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The Influence of Arabic L1 on Grammatical Errors in the English Writing of Libyan ESL Learners: A Self-Report Study

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Abstract

This study examined the grammatical errors that Libyan learners of English report making in their writing, and whether they attribute these errors to Arabic as their first language (L1) or to developmental difficulty with English. Grounded in Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory, the study used a quantitative descriptive-correlational design. A questionnaire derived from a contrastive analysis of Arabic and English, covering seven error categories with paired interlingual and intralingual attribution items, was completed by 58 second- and third-year undergraduates at a Libyan public university. Article use was the most frequently reported error ($M = 3.92$), followed by verb tense/aspect, subject omission and copula omission; subject-verb agreement was reported least often. Interlingual attribution significantly exceeded intralingual attribution for article use, copula omission, subject omission and word order, while subject-verb agreement was attributed mainly to developmental causes. Total error frequency did not differ by faculty but was lower among third-year students, $t(56) = 2.41$, $p = 0.019$, $d = 0.63$, and correlated negatively with years of English instruction ($r = -0.34$) and self-rated competence ($r = -0.29$). Attribution patterns did not change with year of study. The findings suggest that Arabic interference remains a substantial and self-recognised source of difficulty where the two languages diverge most sharply. The study recommends contrastively informed grammar instruction, category-specific corrective feedback and diagnostic writing assessment in Libyan tertiary English programmes.

Keywords: *L1 transfer; Arabic; Libyan ESL learners; error analysis; interlanguage*

1. Introduction

The influence of the first language (L1) on second language (L2) learning has been a central concern of applied linguistics since Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Corder's (1967) reorientation towards learners' actual errors. Transfer effects are expected to be strongest where the L1 and the target language are typologically distant (Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Arabic, a Semitic language, and English, an Indo-European language, differ sharply in their article systems, copula use, subject realisation, verbal tense-aspect marking and word order. These differences make Arabic-speaking learners a long-standing focus of error research (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Smith, 2001).

In Libya, English writing is a key mode of assessment at university level, yet graduates' written accuracy is widely regarded as falling short of academic and professional expectations. Teaching has been shaped by grammar-focused classroom practice that persisted even after communicative curriculum reform (Orafi & Borg, 2009), and by disruption to the higher education system since 2011. Libyan learners also acquire English against a diglossic background: Libyan Arabic is the spoken L1, while Modern Standard Arabic is the variety of schooling and formal writing.

Studies of Libyan learners have documented frequent errors in tense, articles, prepositions and subject-verb agreement, usually by analysing essay samples (e.g., Hamed, 2018). Such studies identify what errors occur but not how learners themselves explain them. Learners' own attributions matter for teaching: a learner who recognises that an article error stems from Arabic structure may respond differently to feedback from one who sees English grammar as simply difficult. Few studies have measured self-reported error frequency and source attribution together in a Libyan university sample.

This study addresses that gap through three research questions:

RQ1. Which grammatical error categories do Libyan ESL learners report making most frequently in their English writing?

RQ2. To what extent do learners attribute these errors to L1 Arabic interference (interlingual sources) rather than to developmental (intralingual) factors?

RQ3. Do self-reported error frequency and attribution differ by faculty, year of study and length of English instruction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Three frameworks inform this study. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) holds that L2 difficulty arises where L1 and L2 structures differ (Lado, 1957). Its strong, predictive form was criticised because not all predicted difficulties materialise; its weak, diagnostic form, which uses contrasts to explain observed errors, remains useful for distant language pairs, and Eckman's (1977) Markedness Differential Hypothesis refined it by adding typological markedness. Error Analysis (EA) shifted attention to learners' actual output and distinguished interlingual errors, caused by L1 transfer, from intralingual errors, caused by overgeneralisation or incomplete rule learning (Corder, 1967; Dulay et al., 1982; James, 1998). Interlanguage Theory treats the learner's system as rule-governed and distinct from both L1 and L2, shaped by transfer, overgeneralisation and simplification, and liable to fossilise (Selinker, 1972; Han, 2004).

