An Investigation of the Influence of L1 on EFL Students Paragraph Writing: Case of First Year English Language Students at Setif 2 University

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Abstract

English language students are exposed to acquire plenty of grammar knowledge during their academic years. Nevertheless, grammar teaching at universities is thought to be marginal, and only taught as a separate module or whenever the need arises. Moreover, students writing, namely essays are mostly full of grammatical errors due to L1 interference. The aim of this study is therefore to analyze the impact of the native language (Arabic) on the grammatical structure used in the students' written paragraphs, and to provide some recommendations to better students' misuse of the EFL grammar.

Keywords:

Grammatical structures; written paragraph; teaching; grammatical errors; inter-lingual interference.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become the most used language by people around the world and it plays an important role in life. In teaching EFL, the learners are expected to acquire the four skills in language: listening, reading, writing, and speaking, however, some specialists see that writing is more important than the other skills. In learning writing, the students also need to understand the language components of English such as comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

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EFL learners in Algeria have various backgrounds and different motivations to learn English. Since English is recognized as a foreign language in Algeria, many learners face several difficulties in mastering the writing skill. Many of them, for instance, do not speak English fluently because their daily language is Arabic and their second language is French. Loubazid (2012) states that those difficulties are caused by lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Grammar knowledge is one of the most important features to acquire the writing skill.

The teaching of English grammar in general emphasizes rules and structures which are so different from the Arabic language grammar. In general, Algerian language learners find it easy to memorize and recite English grammar rules but mostly use them in an incorrect way while writing.

In EFL learning and teaching, grammar is considered one of the most critical elements of the language. However, Thornbury (1999, p. Ix) cited that "Teaching grammar has always been the most controversial and least understood aspect of language teaching." It is imperative that grammar should be a vital part of language teaching especially in EFL contexts where the classroom is the only basis for learning.

For several years, grammar has been seen as rules to be studied. However, Savage et al. (2010) supported to the view of several teachers, who emphasized that grammar is a skill rather than a set of rules, requiring enhancement and development. In this respect, grammar is considered to be a tool for carrying communicative meaning rather than a target in itself. Therefore, it should not be taught in isolation, but rather incorporated into other skills especially in speaking and writing.

Cowan (2008) asserted that numerous grammatical errors are due to first language (L1) interference. This interference occurs when there are no similarities or connections between the grammars of both native language and foreign language like Arabic and English. Learners' native language interference is one of the challenges for teachers when it comes to teaching grammar.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing

The term writing has different definitions. According to Rivers (1981, p. 294), writing is conveying information or an expression of original ideas in a consecutive way in the new language. Brown, (2001, p. 336) also reported that writing is a thinking process. In his view, writing can be planned and given with an unlimited number of revisions before its release. Elbow (1973, in Brown (2001, p.336) reported that writing is 'a two-step process'. The first process is figuring out the meaning and the second process is putting the meaning into language. Writing represents what we think, it is because the writing process reflects things, which stay in the mind. EFL students find generally difficulties when they start looking for some reasons to write and produce grammatical correct sentences.

Urquhart and Mclver (2005) have another definition of writing. They (2005) defined writing as a recursive process, which means students revise throughout the process, and frequently move back and forth among the stages. Students should learn strategies for invention and discovery, and teachers should help them produce content and discover a purpose. In addition, it is stated that readers, purpose, and occasion define all types of writing and effective writing fulfills the writer's intention and meets the readers' needs. In other words, writing is a complex process and it seems reasonable to expect, then, that the teaching of writing is complex as well. Furthermore, Harmer (2004) emphasized that writing encourages students to focus on accurate language use because students consider the language use when they engage in their writing process. This activity will provoke language development, because the students resolve problems that the writing process puts in their minds.

We might say that writing is a creative complex process done through a set of stages. First, discovering and conveying ideas, thought and feeling into written form. Then, conducting a number of revision steps to produce grammatical and orderly texts. The writing productions will

therefore be in readable and meaningful forms.

