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Linguistic Transfer: Example from Arabic users of English

Abstract

Linguistic transfer has been a field of many studies. This could be attributed to the strong association between linguistic transfer and both second language acquisition and linguistic errors. This paper aims at adding evidence about the effect of first language on mastering a second language and to fill a gap in linguistic studies of transfer. It will shed light on the problems which Arabic native speakers encounter when dealing with the usage of 'wish'. There has been few explicit studies addressing the grammatical transfer issue between Arabic and English directly. It has been recognized that the Arabic native speakers encounter serious problems when dealing with 'wish'. The usage of 'wish' in English is one of the most difficult structure for English learners. On the other hand, in spite of the strong association between 'wish' and 'if-clauses', they do not face such a problem when dealing with 'if-clauses'. Eighty eight first year students specialized in English enrolled in this experiment, all of them are Arabic native speakers. It turns out that the problems which they face when dealing with 'wish' result from applying their knowledge in Arabic language (L1) to answer the questions about 'wish' in English.

Key words: transfer, linguistic, wish, if-clause, first language, second language

Introduction

When two languages become in contact or when a person becomes familiar with two languages, these two languages cannot stay separate. They affect each others in different ways and many processes are taken place Some of the processes are language transfer, borrowing, code switching, etc. According to Odlin (1997: 3), "there appears to be wide spread assumption that language transfer is an important

characteristic of second language learner". Language interference or transfer produces different forms of English depending on the speaker's first language. Some well-known examples are: Chinglish (Chinese + English), Japlish (Japanese +English) Franglais (French +English) Spanglish (Spanish + English), etc.

The phenomenon of language transfer has attracted many people, linguists and non-linguists. It has been receiving much attention and different interpretations according to the researcher's academic backgrounds. Linguistically, transfer means applying or generalizing of the learner's knowledge about their native language (L1) to help them to use and understand a second language (L2). Recently, language transfer has been an important issue in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and language teaching. Odlin (1997) states that language transfer can occur at different levels such as linguistic, pragmatic. etc. According to him, transfer means the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the first language and any other learned or acquired language.

Doughty and Williams (1998:226) point out that "a learner's previous linguistic knowledge influences the acquisition of a new language in a principled, if not straightforward, contrastive way." This influence could be positive or negative. It is considered positive when the learner's knowledge of L1 enhances his ability to understand L2. Negative transfer, on the other hand, means that the learner's knowledge of L1 deteriorates his ability to understand L2. Accordingly, Many scholars (Lado, 1957; Corder, 1971, among others) assume that language transfer is considered a source of errors among second language learners in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies. However, this doesn't mean that transfer is the only source of errors.

According to Ajiboye (1993) errors result from transfer affect all aspects of language, phonetics, word-formation, syntax, semantics, etc.

The best example about phonetic or phonological errors result from language transfer can be derived from Arabic native speakers who learn English. Generally, all Arab students confused the English /p/ and /b/ since Arabic has one bilabial letter. Ringbom, H (1983) and Meara (1984) associate transfer with lexical borrowing. Many scholars (Olshtain, 1987 and Odlin, 1997) provide studies in which they show that transfer has its effect in the second language word formation.

The effect of the grammar of the first language on the formation of the grammar of the second language has been reported by many scholars (Hakuta, 1974; Larsen-

Freeman, 1975, etc.). They associate the grammatical mistakes of second language with the grammar of the learner's first language. Anyan (2006) report cases of grammatical mistakes encountered by Thai learners of English as a result of variation of expressing tense in both languages. The verb in Thai does not inflect for first or third person and it shows no difference between past and future tense. Moreover, Thai language has no articles. For instance, Thai speakers say '*tomorrow he go see movie', instead of the English sentence 'tomorrow he is going to see a movie'. Accordingly mastering English grammar is a very difficult task. "we are most aware of transfer in SLA where the L1 and L2 differ on a particular property, because this leads to patterns in the speech of the non-native speaker not found in the speech of the native speakers" (Odlin, 1997:7)

