

The Difficulties of Forming English Irregular Plural Nouns by English Major Students of Al al-Bayt University

Bilal Ayed Al-Khazaleh

Assistant professor, English department, Shaqra University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Each language has its own unique syntactic structure; therefore, the foreign language learners should be fully aware of the way of dealing with the new language since it is totally different from their mother tongues. This study examined the interlanguage syntax of Arabic speaking learners of English in the area of the noun. Specifically, it investigates the difficulties that faced students at Al al-Bayt University in using irregular plural nouns. The main focus is to identify the different types of errors committed by English students at Al- al-Bayt University and the major causes of these errors. Thirty students responded to 15-items grammar test designed by the researcher, and results have been initiated and percentages have been calculated. Results revealed that the errors are committed because the Arabic structure is very different from English. The majority of Arab learners depend on their mother tongue in the process of using irregular plural nouns.

Keywords: Irregular plural, Al al-Bayt University, Arabic structure, English students, difficulties

1. Introduction

Learning the English language is not an easy process for Arab learners. They face many problems with different structure, such as forming the plural of some irregular plural nouns. Various aspects of language have widely become the interest of many studies either in syntax, phonology and others. These aspects focus on the difficulties EFL students from different backgrounds face during their learning process. It has been argued that mother tongue plays a significant role while teaching the new language and it is best investigated through contrastive research since there is a huge amount of interference of L1 on the L2 learning. ESL and EFL Arab learners encounter many challenges seeking to improve their language improvement due to the structural differences between English and Arabic.

Thus, this study is devoted to investigate a very important part of speech which is noun NP. The study attempts to figure out the difficulties EFL students face when trying to make pluralism. In English there are hundreds of nouns that do not follow the standard rules for pluralization. A noun in English is a word used to name a person, animal, place and even abstract idea. A thing includes a quality (fear) a material (gold), a collection (herd, army), a state (adherence) and an action (cheat, mock, movement). A noun is a member of a large, open part of speech whose members can occur as the main word in the subject of a clause, the object of a verb, or the object of a preposition (Melchert, 2002). Nouns can be classified as a singular or plural. When a word refers to one person or thing it is said to be singular when it refers to more than one it is plural.

A singular noun is made a plural in one of two ways.

1- A singular noun can add /s/ at the end of the words (regular plural nouns).

Book books

Chair chairs

2- If the word ends in (s, x, z, ch, sh) add an "es".

Bless blesses

Dish dishes

Certain nouns have irregular plurals which do not follow this standard way. Thus, these irregular nouns must be memorized as shown in the following table:

Table 1: irregular noun plurals

Singular	Plural
Alumnus	Alumni
Amoeba	Amoebae
Bacterium	Bacteria
Cactus	Cacti
curriculum	Curricula

Most nouns ending in *-o* are pluralized by adding an *-s*, but some take *-es* instead—for example:

Singular	Plural
Hero	Heroes
Potato	Potatoes
Tomato	Tomatoes

Some nouns change their central vowel sounds when pluralized—for example:

Singular	Plural
Foot	Feet
Mouse	Mice
Tooth	Teeth
Woman	Women

Some nouns ending in *-f* are pluralized by dropping the *-f* and adding *-ves*:

Singular	Plural
Knife	Knives
Leaf	Leaves

Some nouns ending in *-is* are pluralized by dropping the *-is* and adding *-es*:

Singular	Plural
Axis	Axes
Analysis	Analyses

Some nouns ending in *-ix* are pluralized by dropping the *-ix* and adding *-ices*:

Singular	Plural
Appendix	Appendices
Index	Indices

A few nouns are unchanged in their plural forms:

Singular	Plural
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Barracks	Barracks
Deer	Deer
Fish	fish
Gallows	Gallows
Means	Means

In the case of Arabic structure, it has singular, dual and plural forms of pronouns, nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. The singular form is used when referring to one person or thing. The dual subject pronoun refers to two people or things, and the plural form when referring to more than two people or things (www.languageguide.org).

It is important to know that nouns can be irregularly pluralized by more than one way by using more than one structure or pattern. Moreover, many nouns can be regularly and irregularly pluralized in the same time (www.Arabic.tripod.com).

For example:

Singular	Plural	Plural
/Shahr/	/Ashhur/	/Shuhoor/
Month	Months	Months

2. Literature review

Every language has its own system in sentence structure. One of the main differences between English and Arabic is an irregular plural (Hobi, 2011). The Arabic plural system, especially the irregular plural is one of the most problematic parts of the language for the non-native students of Arabic (Maxos 1995). Further, Arab students do not have this problem in general because they learn most of this system from their spoken Arabic which they learn passively spontaneously or unsystematically. Arabic has lots of irregular plurals known as broken plurals. The plural form is expressed by changing the stem of the singular form (Alexiadou, 2011). /an/ is added at the end of a noun to indicate that it is dual representing two people or objects. /Taleban/ = (two) students

When we make dual in English we use (two) before the noun. The dual forms are only used in very formal Arabic ([Sibawayh](#)). Nouns that have both masculine and feminine forms, often the feminine plural is regular and the masculine plural irregular as shown below:

/Tolab/ Students (m) /talebat/ Students (f)

/Asdeqaa/ Friends (m) /sadeqat/ Friends (f)

One of the major differences between English (irregular plural nouns) and Arabic is that English does not distinguish between masculine and feminine by any particular sign or specific identification as in the Arabic language.

