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On the Acquisition of Passive Voice Constructions in English: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of Arabic-Speaking L2 Learners of English

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study examines the acquisition of passive voice constructions in English by Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English. The study aims to investigate the implications of the full transfer/full access (FTFA) hypothesis (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996) on L2 learners' comprehension and production of passive constructions. As a proxy for understanding the acquisition of passive voice constructions by Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English, the research analyzed errors and patterns exhibited by both beginners and advanced learners in their use of the auxiliary verb, verb conjugation, and verb tense through the application of two tasks. The findings offer significant support for the FTFA hypothesis, highlighting a notable association between the omission of the auxiliary be in English phrases and beginner learners, thus showcasing the influence of their native Arabic language. Moreover, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering further insights into how Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English navigate passive voice constructions.

Keywords: passive, L2, english, arabic, FTFA

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1. Introduction

Second language (L2) acquisition holds a pivotal position within the field of linguistics and has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years. The conceptualization of L2 acquisition has been approached from various perspectives, each offering a distinct lens through which to understand this intricate process (Gass & Slinker, 2008, pp. 1–8). Such distinctions notwithstanding, these perspectives all converge on the fundamental notion that L2 acquisition involves the acquisition of language proficiency in a language that differs from an individual's native tongue (Gass & Slinker, 2008). Taking a broader viewpoint, L2 acquisition encompasses the acquisition of any language beyond an individual's first language (L1), irrespective of "the learning environment" or "the number of other non-native languages" one may possess (Smith & Candlin, 2014, p. 5). Thus, the designation of an L2 extends to any

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nonnative language being learned or acquired, regardless of whether it is a second or third language, as long as it falls within the purview of the designated "target language" (TL) (Smith & Candlin, 2014).

The role of the native language has been the object of much debate in the L2 literature. As a means of capturing the utility of the native language, the term *cross-linguistic influence* (CLI) has been coined. CLI, as elucidated by Odlin (2012, p. 1), pertains to the impact of one language on another and is often used interchangeably with the concept of "language transfer." This transfer concept has been the focal point of numerous theoretical frameworks aiming to unravel its complexities and elucidate how it arises (for a review, see Daftarifard & Shirkhani, 2011).

Within this field, one prominent viewpoint is the full transfer/full access hypothesis (FTFA) proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996). The FTFA model, centering on the role of the L1, has garnered substantial support as well as critical scrutiny. As a theoretical framework, it provides a foundation for understanding the intricate dynamics of language transfer in L2 acquisition. FTFA argues that the initial state of acquiring the L2 is a replica of the final state of the L1 (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). Essentially, this model aims to explain L2 acquisition by considering the role of both the L1 and universal grammar (UG). An important concept within this hypothesis is that of full transfer, which stresses the idea of learners applying rules and patterns from their L1 to their L2. Thus, it follows that all language representations acquired in the L1 are expected to "immediately carry over as the initial state of a new grammatical system on first exposure to input from the target language" (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996, p. 41). As learners progress and gain more exposure to the L2, they may begin to recognize the differences between the two languages and modify their language system accordingly. Thus, "full transfer" highlights how the L1 is evidenced in shaping the early stages of L2 acquisition, and thus CLI can be evident at this stage.

Consequently, the primary objective of this investigation is to utilize the acquisition of the passive voice construction as a means to empirically exemplify and shed light on the theoretical underpinnings of the FTFA hypothesis. In pursuit of this objective, this study specifically investigates the acquisition of English passive voice constructions by Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English as the sample of interest.

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2. Theoretical Background

The construction of the passive voice is widely regarded as a challenging aspect within the realm of language acquisition. A wealth of empirical evidence has highlighted the formidable hurdles that children, particularly those aged 5 and younger, face when producing and comprehending passive sentences (e.g., Hirsch & Wexler, 2006; Stromswold et al., 2002). This research coincides with the widely held view in psycholinguistics that "the passive is seen as a syntactic puzzle to be solved by children" (Slobin, 1996, p. 341). Such perspectives have led to passive constructions being documented as difficult to acquire and acquired late (Hirsch & Wexler, 2006). In principle, passive voice is one form of grammatical structure that is pervasive throughout a wide range of languages. However, this ubiquity does not imply uniformity, as there exists considerable variation across languages in terms of the formulation and construction of passive-voice compositions. English, for instance, is reported to have two forms of passive construction, (1) agentive and (2) agentless (Khalil, 1988), as indicated in the examples[1] provided below.

