The Impact of L1 Transfer on the Interaction of EFL Students with English Prepositions

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[Abstract] The aim of the current study is to examine the impact of L1 transfer on the interaction of Jordanian students with English prepositions. Data was elicited from the responses of BA female students to the test developed by the researcher. The study was comprised of a stratified random sample of 50 female students at two Jordanian universities. Findings revealed that transfer from L1 is one of the major sources of EFL learners' errors among Arab Jordanian female EFL students who use the proper prepositions for which equivalents exist in their L1; select improper prepositions if equivalents are not used in their MT; omit prepositions if equivalents are not required in their L1; and add prepositions if equivalents are required in their L1.

[Keywords] EFL, L1, interaction, prepositions

Introduction

Arabic, which is a central Semitic language, and English, which is an Indo-European West Germanic language, belongs to two different language families. Consequently, it is not surprising that Arab EFL students encounter problems in learning English in general (Hamdallah & Tushyeh, 1993).

Syntactically speaking, there are two basic categories of words in each language: content words and function words. Content words consist of the words that have semantic value (i.e. meaning) and include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Function words consist of the words that are used to create grammatical or structural relationships into which the content words may fit. They have little meaning of their own and are much fewer in number than content words. Function words include pronouns, articles, and conjunctions. Prepositions belong to the second class,i.e. function words (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2007).

Arabic words are classified into three distinct classes, the first two of which consist of content words, while the third class consists of function words: nouns, verbs and particles. Prepositions, which are called "hurufaljarr" (particles of attraction) in Arabic, represent a subclass within the class of particles (Hamdallah & Tushyeh, 1993). Prepositions in Arabic are classified into two morphological classes: The first class includes the prepositions which are inseparable i.e., which are constantly combined in writing with the following noun. They occur as prefixes to the complement: bi (at, by, in, with); li (to); Ka (as, like); Ta (by "in swearing"); wa (by "in swearing"). The second class consists of prepositions which are independent and either bilateral (an (from); fii (in, at); Kay (in order to) and min (from) or trilateral (Alaa (on); adaa (except); ilaa (to, toward); hattaa (until, up to); laallaa (perhaps); mataa (when); munthu (ago, for) (Asma, 2010).

The English preposition can be defined as a word that designates the location of an object in relation to another. Yet, English prepositions are often ambiguous and confusing, even for native speakers. It is extremely hard for EFL students to learn the nuances of all the English prepositions, how to understand them, and how to use them, which can be ascribed to the difficulties incorporated in teaching them. In order to define and explain a certain preposition, one or two more prepositions are used in the definition. Consequently, the teacher would have to define those new prepositions (Boquist, 2009). Thus, it is not surprising that errors occur in the use of prepositions among the EFL students.

Tahaineh (2010: 99) categorizes errors in the use of prepositions among Arab EFL university students as cases of substitution, addition, and omission, ascribing them to two strategies, one of which is inherent in language itself and the other inherent in the learner's strategy of learning: overgeneralization from within the English code and transfer from the mother tongue.

Research in language transfer, which is a major process in the acquisition of languages, began in the 1940s and 1950s. These early studies, which were influenced by behaviorism, considered transfer as a form of influence of L1 habits on L2 learning. In recent studies, language transfer was explored through a cognitive approach to language learning. A cognitive approach discards the interpretation of transfer as a habit and gives a vital role to the learner as a person who makes a choice as to what should or should not be transferred to L2 learning (Karim & Nassaji, 2013).

Language transfer influences all the subsystems of the second language. Traditionally, the concept of language transfer was viewed as the effect of a first language on the acquisition of a second language. Language transfer can be classified into two categories: negative transfer, which results from the differences between L1 and L2, and positive transfer, which can be ascribed to the similarities between L1 and L2 (Shaker, 2016). In other words, the transfer can be positive when knowing one language can facilitate developing skills for a second language. On the other hand, transfer can be negative when understanding one language complicates the understanding of another language (Hanafi, 2014). Thus, in second language acquisition, the transfer of knowledge of (L1) in acquisition of a foreign language (L2) can indeed have a facilitation or inhibition effect on the learner's advancement in mastering a new language. Traditionally, facilitation effect is known as positive transfer, while inhibition is considered negative transfer. Erroneous performance in L2 ascribed to certain constraints existing in the native language can be the simplest example of negative transfer (Isurin, 2005).