Zughoul (2002) investigated the elements come before and after the noun head by 25 Arab EFL learners at the University of Texas Austin based on Quirk and Greenbaum's (1977) treatment of the noun phrase. The data of the study gathered from the students' oral production. Findings revealed that noun phrase errors come the second in rank after verb errors. Further, most of the errors in noun phrase occur in the articles; some students omit the definite and indefinite articles or used them incorrectly. Likewise, Abdalla, Aljenaie, and Mahfoudhi (2013) examined three types of noun plural inflections which are feminine sound plural, masculine sound plural, and broken plural as produced by 36 Kuwaiti Arabic-speaking children. Findings revealed that those children used overgeneralization,

that is, they preferred substituting the feminine plurals with a masculine plural. Altarawneh and Hajjo (2018) revealed that there is a little awareness of the English plural morphemes among Arabic-speaking EFL learners. In addition, the participants' English proficiency level had a little effect on the participants' use of English plural morphemes.

3. Problem statement

Using irregular plural nouns by Arabic learners have been the subject of research for many years. Many scholars specify the reasons for the misunderstanding of irregular plural nouns. Arab EFL in general and Al al-Bayt University English students in particular have been found to encounter many difficulties in different areas of English grammar structures including nouns. These learners face various problems in making plural forms of English nouns (Kharma, 1987). Thus, in order to be able to construct the correct forms, they need to learn the morphology of these nouns and differentiate between the English and Arabic structures. Hence, this study hopes to understand the reasons for these difficulties and suggest some ways to overcome these problems.

4. Objectives

The primary objective of the current study is to find out the most problematic areas for the sample while using irregular plural nouns. The specific aims of the study are:

1-To discover the problems that faced Arabic students who study English language at Al al-Bayt University in using irregular plural nouns.

2-To specify the situation where Arabic students who study English language at Al al-Bayt University use irregular plural nouns incorrectly.

5. Research Questions

1-What are the problems that faced Arabic students who study English language at Al al-Bayt University in using irregular plural nouns?

2-What are the situation where Arabic students who study English language at Al al-Bayt University use irregular plural nouns incorrectly?

6. Methodology

6.1. Sample

The sample of the study consists of thirty students (fifteen male and fifteen female) who are taking grammar course at the English language department at Al al-Bayt University, Mafraq, Jordan in 2017-2018 academic session. The students were selected to take a 15-items test about irregular plural nouns

Participants should choose a suitable answer from A, B, C.

6.2. Instrument

The instrument of this study is a 9 items multiple-choice questionnaire designed by the researcher. To ensure the validity and reliability of this instrument, it was reviewed by two professors of linguistics from Al-al-Bayet University and Al-Balqa Applied University. Also, a pilot study has been conducted with some students similar to the sample of the study to ensure the clarity of the items. Finally, the instrument is found to be valid and clear and thus it was distributed to the targeted samples.

7. Results and discussions

Patterns	Correct	Percentage%	incorrect	Percentage%	No answer	Percentage%	total
1-	25	83 %	5	16 %	-	-	30

2-	14	46%	16	53 %	-	-	
3-	15	50%	14	46 %	1	3 %	
4-	14	46%	16	53 %	-	-	
5-	10	33%	20	66 %	-	-	
6-	21	70%	9	30 %	-	-	
7-	19	63%	9	30 %	-	2	6 %
8-	26	86 %	4	13 %	-	-	
9-	25	83 %	5	16 %	-	-	

Table 3: percentages of the students' errors

Test Analysis

1. Only 5 participants chose the incorrect answer, which showed a lack of knowledge about this kind of irregular plural nouns.
 - A. There were three _____ in the room.
a-Childs b-children c- childrens
 - B. 16 students chose the incorrect answer, they do not have enough knowledge about changing central vowels sounds when pluralized

B. I lost two _____ last year.
a-tooths b- teeths c- teeth
 - C. 20 students chose incorrect answers showing student's lack of knowledge about adding a different ending when pluralized.

C. The _____ were eating cheese.
a-mice b- mouses c- mices
 - D. Did the _____ eat all the hay.
a-Oxs b- Oxen c- Oxes
 - D. 4 students choose incorrect answer which indicates that they are unfamiliar in this kind of words.

E. One man is wearing blue and two ___ are wearing red
a-men b- mans c- mens
 - E. 12 participants chose the incorrect answers, they do not have enough knowledge about changing words completely when making irregular plural nouns.

Look at all of the _____ waiting on line for moving.
a-persons b- people c- peoples
 - F. 6 students showed a lack of awareness of some nouns ending in- f- are pluralized by dropping the- f- and adding -/ves/-.
Some _____ are really sharp.
a-knifes b- knives c- knife

G. 7 students showed a lack of awareness of some nouns are unchanged in their plural forms.

We saw a lot of _____ at the park.

a- deer

b- deers

c- deerses

H. 15 students chose incorrect answers which show their lack of awareness about irregular plural

The desert is home to many _____.

a- Cactus

b- Cacti

c- Cactuses

I. 4 students chose an incorrect answer which indicates that they are unfamiliar to change nouns end in- y- to- ies- to make plural.

There are many _____ in the garden.

a- Monkeys

b- Monkey

c- Monkeys

8. Discussion and conclusion

Irregular plural nouns are considered problematic for Arab learners as a result of the different syntactic structure between English and Arabic languages. Because of this difference, Arab learners rely on their mother tongue to fit with the English language. Making plural of some nouns in English seems confusing for Arab learners, simply because there is no equivalent in Arabic. To be free from mother tongue interference, learners should give serious practice with making irregular plural nouns. In some types of making plural nouns participants do not have difficulties such as nouns changing their central vowels in item. The most troublesome area was when participants make plural by adding different ending in term since Arabic plural nouns differ from English, consequently, the influence of mother tongue will affect learners while making plural nouns.

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