

CAN UNIVERSAL LINGUISTIC FUNDAMENTALS CONTRIBUTE TO THE INTERPRETATION OF EFL LEARNING?

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Abstract

A number of studies have argued that many EFL students face difficulties in learning English at various levels and with different skills (Arlington and Hewings, 2012; Seargeant, 2012a; Mayor, 2012; Seargeant and Swann, 2011). With the globalization of English and its spread to different contexts of use, new perspectives are emerging on communicative practices of the users and the multiple emerging patterns of errors (Seargeant 2012b; Mayor and Allington, 2012; Hewings and Tagg, 2012).

Al-Mukattash (1983) examined inherent language difficulties impeding the learning of the target language. Hamdan and Amayreh (2007) underlined phonological and articulation problems for Jordanian learners. Kambal (1980) reported syntactic problems for Sudanese and Egyptian learners. Zoughoul and Taminian (1984) found serious lexical problems in EFL exchanges of Arab university students. Diab and Hamdan (1999) documented heavy reliance on dictionaries to aid the comprehension of meaning as well as articulation. Rabab'ah (1984) identified communicative obstacles in message transmission.

This study is concerned with identifying the areas of difficulties that EFL learners from Arabic background face when learning English. The study traces correlation between proficiency and language performance in an attempt to examine whether universal linguistic fundamentals can contribute to the interpretation of language learning in foreign language contexts.

The study is comprised of two stages. A pilot sample of 169 students was followed for a six month period in an intensive English programme to identify the weaknesses the learners experienced at three competency levels. In the second stage, a larger sample of 1011 students was studied for a period of one year, to determine the causes of the difficulties and explore whether universal linguistic fundamentals can contribute to EFL learning.

Data include individual student records of progression and assessment, collected through through various set tasks and class performance. BERA

ethical codes were applied in the research study in relation to participants' awareness and consent.

The findings identified three main areas where learners experience difficulties in learning English: areas that relate to the linguistic ambiguities of the target language; areas that relate to the prominence of features in the first language, and areas that relate to the competency levels of the learners. The study concludes with a set of propositions that can be developed to improve the Arab learners' experience.

Keywords: Common underlying proficiency, cognitive academic language proficiency, target language based errors, competence based errors

I. Introduction

A number of studies have argued that many EFL students face difficulties in learning English at various levels and with different skills (Arlington and Hewings, 2012; Seargeant, 2012a; Mayor, 2012; Seargeant and Swann, 2011). With the globalization of English and its spread to different contexts of use, new perspectives are emerging on the communicative practices of users and the multiple emerging patterns of errors (Seargeant 2012b; Mayor and Allington, 2012; Hewings and Tagg, 2012).

Limited exposure and opportunities of using English, in addition to the absence of a conducive learning environment outside the classroom, constitute the major barriers to developing the required proficiency in the English language. Learners' ignorance of rule restrictions results in applying rules to contexts where they do not apply. However, with the persistence of the problem to advanced university levels, there is a need to reconsider the strategies that learners use and the corresponding linguistic theories and analytic frameworks, in order to be able to identify the causes of the difficulties and interpret the principles influencing the erroneous applications.

Al-Mukattash (1983) examined inherent language difficulties impeding the learning of the target language. Hamdan and Amayreh (2007) underlined phonological and articulation problems in the performance of Arab learners. Problems in producing consonants clearly featured in the language performance of the participants in their study and included the inability to produce the th sound in words as this and thin. In addition, since Arabic is more orthographic than English, syllabic structures in English for Arabic learners featured as a difficult task.

Zughoul and Taminian (1984) investigated lexical, syntactic and phonological errors made by Jordanian learners of English. They found that EFL students from Arabic background commit serious lexical errors while

communicating in English. Diab and Rabab'ah (1984) identified communicative obstacles in message transmission. Hamdan (1999) found that Jordanian university students rely on dictionaries to help them in ESL pronunciation and meaning comprehension.

Kambal (1980) reports three main types of errors in the English verb phrase of Sudanese and Egyptian learners: verb formation, tense and subject verb agreement. Kambal also noted semantic errors that relate to selecting English suffixes, as well as syntax errors in using –ing instead of –ed.

From a comparative linguistics perspective, the English language and the Arabic language have structural, phonologic and lexical differences that may affect the learners' attempt to acquire the target language in EFL contexts. Arabic is a Semitic Language that has 28 consonants and 8 vowels/diphthongs. In phonology the Arabic word stress is regular, while in English it differs according to the location of the tonic syllable in the word. Short vowels are not important in Arabic and do not appear in writing. Texts are read from right to left and written in cursive script. In addition, there is no capitalization in the Arabic script.