(1) Agentive Passive:

a. Active: *The artist painted **the masterpiece***.

b. Agentive Passive: ***The masterpiece*** *was painted by the artist.*

(2) Agentless Passive:

a. Active: *They found **the lost keys***.

b. Agentless Passive: ***The lost keys*** *were found.*

In the agentive passive (1), the doer or agent of the action, *the artist*, is explicitly mentioned through the preposition *by*. In the agentless passive (2), by contrast, the doer of the action is either unknown, unspecified or intentionally omitted. As these examples illustrate, passives in English are predominantly expressed through morphosyntactic means, that is, by the use of the auxiliary *be* followed by the head verb in its past participle form (Grosvald & Khwaileh, 2019). Therefore, the manifestation of passivation in English differs from that in Arabic since, in

[1] The examples are provided by the researcher unless stated otherwise.

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Arabic, the passive voice primarily entails a morphological process (Khalil, 1988; Ryding, 2005).

When active-verb sentences in Arabic are transformed into passive constructions, a parallel shift occurs in which the verb's object assumes the subject position, akin to English (Khalil, 1988; Ryding, 2005). Unlike in English, however, in Arabic, "the verb is marked for passive by virtue of a change in the internal vowels" (Ryding, 2005, p. 658), as shown in (3). Furthermore, as Khalil (1988) indicated, passivation in Arabic is characterized only by agentless passive constructions, where deleting the agent in English can be optional in Arabic; nonetheless, it is obligatory.

(3) Agentless Passive:

a. Active: *kataba al-walad-u* ***al-dars-a***
wrote the-boy-NOM the-lesson-ACC
'The boy wrote the lesson'

b. Agentless Passive: *Kutiba* ***al-dars-u***
written the-lesson-NOM
'The lesson was written' (Adopted from Khalil, 1988, pp. 9–10)

As discussed thus far, the surface structure of passive constructions appears to vary between the two languages. The passives are, however, derived in somewhat similar ways in both languages.

2.1. The Derivation of Passives in English and Arabic

Essentially, in accordance with the foundational principles and parameters expounded upon in the earlier stages of the Minimalist Program (MP), as explicated by Chomsky (1995) and subsequent contributions, the derivation of passives in English calls for the movement of the direct object, which resembles the theme θ-role (e.g., "the masterpiece" in (1a)), to the subject position (Adger, 2003; Radford, 2004; Thompson et al., 1997). This movement can be contrasted between the deep-structure (D-S) and surface-structure (S-S) representations (Thompson et al., 1997), as shown in (4).

(4) a. **D-S:** φ was painted ***the masterpiece*** by the artist.
b. **S-S:** [IP ***the masterpiece*** i was painted ti by the artist]

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That movement, however, underscores an integral aspect of θ-role assignments that should be highlighted. In their accounts, Radford (2004) and Adger (2003) have emphasized that passive subjects, such as "the masterpiece" in (1b), which appear as direct objects in the active construction, as seen in (1a), theoretically originate as a thematic complement; thus, such a movement does not assign a theme or patient θ-role to passive subjects, since this role has already been assigned before movement (Radford, 2004; Adger, 2003). This is a reflection, as Radford (2004) pointed out, of the consistent mapping of the thematic structure onto the syntactic structure governed by a principle within UG. This principle is provided in (5):

(5) **Uniform Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH):**
Constituents which fulfil the same thematic role with respect to a given predicate occupy the same initial position in the syntax.