There are two levels for transfer: cross-linguistic transfer and cross-cultural transfer. Cultural transfer is divided into two sub-categories: pragmatic transfer and conceptual transfer. (Arranz, 2005). Pragmatic refers to the effect of L1 pragmatic knowledge of language and culture on the comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information. Pragmatic transfer was regarded as one type of transfer among the five types of transfer depending on the socio-linguistic situation; the other four types of transfer included (a) transfer of phonological awareness, (b) transfer of specific linguistic elements (such as knowledge of the meaning of photo in photosynthesis), (c) transfer of conceptual elements (e.g. understanding concepts such as photosynthesis), and (d) transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g. strategies of visualizing, use of graphic organizers, mnemonic devices, vocabulary acquisition strategies, etc.) (Talebi, 2014).

Literature Review

Utari (2017) examined the types of errors on the use of prepositions in narrative composition made by the eleventh-grade students of SMAN 1 Babat Toman MUBA and the most frequent type of errors on the use of preposition in narrative composition made by the eleventh-grade students of SMAN 1 Babat Toman MUBA. In forty-five minutes, thirty-eight students wrote narrative compositions in English based on the topics provided. Students' narrative compositions were analyzed based on the classification of preposition error by Jha (1991). Results showed that eleventh-grade students committed three types of errors on the use of prepositions in their narrative composition, which included omission (23,47%), insertion (26,08%), and (3) selection (50,43%), 2). The most frequent type of errors in the use of preposition was selection (50,43%).

Shaker (2016) explored the negative Arabic transfer in the acquisition of English prepositions by Jordanian EFL learners. A fill-in-the-blank test, grammatical judgment and correction tasks, and a cloze test were used to collect data. A total of 355 Jordanian EFL learners at the bachelor degree level participated in this quantitative study. The respondents were selected from ten universities in Jordan via cluster random sampling procedures. Results revealed that negative Arabic transfer affected the acquisition of English

prepositions. About 35.2% of preposition errors resulted from negative Arabic transfer. Results showed, also, that the acquisition of English prepositions was influenced noticeably by intralingual interference, to which 64.8% of prepositional errors were ascribed. The results also revealed that preposition combination is the most difficult use of English prepositions for Jordanian EFL learners, to which 65.2% of prepositional errors were ascribed. With reference to the use of pied-piping and preposition stranding in interrogatives, the analysis displayed that the respondents showed no preference of pied piping over preposition stranding and vice versa.

Sudhakaran (2015) sought to identify the extent of acquisition of English prepositions in the absence of formal teaching through a longitudinal study on a single matriculation student. Data was collected on the errors in the use of prepositions in various speaking and writing tasks (essays, journals, interviews, and presentations) at six-month intervals over a period of two years. An analysis of the student's use of prepositions was carried out to determine whether or not there had been any changes over this period. Results showed improvements in the use of prepositions in both speaking and writing tasks, and more errors of commission than errors of omission were found. A common error was the unnecessary use of the phrase involving a preposition, "for me." With respect to the progress made, in speaking tasks, most improvement was seen in the prepositions "for", "in" and "about," while in writing tasks, improvement was most evident in the use of the prepositions "to," "of" and "in".

Sotiloye, Bodunde and Olayemi (2015) evaluated the performance of second language undergraduate students in the use of English prepositions in order to identify the likely sources of challenges in its correct use. One hundred ninety-eight undergraduate students were selected from the Department of English Language of a Nigerian University through random sampling procedure. An assessment test on preposition use was the main instrument for data collection. Results revealed that the highest number of the students scored between 15 and 19 over 50, which is the modal class. Less than average (43.7%) scored fifty and above. The challenges and difficulties encountered in the use of prepositions are linked to the nature of English prepositions: polysemy, idiomatic usage, and substitution with first language (LI) prepositions. The difficulties were made manifest as the majority of the respondents wrongly substituted "on" with other prepositions, such as "in," "at," "over," "for," "by," "with," and "to", usually influenced by L1 meaning.