In comparison with the Arabic language, English has about three times as many vowel sounds as Arabic. Syllabic divisions are not regular and do not support hypothesis on pattern regularities for EFL learners.

In pronunciation, some Arabic learners tend to insert a short vowel to break down long consonant clusters. The gulping down of some words in spoken English adds to the problems of Arabic speakers.

Phonological differences are flagrant for some consonants. EFL learners from Arabic background tend to use a rhotic accent and pronounce /r/ as a flap or trill, they substitute “V” sounds with “f” sounds. In relation to vowels, Arab learners applying Arabic-based phonology find difficulty in distinguishing English specific vowel sounds such as ship and sheep. In addition, some students from specific rural regions substitute “p” sounds with “b”.

In syntax, Arabic is a pro-drop language and has the subject dropped or included in the verb inflection in most sentences. The adjectives in Arabic follow the nouns they qualify whereas in English, adjectives precede nouns.

In morphology, Arabic has the dual category which does not exist in English. In word derivations, differences are present too. Nouns and adjectives are derived from verbs by changing the order of letters. To construct the negative of an adjective or noun in Arabic, the negative word “not” is usually added before the adjective as a separate word. No prefixing is used for this purpose. Morphemes are used consistently in marking plural of both noun and verb categories in the present aspect. In English prefixes are used to express contrary e.g. happy, **un**happy. Inflectional morphemes

are used to mark the verb tense for third person singular, as well as to derive the plural category from the singular noun.

The standard sentence structure in English follows the subject, verb, object order. In tenses and aspects, English has the present and past tenses with progressive and perfective aspects. Arabic has present and past tenses with no aspects, so sentences like, “I am eating” or “I have eaten” have no counterpart in Arabic.

Corder (1981; 1967) maintains that there are inter lingual errors when the learners’ first language habits interfere with the patterns or rules of the other language. Non-native users carry their intonation, phonological processes and pronunciation rules from their first language into English. In addition, they may create unfound sounds while speaking.

Odlin (1989) attributes one third of the deviant structures in the performance of second language learners to language transfer. Richards (1980) argues that intralingual developmental errors are items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. Al-Mukattash, Shehabi, and Al-Khatib, (2008) maintain that semantic errors relate to building false conceptions and wrong comprehension in the target language. Detailed contrastive analysis can identify the main difficulties caused by linguistic transfer in order to propose remedial measures in teaching material, that can help reduce the effects of the negative transfer from the first language.

From a linguistic perspective, however, the performance of the learners may not just reflect difficulties resulting from dissimilarity between the two languages. Ellis (2008) and Ellis and Barkhuizen (2009), observing the sequence of acquisition in pronouns, concluded that some universal patterns exist. Their proposition may indicate other operating mechanisms and not the influence of the learners’ first language.

Chomsky (2007, 2005 and 2004) and Chomsky and McGilvary (2012) argue that there exist universals of language structures or more precisely to the underlying system of rules or principles which are fundamental to all language systems and guide the construction of sentences across all structures, regardless of the particularities of the surface manifestation. The competence level of the learners in the first and second language may provide basis for considering the role of universal grammar in foreign language learning, if correlations can be found.

The study is concerned with three main points:

1. To identify the areas of difficulties that EFL learners from Arabic background face when learning English
2. To look for correlation between proficiency and language performance

3. To examine whether universal linguistic fundamentals operate in foreign language learning.

II. The Context of the Study

The study is based on a research project that was launched in 2008 to follow EFL performance of university students in communication skills courses. The study is divided into two intervals of data collection, to allow for piloting and cross sectional sampling. Intermission one lasted from October 2008 – March 2009 and intermission two from March 2011 to February 2012. Data categorization, sorting and analysis however was continuous and included disseminating and debating information in seminars and conferences held by the Centre of Applied Linguistics Research (CALR) for the duration of the project (2008 – 2012).

Background

A good number of second language English learners who apply for university admissions face difficulties with English as a second language when they sit for the English placement test at the university level (Al-Khatib, Abdel Malak, Sleiman and Zadourian, 2012). Statistics collected on pass and fail rates in the English placement university exam during the project years have put fail percentage between 10-16 percent. The figures collected from a student data base confirm however, that that applicants sitting for the placement test had successfully passed the official government exam of completing the national curriculum at secondary level, which includes testing in one foreign language subject (English or French).

The English language placement test is designed to assess the competence level required in the four skills as a prerequisite for studying at the university. The Arab Open University (AOU) implements programmes that are licensed and validated by the British Open University. This leads to the award of United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) degrees, in addition to the AOU degree in the offered programmes.

