

## The Role of First Language in Learning English as a Foreign Language in Sudan

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***Abstract:** The aim of this study is to investigate the role of the first language in learning English as a foreign language in Sudan. The objectives are to find out the difficulties encountered by secondary school students in using English for communication, thus the sound system of both Arabic and English were compared as well as their structures in order to achieve these objectives. Area of investigation is (phonetics) consonants and vowels for English and Arabic. Another one is syntax (grammar rules), it includes verbs, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, and number. The main findings of the study were that the students faced difficulties in pronouncing sounds which are not found in Arabic, also grammar rules of English were source of confusion to the students, and thus they applied Arabic rules in the sentences they formed.*

### Introduction

English is the first international language in the present time; it is not linked to a particular culture, it is used as a second or foreign language in different parts of the world. There can be no dispute that English is the language of science and technology, thus the number of English language users increase with the growing needs for the advanced technology. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) describe the period after the end of the Second World War as an "age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale for various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, the role (of international language) fell to English".

Learning a second or a foreign language is not always productive or useful; one of the main reasons behind this problem may be the mother tongue or the first language interference. "The first language has been considered the major cause of learner's problems with the new language; it interferes in the learner's efforts to acquire a second or a foreign language". Dulay, Burt, Krashen (1982).

Arabic language as mother tongue or first language for the majority of Sudanese people, interferes while speaking English, this refers to differences between the sound system and structure of Arabic and English in general.

With everyday's use of technology, English language teaching has become first of priorities especially in the developing countries. "English is now taught in schools in nearly every country in the world. Every piece of knowledge is made available in English. Without knowledge of English, a man or a women starting on a new career is gravely handicapped, with knowledge of English she or he holds the key that will open many doors" Ibid.

This research intends to investigate the mother tongue or Arabic as first Language inference in English language speaking.

### **Research problem**

Before 1956 Sudan was a British colony, teachers at that time were English, thus, English was the medium of instructions. After that, all subjects were arabicized, which led to decline of standards in English, not only that, but also lack of trained teachers, syllabus design, and learning environment were all factors that have contributed to the problem of English language speaking in particular, in addition, such students are consumers of information, they are highly social interactive, known as " net generation " or " millennial students "; that the use of technology has become part of their daily life , they use digital technology (laptop computers , mobile phones etc . .) for communication or connections through e-mail .

This research tries to investigate the actual problems of learning English as a foreign language that Sudanese secondary school students encounter, trying to find reasons as well as to suggest solutions.

### **Aims of the research**

The aim of this research is to reach the actual problems facing Sudanese secondary school students in learning English; and that will be reached by comparing the pronunciation and structure of Arabic language with English language to find out differences that cause these problems and difficulties.

### **Research questions**

This research will attempt to answer the following two major questions:

- 1-What are the differences between sound system and of Arabic and English that cause difficulties facing the students in learning English?
- 2- What are the differences between the structures of both languages?

### **Research methodology**

This research will specify the features and description of the problem that Sudanese secondary school students encounter when they write or speak English, thus, it will be of descriptive and

analytical type. This research is limited to Secondary schools in Sudan. Four schools were chosen from Khartoum town center to make sure that there are no students from language interaction areas, as well as to avoid having students whose mother tongue is not Arabic. Source of data was the students written and oral tests.

### **Definition of important terms**

#### **Mother Tongue**

It is the learner's first language or it is one's native language. In this research the mother tongue is (Sudanese colloquial Arabic).

#### **Interference**

“Interference has been used to refer to two very distinct linguistic phenomena, one that is essentially psychological and another that is essentially sociolinguistic. The psychological use of the term interference refers to the influence of the old habits when new ones are being learned, where as the sociolinguistic borrowing and language switching that occur when two languages communities are in contact”. Ibid

### **Literature review**

Many studies and researches in the field of foreign language learning have shown that first language plays an important role in learning the target language. Douglas (1993) states that the principal barrier to language learning is the interference of the first language system with the second language system, and that a scientific, structural analysis of the two languages in question would yield a taxonomy of linguistic contrasts between them which in turn would enable the linguist to predict the difficulties a learner would encounter, and to describe accurately the two languages in question, to match those two descriptions against each other to determine valid contrasts or differences between them.

Aspects of first language are used while learning a foreign language; this is known as language transfer. Benson (2002) states that transfer occurs consciously as a deliberate communication strategy, where there is a gap in the learner's knowledge. Transfer is defined by O'Malley and Chamot(1990) as the use of previous linguistic or prior skills to assist comprehension or production.