2.2 Error

When a student learns a foreign language and makes errors, this indicates his or her level of proficiency. On the contrary, making mistakes has to do with students' performance. The learners might know the language rules, but will be unable to produce correct structures.

An error, as defined by Novita (2014), is the systematic deviations done by a student who does not understand the rules of the target language. The latter happens repeatedly as an unconscious process. Error reflects a lack of underlying competence in the language students learn (Novita, 2014). Brown (2007) defined an error as a deviation which can be noticed from the adult grammar of a native speaker. He also stated that a mistake is a lack of performance which can either be a random guess or a 'slip' to utilize a known system correctly (2007).

Mistakes can be caused by a slip of the tongue and/or a physical condition; such as fatigue, lack of attention, and strong emotion (Novita, 2014). In addition, Scovel (2002) explained that for people who make a mistake or a slip of the tongue, there will be a self-correction but this is not the case for people who make errors. Brown (2007) cited that the source of errors can be classified as follows:

1) Language transfer or inter-lingual interference: In this type, errors are caused by native language interference.

2) Intra-lingual interference; This kind of interference happens during the learning process of a foreign language at a stage when learners have not really acquired the knowledge.

In order to classify errors, we need a taxonomy. The latter refers to the classification of error according to specific principles. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) suggested that there are four kinds of error taxonomy; these are:

1) *Linguistic Category Classification.* This type of taxonomy carries the specification of error in terms of linguistic categories. Linguistic category involves the language levels of the error, its class, its rank, and its grammatical system.

2) *The Surface Structure Taxonomy.* This taxonomy is assigned based on the ways surface structures are altered. This is suitable for analyzing error in writing which is the topic of this research.

3) *Comparative error.* This is a taxonomy of error based on comparison between foreign language structures errors and certain other types of construction.

4) *Communicative Effect Taxonomy.* It deals with error from the perspective of their effect on listeners. It deals with distinguishing between errors that seem to cause miscommunication and those that do not.

2.3 Inter-lingual Error

Inter-lingual errors are also known as interference, language transfer, and cross-linguistic interference. Corder (1981) indicated that these types of errors occur when the learner's habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent them, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language. Lado (1964) defined that interference (negative transfer) is negative influence of the L1 on the performance of the target language (L2).

Chelli (2013) said that inter-lingual errors are the result of language transfer, which is caused by learner's first language. Richard (1974) stated that if learners of a foreign language make a mistake in the target language due to the interference of their mother tongue, this is referred to as inter-lingual error. Moreover, Brown (1980) clarified that most of learners' errors in the second language result primarily from learner's assumption that the second language forms are similar to the native language forms.

For the causes of inter-lingual errors, Allen and Corder (1974) reported that inter-lingual errors are caused by transfer error. Touchie (1986) proposed that they are caused mainly by mother tongue interference.

In addition, Al-Khresheh (2010) suggested that inter-lingual errors are committed by literal translation.

Sari (2016, p.90) defined three types of errors:

* *Transfer Error:* This type of error is caused by interference from mother tongue. A student who has not known the rules of target language will use the same rules as he obtained in his native language.

* *Mother tongue Interference:* These errors are produced as learners' attempt to discover the structure of the target language rather than transfer models of their first language.

* *Literal Translation:* Literal translation errors happen because a student translates his or her first language sentence or idiomatic expression into the target language word by word.

In this paper, our focus is on grammatical error combining words into larger units, such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. Grammatical error can also be errors at morphological and syntactical levels. Morphological errors involve a failure to comply with the norms when supplying any part of word classes, noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and preposition (James, 1998).

Syntactical errors are errors that affect texts, namely phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs (James, 1998). Syntactical errors cover phrase structure errors, clause errors, and sentence errors. In analyzing error, the correction process needs to follow the steps of error analysis.

