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Prepositions and Difficulties in Using them Correctly in English

ABSTRACT

Learning new languages is faced with difficulties as goes with the educational process in general. However, each learning practice has its own particular conflicts and confrontations. In learning the English language, non-native speakers come across problems and encounter certain difficulties, which may be similar, in some way, to other non-native speakers of English. So, for instance, non-native speakers of English whom carry an Arabic mother-tongue usually meet similar difficulties when learning English prepositions. Prepositions are used plentifully in the English language especially and are a significant part of this language that cannot and must not be disregarded.

Putting eye on this necessary language element is the aim of this research. It is also aimed to present problems that learners of English face in the acquisition and learning of English prepositions by Arabic mother-tongue students and reasons behind such problems and why these problems are committed. First language interference problems lead learners to make mistakes and errors in their English language learning process and is considered to be one of the main and most important setbacks in English learning attempts by L1 Arabic learners, especially with regard to learning the correct use of prepositions. Arabic first language learners of the English language come across many difficulties when attempting to acquire or learn prepositions in English. The most significant reason behind such difficulty in learning this essential language and grammatical element is found to be due to first language interference and due to the learners' Arabic mother-tongue influence.

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Introduction

Learners of the English language of an Arabic background and an Arabic first language face a number of problems in their attempt to use English prepositions. According to educational and language studies, learning English prepositions by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic is one of the most frequent and significant difficulties Arabic first language learners of English come upon. This paper discusses and highlights these findings. One of the most important reasons behind these problems that Arabic first language learners of English face when learning to use English prepositions and one of the most substantial cause of such difficulties found in their second/foreign language learning attempts is found to be because of the differences between the article system in both languages. The Arabic language has prepositions which are used in a different manner and which function in a very much different way. the notion of definiteness and indefiniteness are encoded differently than in that of the English language. Given the fact that prepositions are one of the most frequent words used in the English language, this paper aims to discuss an put eye on this necessary language point. Within this paper, it is aimed to present problems that learners of English face in the acquisition and learning of English prepositions by Arabic mother-tongue students. Reasons behind such problems and why these problems are found and made. Also, illustrations regarding differences between the Arabic and the English language concerning the use of prepositions and how this causes first language interference problems and leads learners to make mistakes and errors in their English language learning process and is considered to be one of the main and most important setbacks in English learning attempts by L1 Arabic learners.

Literature Review

Firstly, and before moving further, a distinction between language learning and language acquisition must be put forward. According to linguists this is something worthy of attention. Children, according to linguists acquire their mother-tongue. Through interaction with parents and the environment surrounding, one acquired her/his first language. As a result, a child above five years of age expresses ideas almost in a perfect way from the viewpoint of grammar and language. Furthermore, Linguists state that humans naturally have an innate ability to acquire language. Nonetheless, experts suggest that children have an ability to learn a second language in almost an identical way to their mother-tongue as long as they are exposed to natural communication. So, in order for a second/foreign language learner to acquire another language besides their parent language, they need a source of natural communication. While, learning a language, in linguistic, educational and language studies, refers to systematic studying in which studies of the rules, patterns and workings of language and its utterances are taught and attempted to be memorized and used accurately.

Language learners who aim to acquire a language emphasize on the text of the communication and readily acquire a language in order to communicate, whereas language learners who "learn" a language emphasize on the form. Thus, in many settings, learning a language means conscious memorization of rules where communication is set aside. (Foppoli, 2019: n.p.)

As stated earlier that learners of English as a second or foreign language, despite their different backgrounds, face difficulties when it comes to learning the language. Nonetheless, it is found that native speakers of Arabic whom study English encounter shared difficulties when it comes to learning proper use of prepositions. This case is true mostly due to the nature of the Arabic preposition system and its negative influence on Arabic L1 English learners. Nonetheless, the cause of such problematic issues has many reasons and causes but the learners' mother-tongue and interference is the main reason . First of all, mother-tongue refers to one's native language or parent language. ("mother tongue," 2015) .

Mother-tongue interference; nevertheless, refers to the negative effect of the learner's native language on second/foreign language learning and the influence of the native language on the learner's ability to acquire and learn the target language. By target language, it is meant the language that the learner is aiming to learn, which is also referred to as the L2 or second/foreign language. ("Contrastive analysis," 2015) .

Here, within this paper, the case is with Arabic language and how it interferes with Arab learners of the English language, especially when it comes to acquiring and learning English language prepositions. All because of the differences between the Arabic and English preposition systems such problems arise .