Dulay, Burt, Krashan (1982) believe that parroting activities including most memorized dialogues and mechanical drills appear to do little to encourage the development of fluent conversational skills.... the most surprising finding in second language learning is errors the learners make, these errors resulted from difference between the first and second language.

Lado (1964) states firmly that the goals of language learning have broadened to include spoken communication with an understanding of native speakers on the widest range of human interest.

### Analysis

The major purpose of this research is to compare the sound system and structure of Arabic and English, so the linguistic differences between them may be the reason behind the students' problem in learning English. Area of problems will be discussed and analyzed first by comparing the sounds (consonants and vowels) of the two languages as follows:

### Consonants

English consonant sounds are twenty-four in number, they are: /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /z/, /s/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /h/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /r/, /j/, /w/.

Mispronounced English consonants:

English consonants	Students' pronunciation
/p/ e.g. pay /pei/	/b/ e.g. /bei/
/g/ e.g. gram /gram/	/dʒ/ e.g. /dʒram/
/tʃ/ e.g. actual /æktʃuəl/	/ʃ/ e.g. /ækʃuəl/
/dʒ/ e.g. adjust /ədʒʌst/	/ʒ/ e.g. /əʒʌst/
/v/ e.g. visa /vi:zə/	/f/ e.g. /fi:zə/
/θ/ e.g. thin /θin/	/s/ e.g. /sin/
/ð/ e.g. then /ðen/	/z/ e.g. /zen/

Some English consonants are not phonemic in Arabic, so Sudanese students may indiscriminate or mispronounce these phonemes. For example the sound /p/ is not known in Arabic or Sudanese colloquial, it is pronounced as /b/, the word *pay* comes out as *bay*, and *pig* is pronounced as *big*. Although the students are familiar with the sound /g/, but they are sometimes get confused and keep substituting it for /dʒ/, like /dʒræm/ for gram /græm/, and /vegtəbəl/ for vegetable /vedʒtəbəl/.

/tʃ/ is not a phoneme in Arabic, so the students articulate it with difficulty and might come out as /ʃ/, actual /aktʃuəl/ is pronounced as /akʃuəl/ by the students.

/dʒ/ does not exist in Sudanese Colloquial Arabic, and as this sound consists of two different sound /d/ and /ʒ/, the students usually drop the first one, so the sound comes as /ʒ/, an example for that /əʒʌst/ for adjust /ədʒʌst/, and /eizənt/ for agent /eidʒənt/. Although /ʒ/ is not phonemic in Arabic, but the students managed to use it in the place of /dʒ/.

/v/ is not found in Arabic sound system, it is a problematic area to the students and it comes out as /f/, fi:zə/ for /vi:zə/, and /fənilə/ for vanilla /vənilə/.

/θ / is not a phoneme in Sudanese colloquial Arabic , it is pronounced as /s/ which might give complete different meaning. /sin/ for thin /θin/. /sink/ for think /θink/, and /sænk/ for thank /θænk/.

/ð / does not exist in Sudanese colloquial Arabic. The students tend to pronounce it as /z/, /zen/ for then /ðen/, /zis/ for this /ð is/, and /zei/ for they /ðei/.

## Vowels

Mispronounced English vowels:

English vowels	Students' pronunciation
<u>a</u> e.g. majority / mədʒɔrə ti /	/æ / e.g. /mæ dʒɔrə ti /
<u>e</u> e.g. asked /a:skd /	/i/ e.g. /a:skid/
<u>i</u> e.g. site /saɪt/	/i / e.g. /sit/
<u>o</u> e.g. honey /hʌni/	/ɒ / e.g. /hɒny/
<u>u</u> e.g. turbine /tʊ : bain/	/u/ e.g. /turbin/

English vowels that confuse the students are the vowel letters that represent different sounds. Short vowels are twelve in number and the diphthongs are nine. English vowel letters are (a, e, i, o, u). It is observed that the students pronounce each vowel letter as one sound in different words when the sound is different in other words e.g.: The vowel letter a is pronounced as /æ/, so majority /mədʒɔrə ti/ might come out as /mæ dʒɔrə ti /, the sound /ə/ is replaced by /æ/. The sound /æ/ is also substituted for /ɔ:/, /fæls/ for false /fɔ:ls/.

The vowel letter e is pronounced as /i/ even when it is silent letter, thus the students tend to say /a:skid/ for asked /a:skd/, /bilɔŋid/ for belonged /bilɔŋd/.

