



# **The Effects Of First Language On The Learning Of English As A Second Language**

**Mouzah Y. Alebaid**

The Higher Institute of Telecommunication and Navigation

**E-mail:** [mouzah.alebaid@gmail.com](mailto:mouzah.alebaid@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

The research explores how the mother tongue effects the learning and acquisition of second language. When Arabic learners tend to learn English language, they commit a lot of lexical, grammatical, syntactical, phonetic and pronunciation errors. These mistakes are seen due to vast differences in Arabic and English Language. The negative transfer of language hinders the learning of Arabic students. This research explores the kind of errors that are commonly committed by L2 learners while acquiring the second language and how they can work on improving these errors. This doesn't happen overnight rather requires time and effort of teachers. When L2learners will commit errors, the teachers get to know about their mistakes and it will

help to correct them. It is common for L2 learners to intermingle their first language with the second one, but it has been noticed that constant effort, seriousness of students and teachers can help overcome this matter.

**Keywords:** Second Language, English Language, Learning, Errors, transfer



## ملخص البحث

يستكشف البحث تأثير اللغة الأم على تعلم واكتساب اللغة الثانية، عندما يميل المتعلمون العرب إلى تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية فإنهم يرتكبون الكثير من الأخطاء اللغوية والنحوية والإعرابية والصوتية واللفظية. تظهر هذه الأخطاء بسبب الاختلافات الكبيرة بين اللغتين العربية والإنجليزية. ولعل من المعوقات الأساسية للانتقال السلبي للغة هم المتعلمين العرب. يستكشف هذا البحث نوع الأخطاء والتي عادةً ما يرتكبها المتعلمون من المستوى الثاني عند اكتساب اللغة الثانية وكيفية العمل على تحسين هذه الأخطاء وبالطبع، فإن هذا لن يحدث بين ليلةٍ وضحاها ، بل يتطلّب وقتاً وجهداً من المدرسين.

عندما يرتكب المتعلمون من المستوى الثاني الأخطاء، سوف يتعرف المعلمون على أخطائهم وسيساعد ذلك على تصحيحها من الشائع أن يخلط المتعلمون من المستوى الثاني لغتهم الأولى مع اللغة الثانية. ولكن لوحظ بأن الجهد المستمر والجديّة عند الطلاب والمدرسين ممكن أن يساعد في التغلب على هذه المسألة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية : اللغة الثانية / اللغة الإنجليزية / التعليم / الأخطاء / النقل.**



## Introduction

English has become the language of the World and has a universal reach across the countries. The benefits of learning English language range from the professional, academic, career and personal. The learning of a new language is not different from the acquisition of the mother tongue (**Atwill, 2007; Bley-Vroman, 1990**). Though it is established that the aptitude of a person in learning a second language is affected by the proficiency in the mother tongue (**Dornyei, 2001**). It is very important for a teacher of a second language to know how much the native language or the mother tongue. In this essay the researcher will try to establish whether or not the mother tongue has an impact on the learning of a second language and the level of this impact. Multilingual and bilingual children and students have found to be better performers in intelligence tests and have a broader range of aptitude for learning new things (**Cummins, 1992**). In the context of learning English language for the people who speak Arabic as their native tongue a growing body of research is forming. Some of the recent noteworthy works in this regard include the in-depth analysis of acquisition of vocabulary of the foreign language by Muhammad Saleem Khan of Buraydah Community College, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. One of the aspects of teaching a second language is by translating the words and vocabulary to the mother tongue to help the students understand the meanings of the second language. This methods is considered an easier way to transfer the meaning to the non-native learners (**Kheirabadi, 2015**). Teaching students' multiple languages in the years of primary education boost their lingual proficiencies which helps them to understand and use the languages better. If the teacher uses the mother tongue during the instruction of the foreign tongue then there is an impact on the learning of the second language. There are contrasting views on the effectiveness of the use of the native language during the instruction of the second which are common to the learning and teaching of all languages in general but specifically for English as a second primarily because the body of literature on the subject is mostly about English language.