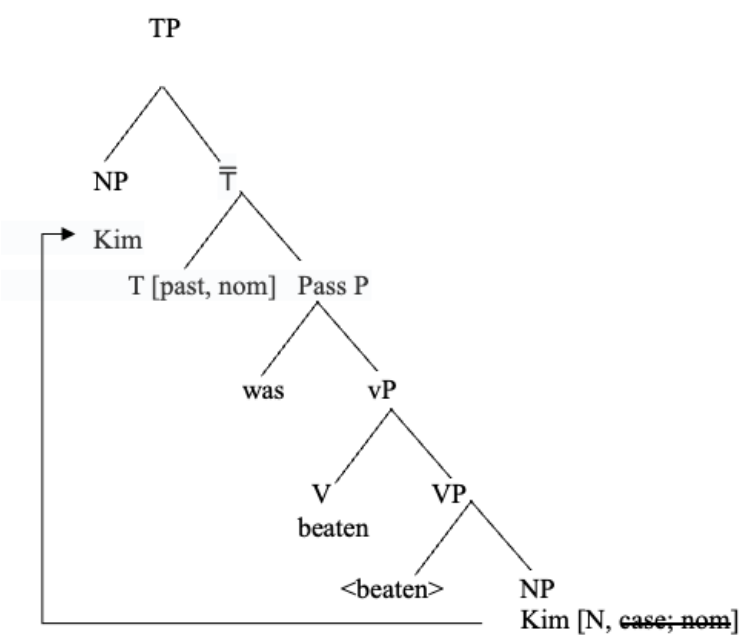
The movement of the theme as such has been described as motivated by the inability of passive verbs to assign the case to the object position (see Thompson et al., 1997, for more discussion). Along these lines, Adger (2003) offered a rationale underpinning the movement of the theme to the subject position and how the case can be checked. In principle, Adger's derivational analysis was geared toward the underlying representations of unaccusative verbs in English in the context of recent refinements of MP. Notably, he treated the passives in a similar fashion, suggesting that as the moved object – for example, 'Kim' in (6) – would be assigned the theme role by the UTAH, it would acquire its case through an *agree*[2i] with finite T[ii], as finite T carries an uninterpretable case feature [*u* case: nom] and "then raises to the specifier TP to satisfy T's EPP[iii] feature" (Adger, 2003, p. 188). Adger further explained the process as follows:

> since there is no intervening subject between the EPP feature of T, and the N feature of the Theme, the Theme should be able to undergo movement to the specifier of TP to satisfy EPP on T. Moreover, since finite T has [nom] case, the single argument of unaccusatives should be able to agree with T in case features too. (p. 83)

[2] The expanded definitions of these terms can be found in the endnotes.

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(6) Kim was beaten.



As noted above, however, English passives, unlike those in Arabic, represent an obligatory presence of the auxiliary *be*. Adger (2003) argued for a passive functional (PassP) head within the derivation of passives in English. In his analysis, he emphasized that the presence of such a head would restrict the inflection of the verb such that it would not be checked by T as a finite verb, like other accusative verbs, but rather would be checked as a participle, as shown in (6).

In Arabic linguistics, the analysis of Arabic passives has been explored within the minimalist framework (MF), as evidenced by various scholarly investigations, including studies by Ayyat et al. (2013), Ben Ayeche (2018), and others. Despite analytical differences, the existing literature has reached consensus on certain aspects of these derivations, particularly in relation to word-order variations in Arabic passives. In Arabic, unlike English, Arabic passives are known to occur in both verb-subject (VS) order, as illustrated in (1a) above, and subject-verb (SV) order, as demonstrated in (7) below.

(7) al-dars-u Kutiba
the-lesson-NOM written the-lesson-NOM
'The lesson was written'

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The present investigation will not delve into the nuances of the variations of such derivations. Of utmost significance to the current undertaking, however, is the SV order, which bears a resemblance to English passives. To derive the SV passive construction in Arabic, as described by Ayyat et al. (2013), the surface passive subject *al-dars-u* in example (7) originates in the [spec, V] position. Within this position, the theme θ-role is assigned by UTAH, and subsequently, it moves up to the [spec, T] position to fulfil the EPP requirement. Notably, in both Arabic and English, passive morphemes hinder the verb from assigning case. Consequently, case assignment takes place inherently through an agreement process with T, as has been demonstrated in the works of Thompson et al. (1997), Adger (2003), and Ben Ayeche (2018).