The use of the verb 'wish' indicates that the speaker wants reality to be different. As in unreal conditionals, the use of a past or past perfect tense verb indicates that the situation is impossible or unlikely. Arabic native speakers face many difficulties when dealing with English tenses. This difficulty is especially evident in complex sentences when there is a difference between time and verb form. One of these difficulties is the usage of tenses with the verb 'wish'. The main problem of the usage of 'wish' is that there is no correspondence between the form of the verb and time reference. That is, verb forms used with 'wish' do not retain their normal references to time. The main disadvantage would be the possible confusion for students in understanding different semantic nuances within a single pattern. For instance, the past form is used to express a present counterfactual. Gordon (1985:85) states that "the past is used to represent improbability in the present or future, and the past perfect is used to refer to impossible events that didn't happen in the past". Schwenter (1998) summarizes results of past studies and comments that not only the conditional markers but also verbal. If tense is used to refer to when the events occur, why is there an asymmetric time-tense relationship? Since it is a notorious fact that past tense does not behave like past tense in counterfactuals, the tense can't simply be a primitive element that refers to the past. There must be something more, that is, the concept of "hypothetically".

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:555) state that "... The verb *wish*, on the other hand, is similar to counterfactual conditionals in that the same clauses that follow *wish* can also function as the *if* clause or the result clause of a counterfactual conditional. These include its relative simplicity, the consistency in the backshifting

of tenses...” Comrie (1986: 94) uses 'backshifting' to mean the "use of a morphologically past tense with present (or future) time reference and of pluperfect with past time reference". He adds that there is a consistent progression backward from present to past to past-past (i.e., past perfect) in the *if* clauses (and 'hope/wish' sentences).

The usage of '*layta*' and '*atamanna*' (wish) in Arabic is almost equivalent to 'wish' in English. Generally; both verbs in Arabic (*layta* and *atamanna*) can be used interchangeably without any significant difference in meaning. But we have to admit that there is a difference when we come to their usage and structure. Let us consider the following examples:

- 1- a- *laytanii* *?usaferu* *gadan*
 wish-pres-I travel-pres-I tomorrow
 *(I wish I travel (leave) tomorrow)
- b- *laytanii* *addrosu* *fi* *aljamiCati* *allaana*
 wish-pres-I study-pres-I at the university now
 *(I wish I study (am studying) at the university now)
- c- *laytanii* *darastu* *fii* *aljamiCati* *qabla sanawat*
 wish-past-I study-past-I at the university many years ago
 *(I wish I studied at the university many years ago)

As can be noted from the above Arabic examples, *layta* (wish) is followed by the present form of the verb *?usaferu* (travel or leave) in (1-a) to express futurity and the present form *addrosu* (study) to describe the wish in present in (1-b). In the third example (1-c), the past form of the verb *darastu* (studied) is used to express a past wish. The second and the third examples are used to express nonfactual situation. In Arabic, the main verb '*layta*' (wish) indicates non-factual. The sentence in (1-b) means that '*he is not studying at the university*'. The sentence in (1-c) which has the past form indicates that the speaker regrets the fact that '*he didn't study at the university*'.

The other verb in Arabic which has almost the same meaning is '*atamanna*' (wish or hope). Syntactically, the usage of this verb differs from the usage of the verb '*layta*' (wish) in that it takes the particle '*?an*' (that). Let us consider the following examples: (Although this verb can be translated into 'hope or wish', I will use 'wish')

in my examples because it serves the aim of this paper, also we avoid the confusion between 'hope' and 'wish' in English.

2- a- ?atamanna ?an yatawaqaf almaTar.
wish-pres-I that stop-pres-it the rain

*(I wish that the rain stops.)

b-?atamanna ?an akuuna fii albayt al?aana.
wish-pres-I that be-pres-I at the-home now

*(I wish I am at home now)

c- ?atamanna ?an-nahu najaHa alssanata almaDiyah
wish-pres-I that-he pass-past-he the year lat.

*(I wish he passed last year)

The sentence in (2-a), means that it is raining and I do not like this situation. That is I would like this situation to be changed. To express the idea, the present form of the verb 'yatawaqaf' (it stops) is used. To express the same situation in English, 'would' is used. i.e. '*I wish the rain would stop*'. The second example (2-b), indicates that '*I am not at home now*', I do not like this, I do like to be at home at this moment. To express this idea, the simple present 'akuuna' (be-pres-I) is used. In English, the past form of the verb is used to express the same situation which is non-factual situation, i.e. '*I wish I were at home*'. The third example (2-c) means that '*he did not pass last year*' and I regret that. I wanted the situation to be different'. The past form of the verb 'najaHa' (passed-he) is used. To express the same situation in English, the past perfect is used, i.e. '*I wish he had passed the exam last year*'.