Forutan and Mehranpour (2015) sought to detect the extent to which Iranian EFL learners commit errors attributable to the cross-linguistic differences between their L1 (TL) and L2(SL), and to examine the types of errors in use of prepositions (omission of prepositions, redundant or wrong use of prepositions). An error analysis was performed through the use of a translation task in order to find out the inter-lingual preposition errors committed as a result of transfer between L1 and L2. The study sample consisted of 60 male and female students studying English at the intermediate level. Results indicated significant differences between different types of errors made by the participants, and most of these errors were related to the redundant use of prepositions. They stood in the second position concerning the errors in the wrong use of prepositions, and, finally, they had less frequent errors with respect to the omission of prepositions in L2 while translating from Persian into English.

Al-Qudah (2013) explored the acquisition of some selected prepositions of time by English major undergraduates at Al-Balqa Applied University in Jordan and the significant differences attributed to the academic level (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year levels). The study sample consisted of 197 students chosen from two colleges at Al- Balqa Applied University in 2012/2013. Results showed that their highest acquisition was in the preposition of time (at) and the lowest acquisition was in the preposition of time (until), and that the mean of acquisition of the prepositions of time was lower than (0.50). Results also revealed a significant difference among respondents' acquisition of the prepositions of time attributed to year-level in three prepositions (at, to, since) in favor of the third-year level students, difference in the acquisition of (on) in favor of the fourth-year level students, and a significant difference in the acquisition of (after) in favor of the second-year level students. No significant differences were found in acquisition attributed to the university college, but there were significant differences among respondents' acquisition attributed to

studying the course "Basic English Grammar" in favor of the students who studied the course.

Altahaineh (2010) analyzed a sample of compositions written by Jordanian first-, second- and third-year university EFL students in order to explore the kinds of errors they make in the use of prepositions. Data was collected through free compositions written by a stratified random sample of 162 students with similar linguistic, sociocultural, and educational backgrounds. Findings revealed that MTI is the major source of EFL learners' errors (58%=1323). On the other hand, transfer strategies of the TL itself constituted a major part of the errors, too (42%=967). Arab Jordanian EFL students use the proper prepositions providing equivalents are used in their MT, select the improper prepositions if equivalents are not used in their MT, omit prepositions if equivalents are not required in their MT, and add prepositions if equivalents are required in their MT. Although freshmen, sophomores, and juniors do not appear to overgeneralize or use transfer strategies in characteristically different ways, they do appear to use these two learning strategies to different degrees. While overgeneralization and transfer errors may not be qualitatively different for the three class levels, they were found to be quantitatively different. The improper use of prepositions is prominent among EFL Arab learners even at advanced stages of their learning.

Aldwayan (2010) explored and compared the prepositions "in" and "on" in English and their Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) counterparts (fi) and (3ala), based on the assumption that MSA and English seem to diverge in the spatial configurations and meanings of these prepositions. The sub-schemas of CONTAINMENT (in-ness) in MSA are found to partially overlap with those of English, with the other sub-schemas being taken care of by SUPPORT (on-ness) and PUNCTUALITY (point-ness). Such differences classify MSA more as a CONTAINMENT-based language than English, which seems to prefer SUPPORT and PUNCTUALITY. However, English and MSA seem to converge in their metaphoric conceptualizations of states owing to conceptual embodiment.

Method of the Study

Description of the Test

The researcher developed an elicitation test, which consisted of 20 sentences in which the participants are asked to fill in the gaps with the appropriate preposition that expresses spatial or temporal meaning. They are also asked to put (×) where no preposition is needed (the cases in which one language uses a preposition and the other language does not). The items are divided into three types in terms of the sentences given: a) cases in which the two languages use the same preposition, b) cases in which the two languages use different prepositions, and c) cases in which one of the two languages uses a preposition and the other language does not. The instrument of the study was reviewed by a jury panel, which consisted of 5 university professors of English literature and English Linguistics at Jordanian universities; they were asked to provide feedback on the content and form of the instrument and the extent to which it can yield data relevant to the objectives of the study. The jury panel stated that the instrument is valid and suitable for the purposes of the study.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of BA students of English literature at two Jordanian universities: Al-Balqa Applied University and Yarmouk University. A sample of 50 female students was selected on purposive from these universities, 25 from each university.