Statistics that were collected on the fail sittings have shown that students who usually come from French foreign language background, as compared to students who come from English foreign language background, are not always able to secure the minimal university entry requirement of a pass grade in the placement test. Students who do not pass the minimum entry score take intensive English classes and complete a set number of language lab hours to attain the qualifying levels that allow them to re-sit the placement test.

The Pilot Study

The pilot study in intermission one followed a sample of 169 students who were diagnosed through continuous assessment as needing additional support to develop the English communication and literacy skills that are required, at university level, for academic, social and personal purposes. The pilot phase was conducted from October 2008 until March 2009.

The collected data included student performance records in the tasks set up in language support sessions, assessment profiling on reading comprehension, grammar and paragraph writing. In addition, language lab activities were set at progressively various levels of difficulty. Students' achievement and progression were monitored through regular weekly reports.

Data collection was carried out for the period of six month for each language user. They were sent to the project team for categorization and analysis. The data included information identifying the performance log, the frequency of visits for each student, and the tasks and levels attained.

The following categories emerged:

1. Level One included weaker performers whose assessment scores in the intensive programme remained under 30%.
2. Level Two included performers whose assessment scores ranged between 30 to just under 60% in the intensive programme.
3. Level Three comprised of performers whose assessment scores in the intensive programme ranged between 60 to just under 80%.

Figure

Level	No. of students	Frequency of visits
Level 1 (0-29%)	37	5 hrs /wk
Level 2 (30-59%)	98	2hrs/wk
Level 3 (60-79%)	34	1hr/wk

III. Preliminary interpretation

In the performance of level one participants

1. In face to face sessions, learners faced difficulty in the pronunciation of some phonemes. On many occasions, the pronunciation was toned by the phonemic patterns of the learner's first language.
2. In oral communication, learners' performance was characterized by the use of limited vocabulary, repetition of same lexical items, and an inability to initiate or maintain effective communication.
3. In reading and listening comprehension, areas of difficulty included word recognition in relation to the semantic meaning, specifically in homophones.

4. In writing, learners displayed systematic difficulties in syntax and word order categories, limited writing skills, basic process writing, and difficulty in producing academic English texts.

In the performance of level two participants

1. Vocabulary and lexical errors reflected overextension of lexical categories, and use of super-ordinates to refer to subordinate references
2. In class communication beyond short replies, learners experienced difficulty in maintaining fluent communication
3. Syntactic and grammar errors reflected systematic difficulties in syntax and word order categories, specifically in relation to omissive, additive and substitutive applications.

In the performance of level three participants

1. In reading and listening comprehension, learners were able to participate in class discussion without much difficulty.
2. The regular markers such as past tense suffixes, present tense, continuous and plural markers were maintained in writing.
3. The articles, auxiliary and third person singular were variably but inconsistently used.

The initial results of the pilot study established correlations between competence levels, as evident in the assessment scores and the proficiency in EFL. The pilot study confirmed Cummins (2000) proposition on Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) which suggest that a specific level of second language proficiency is required for students in order to be able to fulfill academic tasks.

IV. Phase Two: Sampling a Larger Section

Phase Two was launched with a view to sample a larger section of participants to underline the causes of difficulties for Arab EFL learners with lower proficiency. The group of informants in the second phase involved 1011 students who were identified as weak in English, based on their grade attainment. Data comprised continuous assessment records, student profiling from class participation and final grade. The second phase of the study was conducted from March 2011 to February 2012.

The second phase involved the following instrumentalities:

- Identifying the target group of students and rationale
- Briefing the students on the project
- Preparing and administering English assessment tasks, including logistics of allocating halls, proctoring staff, distributing and

collecting assessment and commissioning staff to correct, review and quantify data e.g. 1011 booklets required 200 hours of correcting.

- Quantified the collected data according to the larger category types.
- Applying the BERA ethical code in data collection and analysis.

A refinement in data categorization in relation to the study concerns allocated areas of perceived difficulties in the linguistic characteristics of the target language under the category of Target Language Based Errors (TLBE). Areas that related to the prominence of first language features in target language applications were identified as First Language Based Errors (FLBE). Areas that related to the competency levels of the learners were referred to as Competence Based Errors (CBE).