We believe that the focus of this research paper is very important; since grammar is the basis for other language skills. The teaching of this subject is sometimes marginalized by teachers. Teachers do not generally pay attention to the fact that their students cannot ameliorate their language unless they have a solid background of grammar knowledge, which may not have been established at school.

3. Statement of the Problem

The impact of the native language on English learning appears mostly on the level of the use of grammatical structures in written paragraphs.

4. Research Questions

This paper is based on two main research questions, which are:

1. Is there any relation between the native language (Arabic) and the learning of English as a foreign language?

2. Does the grammar of the native language (Arabic) have any impact on the use of grammatical structures when writing paragraphs?

5. Methodology

The elected population is forty-two first year English language students at the Department of English Language and Literature, at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Setif 2 University (Algeria).

The sample comprised the whole population of forty-two students (males and females) having Arabic as native language. The quantitative paradigm was followed in this research. Data was collected from written paragraphs of students during grammar and written expression classes. We adopted a specific method to demonstrate students' learning improvement. This method was: pre-test - test and post-test.

The students were given a pre-test before starting any grammar or written expression class. Then, they were taking classes during two months. After this period, they were given tests consisted of different exercises of grammar and written expression. These tests were corrected on the table. Each error was referred to its grammatical rule. After two weeks of intensive classes, similar exercises were given to students in order to see if they could overcome their difficulties and reduce the grammatical errors they made before.

6. Data Analysis

To find out whether the learner's native language has an impact on the English language grammatical structures, we examined all students' answers of the pre-test, test and post-test.

	Pre-test		Test		Post-test	
	Grammar exercises	Written expression	Grammar exercise	Written expression	Grammar exercises	Written expression
TRANSFER ERROR	24	25	15	12	9	10
MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE	19	33	13	23	7	11
LITERAL TRANSLATION	3	34	0	12	0	9

Table 01: Errors Frequency in Grammar Exercises and Written Paragraphs

For a better illustration and further analytical results, the above table was made to indicate the obtained results concerning the types of errors that the forty-two students committed in the three phases: pre-test, test and post-test.

Pre-Test

	Grammar Exercises	Written Expressions
Transfer Error.	24	25
Mother tongue Interference	19	33
Literal Translation	11	34
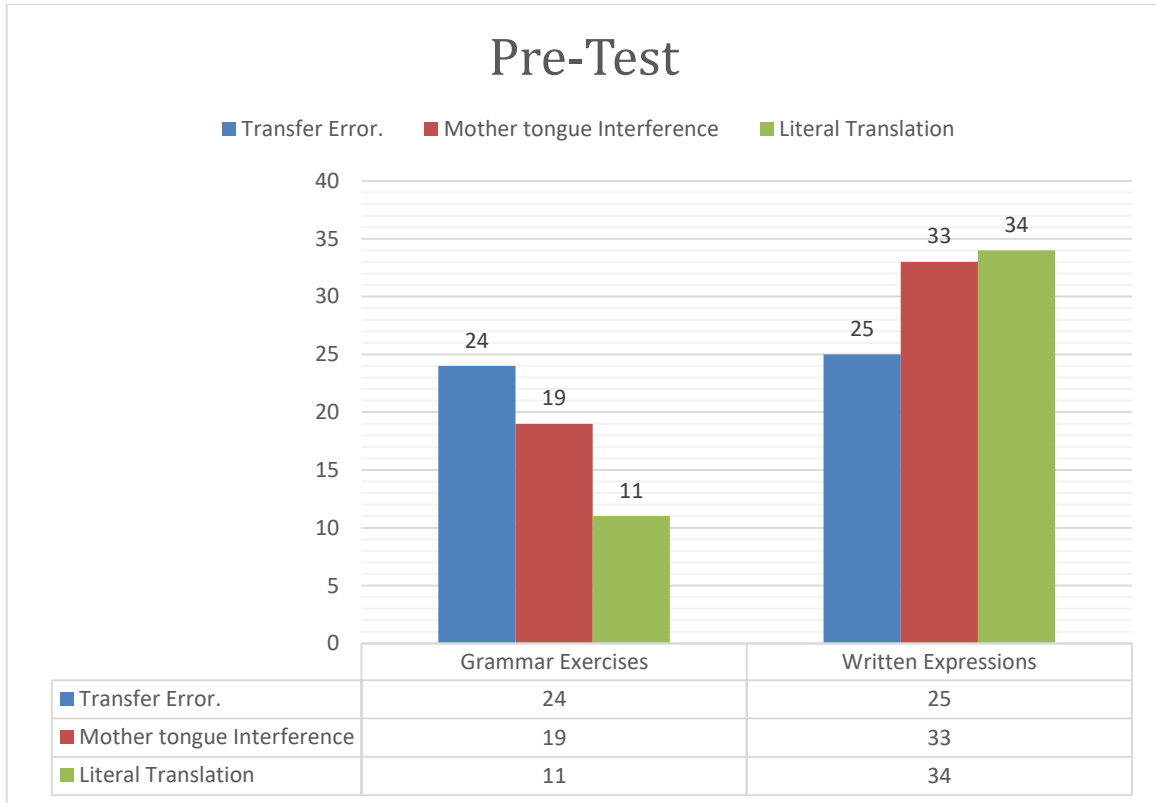
Figure 01: Errors Committed in Grammar Exercises and Written Paragraphs in the Pre-test Phase