Contrastive studies are concerned with the study of a pair of languages in order to discover structural similarities and differences. (Mozlan, 2015) .

Consequently, contrastive studies and analysis explains why certain features in second/foreign language acquisition are more difficult to learn than others, based on the assumption that the more differences between learners' mother-tongue and the target language, the more trouble the learner will have in acquiring these structures and language matters. ("Contrastive analysis," 2015) .

Accordingly, language items of a target language that are similar to the learner's first language will be easy to learn. Notwithstanding, language items of a target language that are different than the learner's first language will be difficult for the learner to learn. This, in turn, is what the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis suggests. (Lado, 1957: 14)

Arabic mother-tongue learners of English tend to make errors when they try to use prepositions in ESL/EFL. These errors, as declared earlier,

are attributed to the difference between the two prepositional systems in both Arabic language and the English language, which is explained as interference of the learners' mother-tongue (Arabic) on the learners' target language (English). Interference of the mother-tongue is also known as "Transfer". However, Transfer, as linguists suggest, come in two versions or has two types: positive and negative. Positive transfer happens when the rules from L1 or first language facilitate positively in learning L2 or second language rules and structures due to similarities between the first and second language. In contrast, negative transfer is when rules from L1 negatively influences on the learning of L2 rules due to differences between L1 and L2. (Sabbah, 2015: 271)

But, what is a preposition? And what do we mean by the word "preposition" in language? A preposition is defined as a word that demonstrates the relationship between two things. For example, "The bird flew behind the chimney", "The bird flew above the chimney", "The bird flew into the chimney" or "the bird flew near the chimney". In these examples the prepositions "behind, above, into, near" show the relationship between the bird and the chimney. Additional examples of prepositions include the following words such as: about, beside, inside, to above, besides, across, on, up, among, with, within, at, over, without, before, for, since, in through, into, etc.

The above prepositions are one word prepositions; nevertheless, prepositions may consist of more than one word as in "along with", "in place of", "because of", "in spite of", "instead of", "except for", "in addition to", "out of", "in case of", "up to", "in front of" which are all types of the most common multiword prepositions. ("Prepositions", 2019: n.p.) .

Likewise, where and when are prepositions used? Answering such a question gives a clear clarification of reasons behind the difficulty of learning English prepositions by non-natives. English prepositions appear everywhere. Prepositions may appear in front of nouns (on Friday), before gerund verbs (for listening), as part of a phrasal verb (shut up) or after adjectives (interested in). This makes it difficult for learners of English because there is no simple rule explaining when and how to use them. Rules, similarly, can be overgeneralized. For example, telling a learner that by saying "I am happy for her" means that "I am pleased that she is happy" can lead a learner of English to overgeneralize this rule by mistakenly believing that "we think you will be happy for this present" is correct English instead of "we think you will be happy with this present." These are some reasons of possible difficulty that Arabic native speakers may face when learning to use prepositions accurately in English. Notwithstanding, the main reason of such difficulty and one of the most frequent sources of mistakes and errors, within this regard, is first language interference or Arabic L1 interference. (Ibid) .

Methods

This paper uses a qualitative approach. By studying the errors and mistakes that English language learners make in English writing and tests, reasons behind such mistakes and repeated errors with regard to the subject of prepositions have been listed. Through the study and analysis of previous studies, as well as comparisons between Arabic and English language regarding the case study, the beneath results and suggestions have been set and made.

Discussion and Results

According to research studies, learning to use prepositions is one of the most difficult aspects of the English language for Arabic L1 students to learn. Due to variety between the two languages regarding preposition rules and usage, correct rule command of preposition use in English is seen to be demanding for Arabic L1 learners. However, the extent of difficulty regarding accurate preposition use that learners of English encounter is not the same. I.e., some preposition are found more difficult to learn than others. (Alsharafi, 2017 : 2) .

Learning English prepositions by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic is asserted to the significance of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. This research paper supports these findings. Due to the difference between what, when, how and why to use prepositions in the Arabic language and that of the English preposition system, many Arabic L1 learners of English encounter difficulties when trying to learn the correct use of prepositions in English language. The difficulty in learning English prepositions that Arabic first language learners of English learners face is mainly in areas where the prepositional system functions differently in L2 (English) than that of the L1 (Arabic). This is linguistically known as the effect of first language (Arabic) interference.

Difficulties lead to mistakes or even errors, which are repeated slip-ups made over and over again. Errors are slip-ups that learners make due to unfamiliarity with the correct rules and cannot be self-corrected. Mistakes; however, can be recognized by the learner by herself/ himself. Nevertheless, mistakes or errors made by Arabic first language students regarding prepositions are typically subconsciously or involuntarily made by Arabic L1 learners of English due to the differences between the prepositional system in the two languages. Arabic L1 learners of English misuse prepositions when communicating in English. (Sabbah, 2015: 273) .