Subjects and methodology

The subjects of the study are first year students specialized in English. All are Arabic native speakers studying English as a second language. They studied English at school and these grammatical structures such as, conditional and the usage of 'wish' were part of the school curriculum. 88 subjects participated in the test. The test consists of three questions: The first is about how to express his/her wish in the future. the second is about how to express his/her wish in the present time, whereas the third is about his/her wish in the past. For instance,

3- a-I wishas soon as possible.

b- (I am not rich/ I do not live in Amman)

I wish

c-I wish.....when I was a student.

The subjects should use the 'to infinitive' or 'would' in the first sentence (3-a). 'wish + to infinitive' or 'wish+ would' are used when we want to talk about situations we are not happy about and we want it to be changed. For example, if we say 'I wish he would stop talking.', it means that 'I want him not to talk.'

In the second sentence (3-b), they should use the 'simple past' to express nonfactual situation in present. If the speaker says 'I wish I were a millionaire' , we understand that he is not and being a millionaire is unreal at present.

The third sentence (3-c) is about a wish in the past. The subjects should use the 'past perfect' to express regret about the nonoccurrence of the situation in the past. For instance, if somebody says, 'I wish I had bought that car.', we understand that he did not buy it and he regrets that now.

Data Analyses and discussion

Eighty papers are taken into consideration. The rest are excluded either because we feel that they answered them randomly or they didn't answer all the questions.

The first type 'I wishas soon as possible'.

68 of the answers (85%) were wrong. 12 subjects used 'will', for instance, 'I wish I will go to US'. 56 subjects used the simple present, for instance, 'I wish I go to USA', or 'I wish I find a job when I graduate'. As stated above, to express your wish about a future event in Arabic, the simple present form is used with the verb 'layta' or 'atamanna' (wish). For instance,

4- a-layta-ni ara-hu Gadan

wish-pres-I see-pres-him tomorrow

*(I wish I see him tomorrow)

b-layta-hu yatawaqaf-u ?an alkalaam

wish-pres-he stop-pres-he prep. talking.

*(I wish he stops talking.)

The present form 'ara' (see) is used to express a wish in the future. There is a very strong semantic association between expressing 'wish' in the future in both languages. The sentence in (4-b) above '*layta-hu yatawaqaf-u ?an alkalaam*' this sentence is almost equivalent to the English sentence '*I wish he would stop talking*'. In both sentences (the Arabic and English), the speaker means that he doesn't like this situation and he wants it to be changed. It seems that since the subjects use the present form to express a future wish in their native language, they generalized this role and apply it for English which is their second language. Kellerman (1987) points to the same process in his discussion of transfer, according to him transfer can be defined as the processes in which certain elements of one language are incorporated into another language.

The second type: '*I am not rich/ I do not live in Amman*' *I wish.....*' .

61 of the subjects (76%) answered this question erroneously. In most cases, they used either simple present or present progressive. For instance, '**I wish I am rich*'. or '**I wish I am living in Amman*'. To express the same idea in Arabic, The present form is used. For instant,

5- atamanna ?an akuuna Gannyan.
 Wish-pres-I that be-pres-I rich
 (*I wish I am rich.)

The third type: '*I wish.....when I was a student*'

Type three is the most difficult one, 74 students (92.5%) gave wrong answers. In most cases they used either simple past or past progressive. For instance, '*I wish I went to Amman*'. Again, it seems that they generalized the way they express such a situation in Arabic to English language. Accordingly, instead of the usage of past perfect they use simple past or past continuous.

6- laytani thahbtu ?ilaa Cmman albariHah
 Wish-pres-I go-past-I to Amman yesterday
 (*I wish I went to Amman yesterday.)