In sum, the English derivation of the passives in its SV resembles that of Arabic, except for the presence of the "auxiliary" functional head in English, which is lacking in Arabic. Hence, the present study capitalizes on the absence of this functional head in Arabic, thereby corroborating one of the fundamental tenets posited by the FTFA hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the initial state of L2 acquisition, as demonstrated by beginner learners, offers a plausible emulation of the final state or grammatical structure of their native language (L1) (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). This premise serves as a pivotal foundation for the current investigation. This study, thus, aims to answer the research question presented in the following section.

2.2. Research Question

Q1. Is there a significant association between error frequencies in passive constructions in English, specifically the omission of the auxiliary versus other errors, and the language competence levels of Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English?

H1: There will be a statistically significant association between error frequencies in passive constructions, particularly regarding the omission of the auxiliary *be* versus other errors, and the language competence level of Arabic L2 learners. Learners with lower language competence levels will exhibit a significantly higher frequency of errors related to the omission of the auxiliary *be* compared to those with higher language competence levels, thereby providing empirical support for the implications of the FTFA hypothesis.

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3. Literature Review

One of the fundamental premises for a better understanding of L2 acquisition is the careful scholarly examination of the language produced by learners in different stages of their learning process (Ellis, 1997). This comprehensive scrutiny of learners' language encompasses various approaches, outlined by Ellis (1997, p. 43) as involving (a) investigating learners' errors, (b) analyzing developmental patterns, (c) exploring variability, and (d) examining the pragmatic features of learners' language. Over the years, the phenomenon of L1 transfer/CLI[3] has been extensively studied, with seminal works focusing on analyzing learners' errors by Corder (1967) and Dulay & Burt (1974). These pioneering approaches have laid a strong foundation, and more recent studies have further explored and built upon their insights.

In the context of error analysis, Richards (1971), as Corder (1975) summarized, proposed a taxonomy of errors that categorizes them based on their underlying causes. This taxonomy includes three main categories: (a) interlingual errors, which arise from the interference of the learners' mother tongue; (b) intralingual or developmental errors, which occur when learners lack complete knowledge of the target language; and (c) errors resulting from inadequate teaching techniques or materials (Corder, 1975). While there are several opposing viewpoints on Richards' distinctions between the causes of such errors, his model has been the basis of numerous research endeavors. Given that errors have been suggested as the most crucial data for reconstructing a learner's knowledge of the TL, studying and analyzing these errors becomes paramount (Corder, 1967, 1975).

In recent years, an increasing body of research has demonstrated that a significant hindrance in the acquisition of English by Arab learners can be attributed to disparities between the syntactic structures of Arabic and English (Adler, 2012; Mourssi, 2013; Murad & Khalil, 2015). Such differences are particularly evident in the case of passive voice constructions (Alasfour, 2018; Khalil, 1988; Lghzeel & Radzuan, 2020; Shamsan & Attayib, 2015). Khalil (1988), for instance, conducted a descriptive study highlighting the differences in passive voice construction between the English and Arabic syntactic systems. His study emphasized that these disparities could pose challenges for Arabic L2 learners of English. He accurately predicted that the distinct

[3] The terms "L1 transfer" and "CLI" are interchangeable throughout.

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characteristics of the two language systems would serve as obstacles in the TL acquisition process. However, it is worth noting that Khalil's assertion was based on a descriptive study and lacked experimental data to support his claims. While his analysis provided valuable insights into the disparities between the English and Arabic syntactic systems in passive voice construction, further empirical research is needed to validate his predictions and draw more conclusive findings.

Shamsan and Attayib (2015) replicated the claim regarding the potential difficulty in acquiring the passive voice experienced by Arabic L2 learners of English. However, like Khalil (1988), their study relied on descriptive analysis rather than experimental data. While they highlighted the disparities between the two language systems, they did not perform any experimental testing to substantiate the claim of difficulty. Consequently, the need for further empirical research to validate and substantiate these claims remains.