When Arabic Language speakers start learning English language at beginner's level, they do not take English language as a new beginning rather they interpret the new phonological, morphological and semantic patterns stored in their own native language. Therefore, plethora of errors committed by Arab students while learning English language is due to the interference of Arabic language (**Al-Zoubi & Abu Eid, 2014**). Besides this, the learners of target language are not at all aware of the errors they commit while speaking or writing L2. According to a researcher named Richards, these errors can be analyzed through the process of Error Analysis (**Al-Zoubi & Abu Eid, 2014**). The main reason for the occurrence of these errors is due to the transfer of language. The L2 language learners tend to transfer the meaning and form; they distribute the forms, meaning and culture of their own language to the second language. Researchers Dulay, Burt and Krashen in 1982 pointed out that these L2 learner errors can be further classified into four types: 1) The development of errors similar to the errors made by children while learning their native language 2) Errors which reflect the structures of L1 3) Uncertain and ambivalent errors 4) Other unknown errors that cannot be defined (**Al-Zoubi & Abu Eid, 2014**). Arabic speakers in learning the second language tend to commit mistakes in the formation of sentences, adverbs, adjectives, nouns and clauses. What is the main reason for the occurrence of such errors? Let's look at some differences in Arabic and English Languages. Arabic texts follow a cursive script and are written and read from right to left contrary to this, English texts are written from left to right and follow Latin script. Similarly, in Arabic there is no distinction of lower- and upper-case letters and the rules of punctuation are loose compared to English. Arabic has 8 vowels while English language has 6 of them and during the use of Vowels Arabic uses diphthongs and long vowels as infixes, considering the use of short vowels as unimportant (**Racoma, 2019**).



The differences in both languages do not in any way state that any language is superior or inferior to other, it is just to highlight the factor differences which effect the L2 learning for Arabic natives. The mistakes and errors committed by the Arabic native speakers are therefore apparent. For example, there are certain words in English which are considered as uncountable nouns like money, information, damage etc but they can be counted in Arabic. Therefore, Arabic speakers tend to pluralize them like, 'The **informations** I received was beneficial' Or 'I got a lot of **moneys**'. On the other hand, in English there are approximately 150 prepositions while the number of prepositions in Arabic is limited, *min* (from), *'an* (about), *ba/bi* (by, with), *fi* (in, into) besides, some adverbs are also used as prepositions such as: *amam* (infront), *bayna* (in between), *khalfa* (behind) (Alja'arat & Husna Hasan, 2018). Therefore, Arabic speakers might use prepositions even where they are not required like, *I will practice doing the exercises* becomes *I will **practice on making** the exercises*. Similarly, in a sentence like *nahnu istamta'na bilfilm* is translated as 'We were interested with the film'. This happens because of the misuse of preposition 'with' instead of 'this' because the preposition *bi* in Arabic means 'with'. They also tend to omit important prepositions and therefore usually say "ashamed from, composed from and object on" where of, of and to should be used respectively (Alja'arat & Husna Hasan, 2018)

More prominent negative transfer of languages take place in essays, lexical usage, pronunciation and spellings. Let's take a deeper look into these errors. Many Arabic students while writing the essays tend to use words that are 'not required', the usage of these words is unnecessary because they follow a certain repetition. Hatim and Mason (1997:127) state that Arabic argumentation uses repetition for emphasis and stylistic effectiveness (Sabbah, 2015). However, this repetition used for emphasis instead makes the argument weak in English essays. Hatem and Mason (1997) state various examples,

- Mona lives alone with no one.
- The boss advanced forward the date of meeting
- The problem is very serious in the nature of it.