The present study combines the three. Contrastive analysis generates the candidate error categories, EA supplies the interlingual/intralingual distinction, and interlanguage theory frames how error patterns change with experience. A known weakness of EA is the difficulty of assigning a single surface error to a single source (James, 1998). This study therefore asks learners to rate the likely source of each error type themselves.

2.2 Arabic–English Contrasts

Table 1 summarises the seven contrasts examined and their predicted salience.

Table 1. Predicted salience of error categories from Arabic–English contrastive analysis

Arabic marks indefiniteness without an article and uses the definite article with generic nouns where English uses the zero article (Ryding, 2005). Arabic present-tense nominal sentences omit the copula, and verbal morphology recovers the subject, so overt subjects are optional (Ryding, 2005; Smith, 2001). These contrasts predict article

misuse, copula omission and subject omission in English. Arabic, by contrast, has obligatory subject-verb agreement, so agreement errors are less likely to be transfer-driven.

Error category	Key Arabic–English contrast	Predicted salience
Article use	No indefinite article in Arabic; one definite article (*al-*), also used for generic reference	Very high
Copula omission	No overt present-tense copula in Arabic nominal sentences	High
Subject omission	Arabic is pro-drop; English requires overt subjects	High
Verb tense/aspect	Aspect-prominent Arabic vs tense-prominent English	High
Word order	VSO/SVO variation in Arabic vs fixed English SVO	Moderate
Prepositions	Fewer, semantically broader Arabic prepositions	Moderate
Subject-verb agreement	Rich but differently organised Arabic agreement	Lower

2.3 Empirical Studies

Error studies of Arabic-speaking writers consistently report articles, prepositions, tense and sentence structure among the most frequent problems (Diab, 1997; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989). Article studies show both transfer and developmental sources. Alhaysony (2012) found that interlingual errors predominated among Saudi learners but that English itself accounted for a substantial share. Crompton (2011) traced the most common article error, the definite article for generic reference, to Arabic. In Libya, Hamed (2018) found tenses, articles, subject-verb agreement and prepositions among the most common grammatical errors in 40 compositions and attributed them to both overgeneralisation and Arabic transfer. These studies rely on researcher classification of errors in texts. None asks learners which source they perceive, which is the focus of the present study.

3. Method

3.1 Design and Participants

The study used a quantitative descriptive-correlational design. Participants were purposively sampled from the Faculty of Arts and Languages and the Faculty of Education at a Libyan public university. Inclusion criteria were: Libyan Arabic as L1; enrolment as a second- or third-year undergraduate in one of the two faculties; at least eight years of formal English instruction; and no residence of more than six months in an English-speaking country. Of 60 questionnaires distributed, 58 were retained; one was excluded for missing data and one for not meeting the residence criterion.

The final sample (N = 58; 34 female, 24 male; aged 19–25) was balanced by faculty (29 per faculty) and year of study (29 per year). Most reported 8–10 years of English instruction (53.4%) and moderate self-rated competence (63.8%); 56.9% reported little or no English exposure outside the classroom.

3.2 Instrument

A structured self-report questionnaire was developed from the contrastive analysis in Section 2.2. Part A collected background information. Part B listed the seven error categories, each illustrated with a short erroneous sentence and its correction, and asked how often participants make each error (1 = never to 5 = always). Part C presented, for each category, one interlingual statement (e.g., "I make this error because Arabic does not have this rule") and one intralingual statement (e.g., "I make this error because English grammar is generally difficult for me"), each rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items avoided technical terminology, following guidance on L2 questionnaire design (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

Two experienced English teachers reviewed the items for content validity. The instrument was piloted with eight non-participating Libyan undergraduates, and three attribution items were reworded. Internal consistency was acceptable to good: $\alpha = 0.84$ for error frequency, 0.81 for interlingual attribution and 0.77 for intralingual attribution. Test-retest correlations for a 15% subsample (n = 9) after two weeks ranged from 0.79 to 0.86.