Accordingly, instead of using past perfect in English to express a wish in the past, they use simple past like the Arabic wish. In the above constructions, It seems that the subjects followed their own devices, and they come up with ungrammatical sentences. The above results show that the subjects are not aware of the differences between Arabic and English languages and apply their knowledge of their native language to solve their problems in second language. In many cases, the learners are

confused about the essential differences in those forms or structures between their first and second language. Accordingly, they ignore the use of 'one step back' or backshifting for the verbs in English to express non-factual situation when they use 'wish' since 'backshifting is not used in the case of 'wish' in Arabic.

Ravem (1971) (in Liu, 2001) points out that the learner's native language (NL) played a certain role in the formation of his second language syntax. Odlin (2001) points out that if the learners of the second language don't learn to think in that language, they will use their first language as a reference point to deal with second language. The problems which face Arabic native speakers when dealing with 'wish' constructions in English match the problems which face other non-native speakers when studying other languages. Many scholars (see Odlin, 1997: 13) report that Spanish-speaking learners of English delete the verb 'to be' in the English sentence since Spanish language does not have a verb 'to be'. For instance, '*that is very simple*' and produce it as '**that very simple*.' This error can be attributed to the grammatical differences between Spanish and English Language.

The above argument that language transfer is the source of errors in the usage of 'wish' by Arabic native speakers can be supported by the usage of 'conditional sentences'. The relationship between conditional sentences and 'wish' cannot be ignored. In most cases, they are discussed side by side since the past form is used in both cases to express 'non-factual' reading. Many linguists (i.e. Norris, 2003) propose a system to make a connection between the actual time reference and back shifting, they introduce the verbs 'hope' and 'wish' together with conditional sentences. They try to capture the system transfers the source-language structure to the corresponding target-language structure. It should be noted that the students when dealing with conditional sentences are aware of the modal usage of the past form in English. It is clear that the subjects associate between hypothetical situation in Arabic and English. 'Back shifting', like English, is applied in Arabic conditional sentences to express non-factual situation.

7- a- Law kuntu makanak, la sakantu almadinati.

If be-past-I in your place, part. live-fut-I

If I were you, I would live in the city.

b- Atamanna ?an akuuna makanak

Wish-pres-I that be-pres-I in your place

*(I wish I am you).

c- Laytanni askuna al madinati
 Wish-pres-I live-pres-I the city
 *(I wish I live in the city).

In the case of conditional, the example in (7-a), the past form of the verb *t 'kuntu'* (be-past-I) is used in the *'if clause'*, and the past form of the verb *'sakantu'* (lived-I) is used in the main clause. That is, in the case of conditional sentences, there is no problem since both languages use the same devices to express non-factual situation in present. On the other hand, unlike English, back shifting is not used in the case of *'layta (wish)'* to express non-factual situation. As can be seen in the above examples (7-b & c), the present form of the verb is used. This could be the reason why they do not have problems with conditional sentences, whereas, they have serious problems in the case of *'wish'*.

While this association is in their minds in the case of conditional, the subjects when exposed to *'wish'* they generalized what they know in Arabic and transfer it to English to come up with ungrammatical sentences. The above results match what is said by Odlin (1997: 36), Odlin points out that similarities in syntactic structures can facilitate the acquisition of grammar: Learners speaking a language with a syntax similar to that of the target language tend to have less difficulty with some syntactic features. Fantini (1985) notes some errors used by a Spanish –speaking while using English which reflect a native language structure. Thus, contrastive analysis could be so important to simplify the situation for both teachers and students and show the situation when transfer will or will not occur.

Conclusion

Transfer as a linguistic phenomenon is there. Teachers of second languages cannot ignore it when teaching certain features of a second language if they distinct from the first language. As discussed above, Arabic native speakers find it difficult to master the usage of *'wish'* in English. This could be attributed to the structural differences between Arabic and English language in the use of *'wish'*. On the other hand, generally, they do not face problems in mastering *'conditional sentences'* since there is a structural similarities in this respect in both languages. The role of contrastive analysis could be so useful to pinpoint the similarities and differences between languages and to help students to be aware of some of the problems they encounter. Odlin (1997: 4) among many other scholars emphasizes this point and states that "teacher may become more effective through a

consideration of differences between languages and between cultures. An English teacher aware of Spanish –based and Korean based transfer errors, for example, will be able to pinpoint problems of Spanish-speaking and Korean-speaking ESL students better..."

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