In these examples, the words, ‘with no one’, ‘forward’ and ‘in the nature’ are completely extra and not required. Researchers Mohamed and Omar (1999) compare a lot of English and Arabic texts in order to point out their organizations. It was found out that Arabic sentences are much longer and contain a greater number of clauses as compared to the ones written in English (**Sabbah, 2015**). An example was sought from the narrative of a student who wrote, “*Thahaba Jawadun 'ila albeita wasa'ada alsalaalema mubasharatan 'ila altabiq althani haithu kanat omuhu biintetharihi wahi'a mustalqaitun fi firashiha mut'limatun min awjaa''en fi kul jasadaha bisababi kibari seniha wa'adami woujudi man yusa''eduha fi alqeami bi'amaal albaeit almurheqa walkatheera*” and the English translation to this sentence was, “Jawad went home, he immediately went to the second floor, where his mum was lying on her bed waiting for him. She was having pain in her body because of her old age. She also doesn't have anyone to help her with house chores” (**Sabbah, 2015**). It was seen with this example that Arabic sentence was long and complex while English equivalent sentence was short, simple and complex. ESL learners also tend to commit lexical errors, the mistakes in vocabulary and words of English Language. Abi Samara (2003) pointed out some lexical errors that Arab students commit while ‘literally’ translating sentences (**Sabbah, 2015**). For example, the Arabic *huwa bisehaten jayedaten* is translated as, “He has a right health” instead of “He is healthy”. Similarly, the Arabic *binnesbati li, minaal muhem ,an o''utabara ummun.* is translated as, “For me, to be counted as a good mother is important” by the Arabic ESL learners instead of, “For me, it is important to be considered as a mother” (**Sabbah, 2015**). Similarly, many Arabic ESL learners also tend to commit mistakes in pronunciation because of the differences in English and Arabic languages. Arabic has only one letter for each sound, therefore, the English sound /θ/ which is represented by two letters /th/ is presented in Arabic only by a single letter. Shabeer (n.d) listed sounds that do not exist in Arabic language and therefore the Arabic speakers borrow it from some other sounds in English Language.



Some common examples are,

Actual Sound	Borrowed Sound
/V/ serve	/f/ surf
/P/ park	/b/ bark
/P/ pregnant	/b/ brignent
/ð/ that	/θ/ θat

A researcher named Al Badawi (2012) pointed out that Arabic students exchange the voiced bilabial stop /b/ for the voiceless bilabial stop /p/ (**Sabbah, 2015**). Committing mistakes while learning new skill is something quite natural. Due to huge difference between the two language, it can be seen why the Arabic students tend to make mistakes while learning English Language. This is not a point of frustration rather the ESL teachers should provide proper guidance to these students. They should be allowed to commit mistakes in order to polish their skill of learning English as a second language.

The L2 learning is also affected by the sociocultural factors. Many students who study EFL come from a background where English language is not well known. Although English is a part of their curriculum in school and college years but students merely study it to pass the examination and do not show any interest in learning the language, “They only need marks to pass the examination and they do so by memorizing the answers without learning English” (**Hussein, 2017**). When these students reach university level where they take admission in professional fields like nursing, medical, engineering, computer science. It is then that they face challenging situation. If an intelligent and competent teacher helps him at that stage, he may be saved otherwise, his interest in English Language completely disappears.



A researcher named Suleiman argues, “The most notable problems which impede the progress of Arab students at University level is the inadequate mastery of four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing” (**Hussein, 2017**). According to Rababah 2002, one basic problem with listening is that listening material is not used by majority of teacher and they read dialogues to students which doesn’t provide necessary native speaker model to students. On the other hand, as per a researcher Ansari, many students do not find the opportunity to listen English from the mouth of native speaker (**Hussein, 2017**). Researcher Ali in 2007 and Aoun, Benmamoun and Chueiri in 2010 pointed out various errors that Arabic students commit while speaking English. These errors were highlighted in terms of tenses. In Arabic language, there are only two tenses: the perfect (only the past) and the imperfect (the non-past, simple present and simple future), where as English has many tenses including these two. Therefore, Arab speakers cannot produce perfect tenses easily. They use simple present tense. For example, a sentence like *I am eating my sandwich now* is spoken as *I eat my sandwich now* (**Alja’arat & Husna Hasan, 2018**). In order to further examine the complications in L2 English language due to L1 Arabic, a short survey was conducted with the students of Oakland University in May, 2014. Both qualitative and quantitative writing samples were collected. Each L1 participant was native of Saudi Arabia. The samples were identified on basis of gender, age and number of years in studying English Language. One L1 English American student was included in the survey to compare and contrast with L1 Arabic samples. 16% of participants were female and 84% were male and the age range was from 19 to 30 years. The samples of the survey were analyzed on the basis of various factors the use of articles, punctuation, word order, spelling issues and cultural tendency for Arabic speakers employ over exaggeration in their writing (**Barry, 2014**). A Researcher Ahmed Fakhri (1994) suggests that native Arabic speakers when write English they overuse coordinating words such as *and*, and underuse of subordination.