3.3 Procedure and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered in regular class sessions of 25–30 minutes over three weeks within one semester, with instructor and departmental permission. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, written informed consent was obtained, and responses had no effect on course grades.

Data were analysed with descriptive statistics (RQ1), paired-samples t-tests comparing interlingual and intralingual scores per category (RQ2), and independent-samples t-tests, Pearson correlations and a chi-square test (RQ3). Because seven paired comparisons were run, a Bonferroni-adjusted threshold of $\alpha = 0.007$ was applied for RQ2. Normality (Shapiro-Wilk) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's test) were checked before t-tests, and expected cell counts were checked for the chi-square test. Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's d.

4. Results

4.1 Self-Reported Error Frequency (RQ1)

Article use was the most frequently reported error category, and subject-verb agreement the least (Table 2).

Table 2. Self-reported error frequency by category (N = 58)

Rank	Error category	M	SD	% rating 4–5
1	Article use	3.92	0.81	70.7
2	Verb tense/aspect	3.76	0.85	65.5
3	Subject omission	3.58	0.93	58.6
4	Copula omission	3.41	0.89	51.7
5	Prepositions	3.35	0.97	48.3
6	Word order	3.02	1.01	39.7
7	Subject-verb agreement	2.87	0.95	32.8

Note. Scale: 1 = never, 5 = always. "% rating 4–5" = proportion answering "often" or "always".

Seven in ten participants reported making article errors often or always. Variability was greatest for word order (SD = 1.01) and subject omission (SD = 0.93), suggesting that learners differ more in their progress on these structures than on articles. Inter-correlations among the

seven categories were positive but low to moderate (r = 0.18–0.44), so the categories were analysed separately. The strongest link was between subject omission and copula omission (r = 0.44), both related to Arabic clause structure.

4.2 Source Attribution (RQ2)

Interlingual attribution exceeded intralingual attribution for four categories after Bonferroni correction (Table 3).

Table 3. Interlingual vs intralingual attribution by error category (N = 58)

Error category	Interlingual M (SD)	Intralingual M (SD)	t(57)	p	d
Article use	4.03 (0.72)	2.71 (0.88)	9.86	< .001	1.65
Copula omission	3.87 (0.79)	2.85 (0.91)	7.42	< .001	1.19
Subject omission	3.81 (0.84)	2.93 (0.86)	6.58	< .001	1.04
Word order	3.62 (0.90)	3.02 (0.93)	3.94	< .001	0.65
Prepositions	3.44 (0.88)	3.11 (0.90)	2.31	.024	0.37
Verb tense/aspect	3.19 (0.86)	3.34 (0.84)	−1.08	.285	−0.18
Subject-verb agreement	2.68 (0.91)	3.22 (0.87)	−3.71	< .001	−0.61

Note. Paired-samples t-tests; Bonferroni-adjusted α = 0.007. d = mean difference divided by the average of the two SDs; positive values favour interlingual attribution.

The largest gaps were for article use, copula omission and subject omission, the three categories tied to obligatory Arabic–English contrasts. The preposition difference favoured interlingual attribution but did not survive correction. Verb tense/aspect showed no difference, and subject-verb agreement was attributed significantly more to intralingual causes.

4.3 Background Variables (RQ3)

Total error frequency fell with year of study and instruction, but not with faculty (Table 4).

Table 4. Group comparisons and correlations for total error-frequency score (N = 58)

Comparison	Statistic	df	p	Effect size
Faculty (Arts & Languages vs Education)	t = 0.87	56	0.389	d = 0.23
Year of study (2nd vs 3rd)	t = 2.41	56	0.019	d = 0.63
Years of English instruction	r = −0.34	56	0.010	—
Self-rated competence	r = −0.29	56	0.028	—
Year × dominant attribution type	χ^2 = 1.62	1	0.203	—

Third-year students reported fewer errors than second-year students, a medium effect. More years of instruction and higher self-rated competence were associated with fewer reported errors. Each participant was classified as interlingual- or intralingual-dominant by their higher mean attribution score; this classification did not differ by year of study. Experience therefore reduced how often learners reported errors but not how they explained them.