Limitations of the Study

1. This current study is limited to exploring the impact of L1 transfer on the interaction of Jordanian female EFL students with English prepositions.

2. Due to the fact that data of the study were elicited from BA students of English literature at two Jordanian universities, its results cannot be generalized beyond the population from which the subjects were selected.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 provides the numbers and percentages of correct and incorrect responses yielded by the subjects.

Table 1
Numbers and Percentages of Correct and Incorrect Responses

BA students of English Literature	Responses			
	Incorrect		Correct	
	No.	%	No.	%
	389	38.9	611	61.1

Table 1 shows that the number of incorrect responses provided by the BA students of literature is 389, which represents (38.9%) of their overall responses, while the number of correct responses provided by these students is 611, which represent a higher percentage of their total responses (61.1%). These percentages show that the performance of the participants in the study sample was generally good.

Table 2
Results of The Students' Scores to The Items in Terms of the Type of Case

Types of items	Percentage of Correct responses	Percentage of Incorrect responses
Cases in which the two languages use the same preposition.	96.4%	3.6%
Cases in which the two languages use different prepositions.	63.0%	37.0%
Cases in which one of the two languages uses a preposition and the other language does not.	24.0%	76.0%
Total	61.1%	38.9%

Table (2) shows that the performance of the group of students was at its best in the items that provided cases in which the two languages use the same preposition; the percentage of correct responses was 96.4%, followed by the items that provided cases in which the two languages use different prepositions (63.0%), and, finally, the items with the cases in which the one language uses a preposition and the other language does not (24.0%). These results agree with the results reported in literature (Utari, 2017; Shaker, 2016; Hanafi, 2014; Al-Qudah, 2013). Tahaineh (2010) found that Arabic is the major source of EFL learners' errors (58%=1323), and transfer strategies of the target language constituted a major part of the errors

(42%=967). Tahaneh found the following similar results: Arab Jordanian EFL students use the proper prepositions provided that equivalents are used in their MT; they select the improper prepositions if equivalents are not used in their MT; they omit prepositions if equivalents are not required in their MT; and they add prepositions if equivalents are required in their MT. Thus, transfer from Arabic affects the interaction of Arab EFL students with English prepositions, which can have unfavorable effects on their communicative interactions with native speakers, as well as on their proficiency in English in general.

Part of the problem related to the poor performance of students in their interaction with some English prepositions can be ascribed to the teaching strategies used at educational institutions. Thus, the teaching strategies employed at Jordanian universities ought to be examined in order to explore their effects on the performance of students in their interaction with English prepositions.

The results of the current study highlight the need for practical solutions that may contribute to improving the performance of the students in their interaction with English prepositions by alleviating the impact of transfer from Arabic, their L1.

Conclusion of the Study

Any graduate student of English should be highly proficient in the use of prepositions, which constitute an important part of the language. However, during the course of this study, some difficulties related to the interaction of students with English prepositions were identified, explored, and explained in terms of L1 transfer. The conclusions of the present study include the following:

It is hoped that the present study will open the door for more studies on the impact of L1 transfer on EFL student's interaction with English prepositions in other Jordanian and settings and among other populations. Such practical studies will, undoubtedly, shed more light on the problems that impact the interaction of students with the subsystems of English, in particular, and their proficiency in English in general. Furthermore, it is important to increase cross-linguistic awareness among language learners and help them overcome the inhibitive influences of the L1 transfer in order to facilitate learning. It is recommended that in the Jordanian EFL contexts at universities, learners have a comprehensive view of cross-linguistic transfer in language learning and that instructors teach for transfer.

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