The vowel letter i often pronounced as /i/. The students might say /bit/ for bite /bait/, and /sit/ for site /sait/.

The vowel letter o comes out as /ɔ/ in most cases. /hɔni/ for honey /hʌni/, and /kɔnfju:z/ for confuse /kə nfju:z/.

The vowel letter u is pronounced as /u/ where the sound is shwa /ə /, /but/ for but /bət/. The students also pronounce /tʊ :/ as /u/, e.g. /turbain/ for turbine /tʊ : bain/.

## Syntax

Another area that causes problems is the area of syntax (grammar rules). The chief problem which arises or comes as a result of the difference between the students' mother tongue and the target language and causes problems is confusion of parts of speech.

## Confusion of parts of speech

### Verbs

(make, do): the verb (make) is often misused, the students tend to say (I make my homework). The Arabic verb /ya'mal/ can be used for both verbs (make, do).

(borrow, lend): the verb (lend) is replaced by the verb (borrow) e.g. (can you borrow me a pen ). In Arabic /yusalif/ gives the meaning of both words (borrow, lend).

(can, may): the verb (can) is substituted for the verb (may) e.g. (can I go? ) - in the case of permission not ability - as the Arabic verb /yumkin/ can be used in both cases.

### Adverbs

(before, ago): the adverb (before) is misused, the students might say (I saw him before three days ) a literal translation from Sudanese colloquial Arabic.

(bigger, older): The Arabic word / akbar/ is used for both size and age so the students tend to say (he is two years bigger than me).

(very, too): the students substituted (very) for (too) (the tea is very hot for me to drink) in Arabic /jidan/ can give the same meaning for both words (very, too).

### Wrong position of adverbs

(I last night went to the club) for (I went last night to the club).

(they will be tomorrow here) for (They will be here tomorrow).

In Sudanese colloquial Arabic there is no certain rule for the position of the verb in the sentence, so the students misplace them.

### Adjectives

(foolish / fool): the students misuse English adjectives and nouns (he is fool), they also say (he is a foolish), in Arabic both words can give the same meaning.

(like, as): the adjective (like) is replaced by the conjunction (as) (she does not look as her sister) this is mainly because (like) and (as) mean the Arabic word (miΘl).

(Dead, died): the student tend to say (the dog is died) they used the (past tense of die) instead of the adjective (dead), in Arabic the verb (to be) is not used in the same way as in English, that /mata/ and mayit/ can follow the noun.

### Using a Wrong Preposition

The preposition (from) is used by the student instead of many other prepositions, such as (of, with, by, in) in the following examples:

-I am afraid of the dog.

*(I am afraid from the dog)*

/yakhaaf min/

-My father is angry with me.

*(My father is angry from me).*

/yagdab min/

-We benefit by money.

*(we benefit from money).*

/yastafid min/

-I was disappointed in his work.

*(I was disappointed from his work).*

/yux al min/

The Arabic word (min) means (from), but the students used it incorrectly because they ignore that languages function differently.

### Other Prepositions

-He was accused of stealing.

*(he was accused with stealing).*

/yutaham bi/

-The table is covered with cloth.

*(The table is covered by cloth)*

/ ghata bi/

- I divided the cake into four parts.

*( I divided the cake to four parts)*

/qasama illa/

-She is glad of the new.

*(She is glad with the news)*

/fariha bi/

-Ali is popular with his friends.

*(Ali is popular among his friends)*

/mahbub bayn/

-She is good at English.

*(She is good in English)*

/jayidah fi/

-The vase was full of flowers.

*(The vase was full with flowers)*

/mamlu bi/

-I have no doubt of his ability.

*(I have no doubt in his ability)*

/yašuku fi/

-He exchanged sugar for oil.

*(He exchanged sugar by oil)*

/badala bi/

### **Omission of a Preposition**

Some prepositions are not used in the same way in both language; some are not needed in Arabic, while they are necessary in the following examples:

-(he is knocking the door) for (he is knocking at the door).

-(she does not wait any reward) for (she does not wait for any reward).

### **Confusion of Number**

Number in English is different than that in Arabic. So the students got confused when using it. They added (s) where it is not needed e.g. (I need your advices), and they used (are) in the place of (is) e.g.(the news are not good).

### **Conclusion**

In an attempt to accomplish the purpose of this study, investigation was made on the role of first language or mother tongue in English language learning. Thus the main findings were that the difference between the sound system of Arabic and English was one of the main reasons behind problems confronting the students; grammar rules of English were also another problematic area for the students, instead they applied Arabic ones when writing or speaking English.

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