5. Discussion

The self-reported hierarchy closely matches the contrastive predictions in Table 1. Article use, copula omission and subject omission, the categories tied to the most direct Arabic–English contrasts, were among the most frequently reported errors and drew the strongest interlingual attribution. The ranking also mirrors patterns found through text analysis of Arabic-speaking writers, where articles, tense and prepositions recur among the most common errors (Diab, 1997; Hamed, 2018; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989). This convergence between self-report and corpus evidence suggests that Libyan learners have a reasonably accurate awareness of their most salient difficulties, and supports the diagnostic value of the weak CAH for this language pair.

Learners did not attribute all errors to Arabic. Verb tense/aspect errors were frequent but attributed equally to both sources, and subject-verb agreement was attributed mainly to English itself. This graded pattern indicates differentiated metalinguistic judgement rather than a blanket belief that "Arabic causes my mistakes". It is consistent with EA's distinction between interlingual and intralingual errors (James, 1998). Tense-aspect marking is known to develop gradually in learners from many L1 backgrounds, and Arabic's own obligatory agreement may offer positive transfer for the general operation of agreement, leaving the irregular English third-person -s as the main residual difficulty. An alternative explanation is that agreement errors are frequent but under-noticed because agreement feels automatic to Arabic speakers. Alhaysony's (2012) finding that English itself accounted for many article errors also cautions against assuming transfer behind every error.

The findings group the seven categories into three profiles. The first, article use, copula omission and subject omission, combines high frequency with strong interlingual attribution. The second, word order and prepositions, combines moderate frequency with smaller interlingual gaps. The third, verb tense/aspect and subject-verb agreement, shows weak or reversed interlingual attribution. These profiles suggest different instructional responses.

For RQ3, error frequency was lower in the third year and with longer instruction, yet attribution patterns were stable. Read through the lens of fossilisation (Han, 2004; Selinker, 1972), the structural sources of the most persistent errors appear unchanged even as overall control of English improves. Because the design is cross-sectional, this interpretation should be confirmed longitudinally. The absence of a faculty difference is consistent with the largely undifferentiated general-English provision that students in both faculties receive.

6. Conclusion

Arabic L1 interference remains a substantial and self-recognised source of grammatical difficulty for Libyan university learners, concentrated where Arabic and English diverge most sharply: articles, the copula and subject realisation. Developmental factors play a larger role in tense/aspect and subject-verb agreement. Experience reduces how often learners report errors, but not how they explain them.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications

First, article use, copula omission and subject omission should receive early, explicit and contrastive grammar instruction that shows learners why Arabic structure produces the English error. Second, feedback should be differentiated: brief contrastive explanation suits interlingual categories, while recasts and extended meaning-focused practice may suit tense/aspect and agreement. Third, later years should provide targeted diagnostic feedback rather than repeating first-year grammar, since the most persistent categories do not resolve on their own. Fourth, writing rubrics could report category-specific accuracy alongside holistic scores, and teacher training could include a short contrastive linguistics component on these structures.

6.2 Limitations and Further Research

The data are self-reports, which reflect learners' perceptions and may be shaped by memory, prior feedback and social desirability rather than actual error rates. The sample came from two faculties at one university, which limits generalisation. The cross-sectional design compares different cohorts, so year-of-study effects may partly reflect cohort differences. The fixed seven-category format excludes lexical and discourse-level transfer. Future research should triangulate questionnaire responses with error analysis of the same learners' essays, follow a cohort longitudinally, extend sampling to other Libyan universities, add interviews or think-aloud data on learners' reasoning, and test contrastively informed instruction in intervention studies.

Declarations

Ethics: Institutional permission and informed consent were obtained; participation was voluntary and anonymous. *Conflict of interest:* None declared. *Funding:* None. *Data availability:* Available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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