Adler (2012) analyzed passive voice errors among Korean and Arabic L2 learners of English. Among L1 Arab learners, Adler observed that the most common error was the omission of auxiliary verbs; learners tended to overlook the necessity of using the auxiliary verb *be* in English passives. Alasfour (2018) replicated these findings, further supporting the prevalence of this error among Arabic L2 learners of English. Both Adler (2012) and Alasfour (2018) examined students' written essays to identify errors within them. This method of analysis, however, appears to be limited to the learners' production abilities; hence, incorporating a task that also assesses the learners' comprehension would further strengthen such a conclusion.

A recent study conducted by Lghzeel and Radzuan (2020) examined the use and understanding of passive constructions by Arab L2 learners of English. The researchers initially focused on identifying the types of errors made by the learners, followed by quantifying these errors and calculating the percentage of both interlingual and intralingual errors. The results revealed that due to their Arabic language background, learners made a considerable number of errors in using the passive voice, with interlingual errors outnumbering intralingual errors. Based on their test results, 40 of 46 participants were classified as beginners in their knowledge of the passive voice in English. Importantly, however, the researchers did not specify the language proficiency level of the learners nor provided any statistical analysis on the reported data. This lack of information makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions regarding the learners'

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language competence and the accuracy of the findings. Further clarification and rigorous analysis would be necessary to establish a more comprehensive understanding and lend credence to such a conclusion.

By addressing theoretical and methodological gaps identified in previous studies, this paper extends the current understanding of the topic within the realm of linguistic theory. The study specifically investigates the acquisition of English passive-voice constructions by Saudi L2 learners of English, shedding light on how these learners navigate the linguistic disparities between their L1 and the TL. The overarching objective is to enrich the field by employing the FTFA hypothesis as a theoretical framework to offer further insights. As a departure from the aforementioned studies in the field, this research delves into the acquisition of passive constructions in English from a theoretical perspective.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

To include beginner L2 English language learners in the study, a total of 19 participants were recruited from an English teaching class at a specific Saudi university. The participants' competency in English was determined through language assessment tests such as the IELTS (International English Language Testing System). Six participants achieved a test score of 4, indicating a beginner level of proficiency.[4] The remaining 13 participants, who scored above 4, represented modest to proficient levels of proficiency. Importantly, the 13 participants who scored above 4 were students majoring in English. Participants ranged in age from 18–26 years old, with a mean age of 22.8.

4.2. Research Instrument

In this study, a grammatical judgment task was employed as a research tool to assess the participants' understanding and production of passive constructions. The task involved

[4] Classification of levels based on IELTS descriptors for each band score.

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presenting the participants with two constructions, which were adopted from Swan and Walter (2011) and modified for the current undertaking. Participants were instructed to choose the construction that best exemplified the passive voice, akin to those in (8):

(8) a. A gold watch given to Joe.

b. A gold watch was given to Joe.

The aim of the task was to examine two types of errors: (a) the omission of the auxiliary *be* and (b) errors related to tense or the correct conjugation of the verb or auxiliary, as shown in (9):

(9) a. Dr. Lee has awarded the Nobel prize for physics last year.

b. Dr. Lee was awarded the Nobel prize for physics last year.

By specifically targeting these types of errors, the task provided valuable insights into the participants' competence and accuracy in passive constructions.

In addition to the grammatical judgment task, participants in this study were also presented with an elicitation task. In this task, participants were provided with active sentences and were instructed to change them into passive voice. The aim of this additional task was to evaluate the participants' ability to actively produce passive constructions and to assess their grammatical competence with this linguistic feature. By engaging participants in the active transformation of sentences, this task provided further insights into their understanding and application of passive voice structures. As with the grammatical judgement task, two types of errors were examined: (a) the omission of the auxiliary *be* and (b) errors associated with conjugation and tense. In this study, participants completed the tasks through an online platform.

4.3. Analysis

Data analysis in this study employed SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program, version 28. The initial step of statistical analysis involved calculating the percentage of errors observed in the data.[5] These errors were subsequently classified into two distinct

[5] This step of analysis is akin to that of Lghzeel and Radzuan (2020).