I. TLBE include the following features:

- Silent letters led to confusion in sound and letter correspondence in learning English
- Articulatory difficulties in pronouncing distinctive sound units, specific to English
- Homographs created another area of difficulty as they challenged learners' assumptions on correspondence of the same graphic form to same pronunciation and meaning, e.g. lead (metal) and lead (guide).
- Confusion in using or omitting the third person present tense marker "s" in interrogative addressee structures
- Confusion in using or omitting auxiliary verbs specifically in negation, interrogative, short answers and tag questions
- Confusing in relation to transformations that require more changes in letters, including dropping and adding some features rather than the simple addition of plural "s", e.g. heros/heroes
- Absence of subject and verbs agreement especially in applications of "have" and "has"
- Over generalizing the use of regular past tense markers to irregular verbs such as swimmmed and goed

Syllabus design need to highlight the Target Language Based Errors TLBE in order to help learners understand, learn and remember the appropriate information. Efforts in this respect need to focus in syllable design on aspects of difficulty and identify and organize information in explicit manner, supported by appropriate drills and exercises, to increase comprehension and aid retention.

II. FLBE identify the following weaknesses:

- False assumptions on the application of simple past, such as using it to refer to ideas that are no longer true, analogous to the past tense function in the Arabic language.
- Infusing consonant clusters in English with forced vowels, compatible with Arabic pronunciation patterns.
- Persistence in using Arabic-based distinctions in assigning count and non count categories, for example, information (معلومة) is treated as a count noun, based on the Arabic language assignment of categories.
- Instants of literal translation; “to learn from birth to grave”
- Mismatch in singular and plural references
- First language influence in collocation and inflection, e.g. “s” is exclusively reserved for plural marking, while third person singular is not marked for tense in the present.
- Confusion in the use of simple past instead of the present perfect and past perfect
- Overextension of simple present to present continuous conditions
- Use of long run-on sentences, inappropriate punctuation and capitalization.

The semantics of grammar of the target language may be affected by specific first language mechanisms that the learner may have already developed. This may prohibit the learner from developing the target language. In such a context, the learner may not be able to utilize universal grammar deep structures in foreign language applications and inferences. Surface structures are transferred instead from the first language. Appropriate teaching methods can draw on first language rules and applications to explain similarities and differences in relation to target language and hence alert learner to deeper similarities and surface particularities of the two languages.

III. CBE include the following features:

- The lexis used reflects limited vocabulary, inappropriate extension of words, substitutions or replacement
- Confusion in using irregular plural forms
- Indiscriminate use of prepositions, regardless of restrictions and semantic function.
- Modal verbs are used indiscriminate of functions, the use of “must” for example in prohibition, is confused with its use in deduction, e.g. You must not drink water; You must be a native speaker

- Confusion in application of definite and indefinite article, specifically at instances involving a switch in the initial indefinite article to become definite, in referrals beyond the first mention, e.g. I bought a book. The book was written by a famous writer
- Confusion in the use of phrasal verbs of location, position, direction and time, e.g. “look up to”, “look down on”, and “put up with”.
- Indiscriminate use of demonstratives, reversal in near/far articles and in singular/plural references, e.g. that for plural and close and these for far and singular.

Errors in this category result from the inability of the learner to make correct inferences and generalizations. In addition, at some instances, the literal equivalences produced do not convey the intended meaning in the target language and stand awkward and odd in an English context.

IV. Findings and Conclusion

In the lower competency group, although learners were able to use limited English among peers, they were not able to perform in the target language, according to the academic standards expected in the class. Their performance largely reflected target language based errors (TLBE). The semantics of the grammar of the target language may be affected by other specific mechanism or mental processes that second language learners may have developed. Cummins (2000) related this to the competency levels of the two languages, as they are perceived to constitute one whole entity in the mind of the learner. Below the prescribed thresholds, learning is severely constrained.

Learners in this group required continuous rephrasing, repetition and clarification to follow up classroom discussion. They hesitated when communicating and were inconsistent in grammar and vocabulary usage. Their production reflected a mix of the characteristics of their first and target languages. In phonology, unfamiliar letter sounds were hard to produce. In syntax, errors committed reflected global errors in the use of major elements of sentence structure to the degree of obstructing comprehension.

The foreign language based errors (FLBE) group hypothesized on target language rules and experimented with applications based on first language rules. Corder (1981) in his study of error analysis, noted that in the transitional stage of second language ability and morpheme development, learners make use of intrinsic internal linguistic processes. Gass and Selinker (2001) confirmed that second language learners are active in learning the second language. They possess their own individual linguistic systems that are or may be independent from both the first and second languages.

According to Chomsky, the use of intuition and introspection in first language contexts can be employed by the ideal native speaker of the language to make judgments about the grammaticality of an utterance in the first language. However in second language contexts the strategies that learners use in learning language, the causes of learners' errors, the common difficulties facing language learners, grammar theories and analytic frameworks may not be the same as in first language contexts.