The above figure illustrates the percentages of transfer errors, mother tongue interference and literal translation committed by the forty two students for both grammar exercises and written paragraphs in the pre-test phase. In grammar exercises, transfer error has the highest rate (24), mother tongue interference has a moderate rate (19), and literal translation has the lowest rate (03).

In written paragraphs, literal translation has the highest rate (34), mother tongue interference has a high rate too (33), and transfer error has the lowest rate (25).

Test

Legend: ■ Transfer Error. ■ Mother tongue Interference ■ Literal Translation

	Grammar Exercises	Written Expressions
Transfer Error.	15	12
Mother tongue Interference	13	23
Literal Translation	0	12

Figure 02: Errors Committed in Grammar Exercises and Written Paragraphs in the Test Phase

The above figure clarifies the rates of transfer errors, mother tongue interference and literal translation committed by the forty-two students for both grammar exercises and written paragraphs in the test phase. In grammar exercises, transfer error has the highest rate (15), mother tongue interference has a moderate rate (13), and literal translation has no rate (00).

In written paragraphs mother tongue interference has the highest rate (23), while both literal translation and transfer error have a moderate rate (12).

Post-Test

■ Transfer Error.   ■ Mother tongue Interference   ■ Literal Translation

|	Grammar Exercises	Written Expressions
■ Transfer Error.	9	10
■ Mother tongue Interference	7	11
■ Literal Translation	0	9

Figure 03: Errors Committed in Grammar Exercises and Written Paragraphs in the Post-test Phase

The above figure shows the rates of transfer errors, mother tongue interference and literal translation committed by the forty-two students for both grammar exercises and written paragraphs in the post-test phase. In grammar exercises, transfer error has the highest rate (09), mother tongue interference has a moderate rate (07), and literal translation and has no rate (00). In written paragraphs, the three elements have close rates, transfer error (10), mother tongue interference (11), literal translation (09).