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categories: (1) errors associated with the omission of the auxiliary *be* (referred to as "-Aux errors" in the tables), and (2) errors arising from deficiencies in the knowledge of correct verb tense or the improper conjugation of the verb *be* in passive constructions (referred to as "verb-related errors"). This systematic categorization of errors allowed for a comprehensive examination of the various error patterns exhibited by the participants. Identifying -Aux errors provided valuable insights regarding the feasibility of transferring passive construction derivations from Arabic to English, while the identification of verb-related errors revealed specific areas of linguistic knowledge that require further research. Errors such as spelling, incorrect use of articles, and incorrect plural formation were also found but were not included in this study as they are beyond its scope.

As a second step, inferential statistics were employed to ascertain the difference between the study groups, as follows:

- The Shapiro–Wilk test is a test of normality in frequentist statistics (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965) and was used in this study for the total number of both error types: -Aux errors and verb-related errors.
- Pearson's chi-squared test ($\chi 2$) is a statistical test applied to categorical data to determine how independent two variables are (Plackett, 1983). As part of this study, chi-squared tests were used to determine the association between error types and the two groups.
- To compare the two error types within the same group, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used (Conover, 1999).
- *P*-values less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

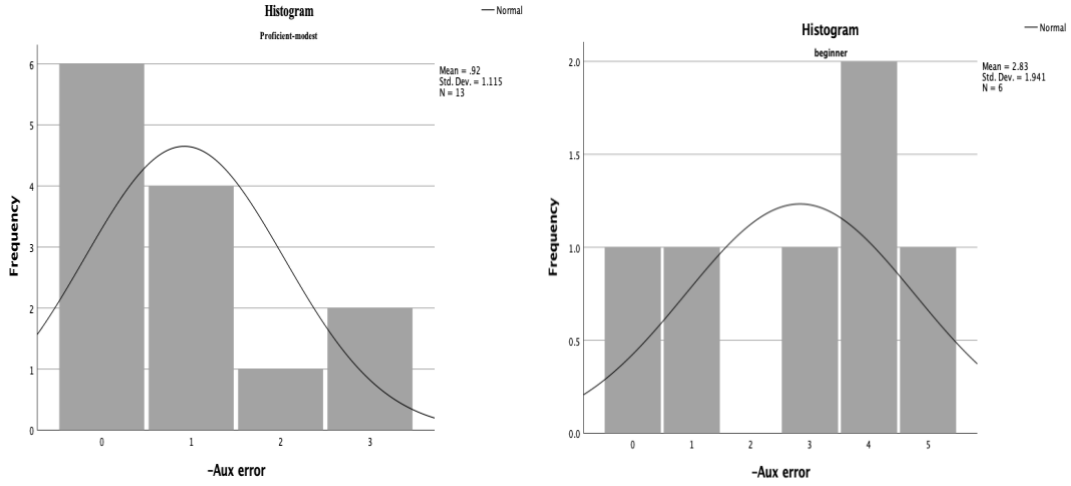
4.3.1. Test of Normality

Before proceeding with the statistical analyses, the assumptions of parametric statistics were assessed for the study variables. The Shapiro–Wilk test was employed to examine the normal distribution of the continuous variables using a significance level of alpha = .05. Based on the results of these tests, appropriate nonparametric statistical techniques were employed.

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The -Aux errors among proficient to modest L2 learners (*n* = 13) had a minimum value of (0) and a maximum value of (3) by mean ± SD (0.92 ± 1.115) with a positive skewness of 1.026 because six of 13 learners committed zero -Aux errors, as shown in Figure 1a. The -Aux errors among beginner L2 learners (*n* = 6) had a minimum value of (0) and a maximum value of (5) by mean ± SD (2.83 ± 1.941) with a negative skewness of −0.638 because two of six learners committed four -Aux errors each, as shown in Figure 1b.

