many researchers (e.g. Ellis, 1997; Yorio, 1989) suggest that adequate knowledge and appropriate use of idioms in an L2 is an important indicator of L2 communicative competence. Cooper (1998) elaborates on the importance of idiom in EFL teaching by stating: “Since idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programs and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum”.

2.2. Why study Errors?

Pit Corder, who many linguists and academics consider as the father of error analysis and an important researcher in this field, changed the views and perceptions toward error analysis and provided it with new directions. He disagreed with the views of structuralists and behaviorists considering the errors as blemishes that needed to be

eliminated. He asserted that errors are important in and of themselves (Corder, 1967). He also argued that, for learners themselves, errors are unavoidable and mandatory because making errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses to learn. Richards and Sampson (1974:15), explain: “at the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort”.

2.3. Errors or Mistakes?

This study aims at exploring and analysing errors rather than mistakes. It is essential to note that the two terms are not the same. Several researchers discuss this crucial point. Corder (1971) explains that: “mistakes can be self-corrected, but an error cannot”. Errors are “systematic,” i.e. likely to occur repeatedly and are not recognized by the learner. Hence, only the teacher or researcher would locate them, the learner wouldn't (Gass & Selinker, 1994).

Corder (1981) hypothesizes that mistakes should not be included in the quantification or analysis of errors. According to Richards & Schmidt (2002), mistakes are those made by a learner while writing or speaking and are caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, whereas errors are those made by a learner while writing or speaking caused by incomplete learning. Errors help teachers and researchers observe the learning outcome as well as the learning strategies of EFL learners.

2.4. Error Analysis

Johanson (1975) argues that the best tool for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages is error analysis. Corder (1967), however, defines error analysis as a type of linguistic analysis concentrating on the errors learners make

in the process of language learning and comparing the errors made in the Target Language (TL) with that TL itself. He believed that systematically analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching (Corder, 1974). Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language (Taylor, 1975; Dulay and Burt, 1974). The analysis of errors can be diagnostic as well as prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's state of the language at a given point during the learning process, and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems (Corder, 1967).

3. Body

3.1. Participants

200 university level preparatory year (male) Saudi students were randomly selected from 12 different sections over the period of three years. They were asked to perform three different oral examinations in addition to one written exam all of which were part of their end of semester evaluation.

3.2. Errors Categories

Errors committed by students were categorized into three main groups:

1. Grammatical
2. Syntactic
3. Lexical/Semantic

Errors committed by the students were over 70% lexical. The latter includes several subcategories and the subcategory that relates to this study relates to the direct translation from L1 into L2 (modified from Zughoul, 1991 and Shalby et al, 2007).

3.3. Results

Errors committed by the student were recorded on custom made error record sheets and errors analysed. It was found that students used over 12 Arabic (L1) language-specific idioms and directly transferred them into English (L2). It was also found that all of the idiomatic expressions that students directly transferred into English were reflective of Arab culture and environment. Out of the 70% lexical errors committed by the students, 25% were committed in the written exam and 45% during the speaking exams.

a) Two of the examples of written errors were:

1. Clear and without any dust on it. (*indicates something that is pure and irreproachable*).
2. Time is like sword if you don't cut it, it will cut you. (*time and tide wait for no man*).

b) Examples of speaking errors include the following:

1. Any service teacher? (*offering to help the teacher or bring something that the teacher needs*)
2. From my two eyes teacher? (*with my pleasure*).
3. When the cow makes Hajj (pilgrimage) on its horns! (*Indicating that something will never happen or impossible*).

4. When the camel falls, its knives increase. (*When something big (a person or company...etc) falls or collapses, it will start getting attacked from all*).

Out of the 200 students included in this study, 90 students committed most of the errors and their level of English was pre-intermediate based on their entrance proficiency exams they took at the beginning of the semester. 100 of the beginner level students surprisingly did not commit any interlingual transfer errors due to the fact that they attempted to express themselves in non-idiomatic language. The 10 students who were intermediate or above intermediate level were able to express themselves in both speaking and writing exams through sound language or in few cases positive transfer of idiomatic expressions and collocations.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Carl (1998) states that: “Not only to err is human, but there is none other than human error: animals and artifacts do not commit errors, and if to err and to speak are each uniquely human, then to commit language errors must mark the very pinnacle of human uniqueness”.

The results in this study indicate that Arab EFL learners adopt the direct interlingual transfer as a substitutive mechanism for their low proficiency in English. This coupled with their aspiration to achieve idiomaticity, Arab EFL learners resort to a compromise in the form of direct interlingual transfer from Arabic (L1) to English (L2). Those errors can provide a wealth of information and pedagogical implication to the EFL teacher. The use of direct transfer by the EFL learner could be a reflection on his/her culture, social and country's background. When the EFL teacher discusses those errors with his/her students and makes them aware of either positive transfer of

equivalences in English, he/she (the teacher) can understand the background of those idiomatic expressions negatively transferred from Arabic into English. Approaching this issue can be in the following few suggestions in the form of designated lessons of:

1. Idiomatic expressions and proverbs in English with visual aids and pictorials supporting certain common idioms if possible.
2. Idiom of the day
3. Translating Arabic idioms into English and analyse the translation for negative or positive transfer.
4. Discussing, defining, drawing and dramatizing idioms.
5. Idioms in cartoons or movies.

This study is by no mean comprehensive and further research is needed in order to compare findings in this study. It would be particularly valuable if further studies are conducted from a broader samples of Arabic speaking EFL learners (e.g. from North African Arab countries) so as to compare with EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. Also, comparative studies with EFL learners from different first language backgrounds, would be useful.

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