The following figure indicates the errors frequency in grammar exercises answered by the forty-two students in the three phases: pre-test, test and post-test.

|	Pre-test	Test	Post-test
Transfer Error	24	15	9
Mother Tongue Interference	19	13	7
Literal Translation	3	0	0
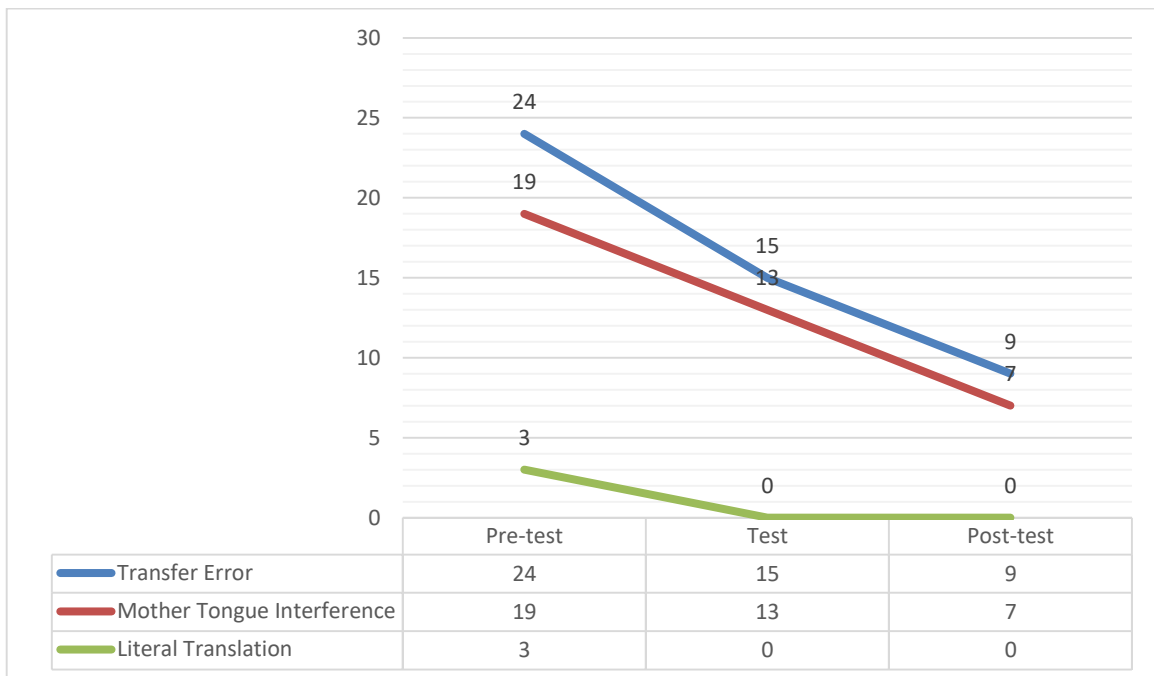
Figure 04: Errors Frequency in Grammar Exercises

From the above figure, we can notice that the rate of both transfer error and mother tongue interference is high compared to literal translation. This indicates that students resort to the rules of the mother tongue (Arabic in this case) when they are unable to find the appropriate grammatical rule in English.

Literal translation was rarely used in the pre-test phase. As for the test and the post-test phases, it disappeared completely. This is due to the intensive lessons in grammar that students received.

The following figure indicates the errors frequency in written paragraphs composed by the forty-two students in three phases: pre-test, test and post-test.