The Arabic writers begin the paragraph with *and* which is quite inappropriate while writing English but appropriate stylistic feature while writing *wa* (the English transliteration of the Arabic word for *and* in written Arabic: وَ ) (Barry, 2014). Lina Gomaa (2014), a professor of Arabic at Beloit College in Wisconsin, and professor of English at Misr International University in Cairo, discussed on another issue with L1 Arabic ESL writers of English which was about “run-on sentences”, she wrote: “Run-on sentences in Arabic language are putative and there is no harm in writing them. Newspapers, magazines and books have run on sentences and readers can follow them without any ambiguity. Therefore, the teacher has to make it clear that it is ambiguous for English readers to have fairly long sentences, unlike Arabic.” (Barry, 2014)

Modern education system requires the students to learn English Language and acquire the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Many Arabic students do not try to put effort in writing English language in fact, they do not even try to write a single word. When asked about it they simply answer, “I am not good at writing English” or “English is not among my good subjects”. They simply reflect that they are not talented enough to write English, however, a researcher Langan (2000) suggests that unless students change the predominant idea about writing as a “Natural talent” rather than a skill that can be acquired through learning, they would not be able to learn effectively (Fatima, 2017). Langan (2000) also suggests that students need to understand that writing is not a one step process rather it takes various steps to form a well written statement or paragraph for example, it starts with the formation of thesis, it involves pre-writing techniques and editing (Fatima, 2017). Professors must encourage students to write on their own even if they transfer language. This way teachers would be able to point out the mistakes and recognize what a student lacks and what needs improvement. Instead of considering it a failure, it can be looked from a positive angle in order to correct the errors of students from time to time. Vanday (2006) suggests, “Errors are very useful way of giving evidence of what they have learnt and what they haven’t learnt” (Dweik & Al Hommos, 2007).



Li (2008) states that some psychologists like Piaget and Bloom take the concept of Language transfer deeper by looking at it from a cognitive point of view ( **Dweik & Al Hommos, 2007**). These psychologists are of the view that language learning is a mental process where students must identify and look at words, sentences and paragraphs in a way that gives them knowledge that which word is appropriate to use how to use it and how they should structure a sentence. A research was also conducted in order to understand about this cognitive theory. This study was concerned with how knowledge, understanding and logical thinking takes place while learning ESL ( **Dweik & Al Hommos, 2007**). Arabic students already show least amount of interest to learn English Language and a major reason that adds to this lack of interest is that the L2 teacher prefers to conversate with his students in L1 because he believes that this way student would be able to understand and comprehend L2, however, that is not the case. Prohibiting the use of L2 in classroom is one of the reasons for students who are not able to learn L2 efficiently. A researcher named Ma (2009) considers L1 use as a scaffolding instrument for L2 learners which might result in more effective L2 output” ( **Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014**). When a student will make use of L2 during studies and while conversing with his teacher, the L2 teacher would be easily able to comprehend the errors the students commit and he would understand and guide the students about their mistakes. This would have a positive effect on their L2 learning. In another research it was found out that code switching is usually used by L1 speakers while making an utterance and it should be regarded as a skill rather than something negative because it helps the bilingual speakers exchange a conversation more fluently. Cook (2008) suggests that code-switching is a natural and purposeful phenomenon that facilitates communication and learning ( **Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014**). Therefore, an organized and principled code-switching is seen as a part of bilingual speakers in everyday life.