The correct use of prepositions amongst English language learners can suffer from L1 (first language) interference, as previously said. Indeed, when a preposition is used in English and could also be used in the learner's own language, in the same context, a preposition may simply be translated or transferred. The learner of a new language may simply refer back to his

first language for help and assistance. If, in such a circumstance, prepositional rules were different and were dissimilar, the case would be negative transfer. That is, the rules of the mother-tongue or L1, in this case, hinders from correctly using prepositions in the second/foreign language or L2. ("Prepositions", 2019: n.p.) .

Errors and mistakes that L1 Arabic learners of English as an L2 make are not random and are rule governed as Ledia White mentions (cited by Alsharafi, 2017 : 2). Accordingly, Jie (2008) as cited by Alsharafi (ibid) when a new language learner refers back to her/his native language for help and interference occurs usually four different kinds of clashes may happen. The new language learner may go through one of four things: the learner may overgeneralize a rule in the new language. So, a learner of prepositions may apply the rules regarding this subject to similar contexts or similar situations but which are in fact inapplicable. Else, the learner of a new language when using prepositions may ignore the rules of the English language (L2) and apply the rules of the Arabic language (L1). On the other hand, the third and fourth negative thing a new language learner may do due to first language interference is apply the rule incompletely or invent an imaginary rule based on what the learner thinks the rule is in the target language .

As stated, mistakes Arabic learners make are in some sense similar to one another and are not arbitrary or random. For instance, students of English language from an Arabic background, usually say "part from the plan" when using the preposition "from" and not "part of the plan". Another mistake learners make when using prepositions is "I thank her on her advice" which is incorrect and should be actually "I thank her for her advice". Moreover, learners by negatively transferring from their first language (Arabic) and because of interference may give an example which is very commonly repeated by EFL/ESL students "They told him on everything", which should actually be "I told him on everything". These incorrect examples are made because of transfer from the mother-tongue, which in this situation harmful, not helpful. (Alsharafi, 2017 : 3).

Prepositions are words which are abstract, that means that they do not have an concrete meaning. Prepositions are connectors that simply show the relationship between words. So, a preposition connects a noun or pronoun (known as the object of the preposition) to another word in the sentence. Therefore, a preposition can never stand alone, what prepositions usually do is show relationships of direction, location, time and sometimes show the relationship of exclusion as in the prepositions "but, except, without, etc." (Ibid : 6) .

So, sometimes learners use prepositions incorrectly due to first language interference with the correct form in the target language as in the harmful translation and negative transfer in the sentences "I will thank her

on her advice" and "They told her on everything" from the Arabic language where we say "سأشكرها على نصيحتها" و "أخبروها عن كل شيء". (Ibid: 9)

All in all, mistakes and errors when learning a new language is unavoidable. Nevertheless, some suggestions are given, here, in order to help learners with prepositions. First of all, teachers should keep a record of typical mistakes learners make with prepositions and discuss them in front of students. Learners of English in ESL/EFL environments should be given drills and practice that is sufficient in the aim of familiarizing them with prepositions and when, why, and how they are used as well as giving them listening pronunciation and dictation practice in order to draw their attention and help them with any problems they may face. Pairs and groups in EFL/ESL classrooms, for the aim of communication and speaking practice are necessary. Regarding prepositions, groups and pairs provides learners with practical practice that should accustom students to more every day and spontaneous communication. Giving learners of English translation practice and showing areas where this could be helpful and harmful is also need and should be done, especially in areas where mother-tongue transfer is likely to be found.

Conclusions

This paper concludes that learning English articles by students whose mother-tongue is Arabic emphasizes the importance of Contrastive Analysis. This is due to the fact that Arabic L1 speakers encounter huge difficulty while attempting to use English articles. The source of such difficulty is based on the degree of difference between the Arabic article system and the English article system.

The difficulty in learning English prepositions by Arabic L1 speakers is mostly because their native language's negative influence on learners and on their ability to acquire prepositions which function differently in their Arabic language than its function in English. Therefore, it is suggested and concluded, here, that teachers of English as a second/foreign language consider these matters, become aware of them and clarify them to their learners all in attempt to overcome such frequent and common problematic difficulties found in ESL/EFL classrooms and environments. This, in turn, will certainly lead to better English language learning, especially for those with an Arabic L1.

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