Figure 1. *-Aux errors*

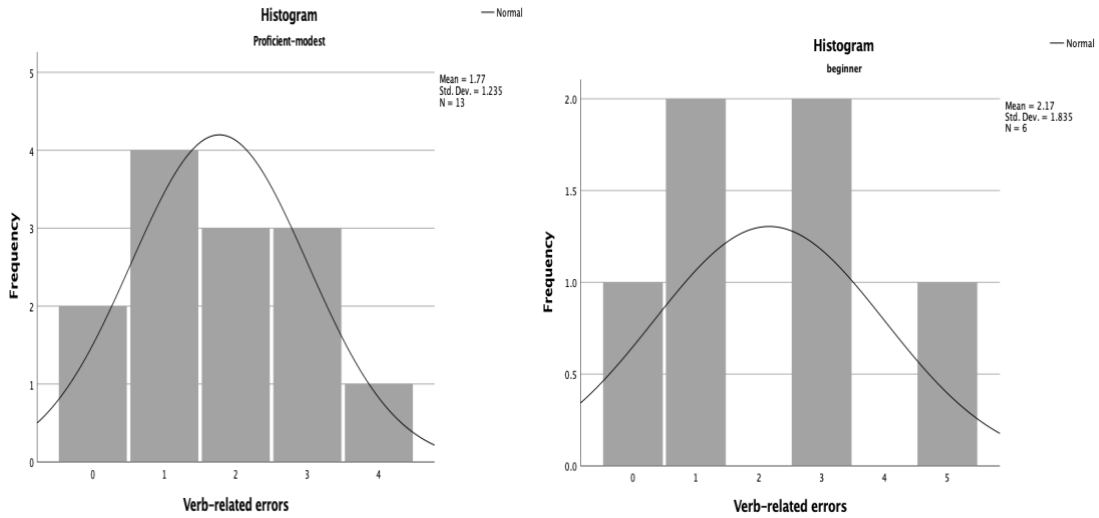


(1a) Proficient to modest learners (1b) Beginner L2 learners

The verb-related errors among proficient to modest L2 learners (*n* = 13) had a minimum value of (0) and a maximum value of (4) by mean ± SD (1.77 ± 1.235) with a positive but small skewness of 0.200 because four of 13 learners committed verb-related errors, as shown in Figure 2a. Among learners of limited proficiency (*n* = 6), the verb-related errors had a minimum value of (0) and a maximum value of (5) by mean ± SD (2.17 ± 1.835) with a positive skewness of 0.513 because two of six learners each committed three verb-related errors, as shown in Figure 2b.

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Figure 2. *Verb-related errors*



(2a) Proficient to modest learners (2b) Beginner L2 learners

4.4. Results

Table 1 presents the association between -Aux errors and groups (proficient-modest and beginners) among the Arabic L2 learners of English in this study. The table shows the frequencies and percentages of error occurrences within each group. Chi-square analysis was performed to examine the significance of the association between the variables.

Table 1

Association Between Interlingual Errors and Groups

			Group		Total	Chi-Square	P-Value
			Proficient-Modest	Beginner			
-Aux Errors	0–2 Errors	*n*	11	2	13	4.997	0.025*
		%	84.6%	15.4%	100.0%		
	3–5 Errors	*n*	2	4	6		
		%	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%		
Verb-Related Errors	0–2 Errors	*n*	9	3	12	0.652	0.419
		%	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%		
	3–5 Errors	*n*	4	3	7		
		%	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%		

*Significant at the 0.05 level.