	Pre-test	Test	Post-test
Transfer Error	25	12	10
Mother Tongue Interference	33	23	11
Literal Translation	34	12	9
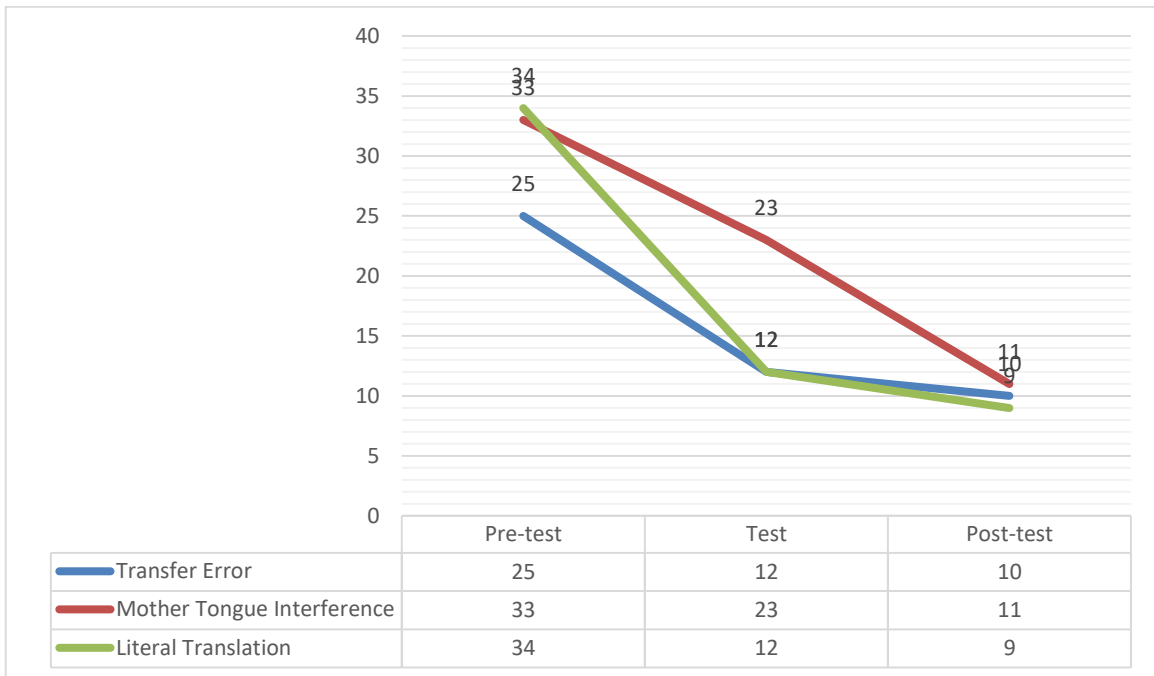
Figure 05: Errors Frequency in Written Paragraphs

From the above figure, we can notice that the rate of all types of errors (transfer error, mother tongue interference and literal translation) is high. This indicates that students were not really able to express themselves in written composition and use the correct grammatical rules within it. The rate of errors decreased in the test phase, until it reached its lowest level in the post-test phase which is not very different from the test phase level. This improvement in using correctly the grammatical structures may be due to the intensive lessons in grammar that students received.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

As English and Arabic are different with regard to their syntax and grammar, the mother tongue of students seems to have an impact on their English learning, especially on the grammatical structures that appeared clearly in their written paragraphs. This study indicates that there is an influence of Arabic on English learning. The grammatical errors committed by students may be due to the influence of their mother tongue (Arabic).

Given the above findings, it can be assumed that inter-lingual errors were caused because some students have not known the rules of the target

language; students use the same rules they learnt in Arabic; and because of word-for-word translation from Arabic. This means that the learners combined the English sentence words with Arabic structures.

This study indicates that the students in this study were unable to answer correctly the grammar exercises, but the types of errors in their written paragraphs reveal also their inability to think and write in a correct way in English. This means that our sample of students is able to use correctly their grammatical knowledge in isolation of a defined context. However, in their written paragraphs, they use spontaneously Arabic as a support to understand English.

To sum up, the inter-lingual errors with regard to grammatical structures that are committed by the participants of this study are due to the transfer Arabic habits. The findings propose that the participants are still influenced by Arabic knowledge when producing the English sentences.

8. Recommendations

We suggest some pedagogical implications which should be taken into account in teaching grammar context. First, it is suggested that syntax and grammar should be given much attention while teaching English language to students. Thus, teachers should be aware of points of similarities and differences between Arabic and English to avoid the interference of mother tongue.

9. CONCLUSION

English grammar should not be taught in isolation of a defined context. A defined context helps students to create a situation and express themselves. By using correct grammatical structures, they can write correctly in English. Teachers should encourage their students to learn most of the syntactic rules that will improve their ability to write correctly in English without committing errors.

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