The competence based error group (CBE) engaged in attempts to generalize and experiment with inferences in learning the foreign language. At instances where they were required to work with a directly salient feature, minimal errors were committed. Learners in this group made use of knowledge of grammar rules in their first language where the target language features were not salient, to attempt to generalize in the target language applications. This sometimes resulted in awkward developmental errors and inconsistent patterns. However, data associated with the performance of participants from this group can attest to evidence on the operationalization of some underlying universal rules across the two languages, with varying degrees of success.

Chomsky's work considered language as a system of rules or principles that guide the construction of sentences. Universal Grammar refers to all the grammatical properties that hold for all existing and possible languages. In attempting to answer the study questions on whether universal grammar allows for the development of a particular grammar through contact with a particular linguistic environment, including foreign language contexts, patterns emerging from the two groups, FLBE and CBE, confirm active engagement with fundamental linguistic universals, with varying degrees of success.

The universal grammar consists of fixed principles and open (unset) parameters. Input in the first language triggers processes in the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which lead to sorting and fixing the open parameters for a particular language through hypothesis forming and hypothesis testing. The learner's first language core grammar is established as a result of these processes.

Universal grammar considers language competence as the development of an innate system of principles underlying the faculty of human languages. It focuses on the properties and constraints afforded by language systems. Specific language parameters prescribe rules of government and binding for the surface structures. Acquiring a language, from this perspective, means applying the principles of the particular language and learning which value is appropriate for each parameter. Lower competency levels, from this perspective, may relate to the poverty of stimulus (Chomsky, 2004).

According to Universal Grammar theory, the universal base components, available for all languages, transform into surface components according to the specific rules of the language in use. In Principles and Parameters theory the main premise is that any language has a set of universal principles common to all languages and also a set of parameters specific to one language. In FLBE the learners is attempting to apply the principles of his first language to foreign language parameters, specifically in projecting structural relations.

The deep structures D-structures identify the core semantic relations of entities within the sentence. The lexicon gives information about the class of a word as well as information about the grammar strings associated with the word. The transformation rules transforms basic structures into surface structures. The surface structures follow the phonological form of the specific language.

The Phonologic component, supplies the rules for pronouncing a structure and gives the sentence a phonetic representation. The Semantic component, deals with the meaning of sentences is perceived to be determined by both Deep and Surface Structures.

As for learners in the CBE group, their performance generally reflected consistent target language applications. Occasional mechanical errors did not detract them from making meaning.

According to Universal Grammar theory, acquiring a language means applying the principles of Universal Grammar to a particular language and learning which value is appropriate for each parameter. However, could the same be applied to foreign language learning contexts?

One of the principles of UG is structural dependency, which means that knowledge of a language relies on knowing the structural relationships in a sentence (the deep structures) rather than looking at it as a sequence of words (surface structure). The deep structure is the level of sentence structure which shows the basic form of a spoken or written sentence in a language. The surface structure is the syntactic structure of a sentence. The deep structure is more abstract and is considered to be in the speaker or writers mind.

Rules which describe deep structures are in the base component of the grammar. Rules which transform these structures into surface structures are in the transformational component of the grammar.

Neurological evidence suggests that certain parts of the brain, the Broca's area, is selectively activated by languages meeting Universal Grammar requirements.

The rules of Generative Grammar should be able to predict correct grammar combinations as well as the semantics and morphology of a sentence.

The study provides the following propositions:

1. In CBE group, UG operates in the foreign language context in the same way it does for the first language. The learner's knowledge of the first language is irrelevant.
2. In TLBE group the learner's core grammar is fixed and UG is no longer available to second language learners, particularly not the adult learner.
3. In FLBE group UG is partly available but it is only one factor in the acquisition of the foreign language. There are other factors and they may interfere with UG mechanism.

The conclusion from the research finding confirms the following propositions:

1. Difficulties encountered vary in nature and perseverance according to competency levels of the learner
2. The identified difficulties caused by linguistic transfer require addressing in curriculum building as well as remedial measures in teaching materials
3. Audio immersion can help learners experience the target language phonologic patterns, stress, segmentation of rhythm and intonation, to overcome first language phonologic transfer and retain the model the language pronunciation forms.
4. Direct and explicit instruction that target language specific characteristics can be useful in making salient the undefined features of the target language.
5. Chomsky's universal grammar operates in second language as an aspect of acquisition, provided that first language core grammar and parameters are fixed to allow for positive transfer of first language universals.

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