The transfer and effects of L1 Arabic on ESL learners include such errors which are common, certain and quite predictable. These errors are commonly committed in punctuation, capitalization, conjunctions, articles and most common lexical errors. Various researches and studies have been carried out in order to point out the errors and mistakes committed by Arabic students in learning English Language. These errors were found in writing, speaking, listening and reading. The errors and the reasons for these errors have been discussed earlier. The pointed to be taken into consideration is that one must consider that in order to efficiently learn English Language the flaws must be noticed if one wants to remove it. According to Corder (1967) these flaws are indispensable since the making of these errors can be considered as the device that the learners use in order to learn (Al-Hassan, 2013). Many researchers took visible interest in studying these errors because they are a kind of strategy for the learners in order to acquire and learn another language. Gass and Selinker (1994) defined these errors as “red flags” that provide evidence of the learner’s knowledge of foreign language. Therefore, these errors must be considered a plus and not something deleterious. A very important rule is to be played by the teachers who should not point out every single error that a student commits because this may discourage a student. A teacher should only point out errors where necessary, “A teacher should highlight to Arab learners of English the areas where the native language will be a source of error” (Sabbah, 2015). Moreover, as the writing rules and conventions are concerned, they must be ‘enforced’ at a very early stage. Corder (1967) claims, “We cannot really teach a language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way” (Al-Hassan, 2013). All the teachers from grade 1 must work on the language skills of their students. Students must also realize the importance of learning English as a second language. This cannot be achieved unless students become habitual of writing essays on their own.



Teachers must give proper instructions regarding essay writing to students ranging from Introduction, thesis statement, well-structured body paragraphs and conclusion. Students should become habitual of doing writing practice, “Students need to be given some well-defined essay rules and samples of their writings must be transcribed and distributed to them for correction and analysis” (Al-Hassan, 2013). This way they would be able to learn from their own mistakes. We should also be aware of the fact that different types of written material submitted by Arabic students will have different kinds of errors and mistakes (Al-Hassan, 2013). Therefore, these facts must be kept in mind while considering the approach of error analysis. The study should be conducted with small number of students and the amount submitted essays must also be limited.

### **Conclusion:**

Samuel Johnson in 1761 said, “To use two languages familiarly and without contaminating one by the other is extremely difficult” (“Sabbah, 2015”). Therefore, when two languages come in contact there is a huge possibility that the speakers will borrow the words from one and use it in another. Similarly, due to the different lexical and semantic structure of two languages (Arabic and English) Arabic speakers tend to commit certain errors. These can be amended by considering certain factors. The teachers should practice their wisdom and intelligence to guide their students. Firstly, student attention must be drawn to form and structure of English Language. Secondly, for the students to commit redundancy in writing, the teacher must explain to students that simple, direct and non-redundant sentences are preferred to complicated, indirect and redundant (Sabbah, 2015). Teachers should also teach pronunciation to students, students must be exposed to various listening skill activities and they should be taught about heteronyms, homonyms, minimal pairs and homophones. As “most human brains are pattern seekers” (Lawery, n.d). Students should be taught different rules and patterns while explaining grammar.



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Multi-Knowledge Electronic Comprehensive Journal For Education  
And Science Publications ( MECSJ )

Issue ( 44 ), 2021

ISSN: 2616-9185

EOI : 10.11246/mecsaj/01/44

Teachers should also change their attitude towards student errors. They should not correct every single error that a student commits rather should only CORRECT high frequency errors. Teachers should also teach ways of correction to students which can begin from self-correction, peer correction and then finally the corrections that should be made by teachers. Moreover, Stylistic and lexical differences should be brought to the students' mind in order to avoid making such errors. **(Mason and Hatem 2005)**. Another important issue that needs to be thrown light at is that humans are used of not only commit errors while speaking a certain language rather they also tend to make wrong judgements about the errors committed by others. Finally, I would love to quote Von Humboldt's speech, "We cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way" **(Corder, 1967)**



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Issue ( 44 ), 2021

ISSN: 2616-9185

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