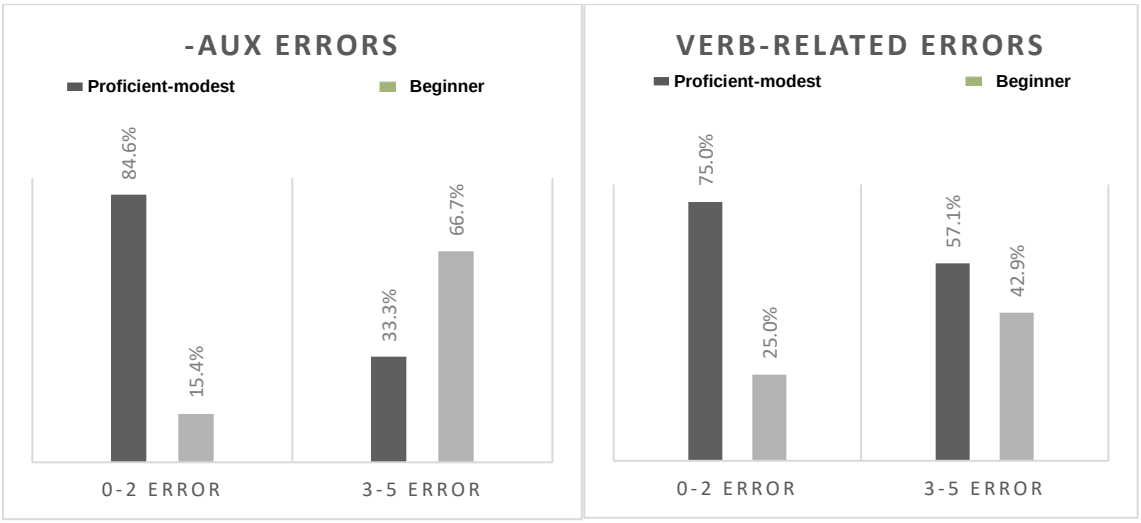
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For -Aux errors, among the proficient-modest group, 84.6% (*n* = 11) committed 0–2 errors, while 15.4% (*n* = 2) committed 3–5 errors. In contrast, among the beginner group, 66.7% (*n* = 4) committed 3–5 errors, and 33.3% (*n* = 2) committed 0–2 errors. The chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between -Aux errors and the two groups, $\chi^2(1) = 4.997$, $p = 0.025$*. This result suggests that there is a significant difference in -Aux error frequencies between the two language competence levels, with such errors being more prevalent among beginners.

Regarding verb-related errors, as shown in Table 1, the majority of both groups committed 0–2 errors each. Among the proficient-modest learners, 75.0% (*n* = 9) committed 0–2 errors, while 25.0% (*n* = 3) committed 3–5 errors. Among the limited-proficiency learners, 57.1% (*n* = 4) committed 3–5 errors, while 42.9% (*n* = 3) committed 0–2 errors. The chi-square test did not yield a significant association between verb-related errors and the two groups, $\chi^2(1) = 0.652$, $p = 0.419$. Accordingly, the differences among Arabic L2 learners of English in error frequencies related to the tense and conjugation of verbs is not statistically significant.

Figures 1 and 2 offer a visual representation of the results to aid in understanding the statistical findings. Figure 1 presents the graphical depiction of the association between -Aux errors and groups, while Figure 2 illustrates the association between verb-related errors and groups.

Figure 5. *The Association of Errors Between Groups*



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As an ancillary exploration, a Wilcoxon signed-ranks test analysis was conducted within each group to examine the prevalence of different error types in passive constructions. While not directly aligned with the main research question, this supplementary analysis aimed to gain further insights into error distribution within each group and to explore potential disparities between -Aux and verb-related errors.

Within the proficient-modest group, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test revealed a significant difference in error frequencies between verb-related errors and -Aux errors ($Z = -2.598$, $p = 0.009$**), with verb-related errors outnumbering -Aux constructions. This finding suggests that passive voice construction may present specific grammatical challenges that are not necessarily confined to the -Aux structure that is typical of Arabic. In contrast, within the beginner-learners group, no statistically significant distinction emerged between the two error types ($Z = -1.134$, $p = 0.257 > 0.05$).

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the FTFA hypothesis, which assumes that learners transfer the grammatical structures from one language to another in their initial exposure, a phenomenon observed predominantly among beginning language learners (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). Particular attention was paid to the acquisition of passive voice constructions by Arabic L2 learners of English. The rationale for analyzing passive voice constructions stemmed from the unique characteristics of English passive structures, which involve a functional projection to the auxiliary verb. In the absence of this functional head, the resulting surface structure closely resembles that of Arabic. Because this auxiliary head contributes neither to meaning nor to the assignment of θ-roles (Adger, 2003), its absence from the surface structure has significant implications for L1 transfer.

To achieve this aim, I employed two tasks to analyze learners' language. First, I assessed their production and comprehension of passive constructions in English by examining their language for potential errors. These responses were interpreted as representations of the learner's interlanguage, allowing us to obtain a better sense of their grammar (Ellis, 1997). The participants, particularly at the beginner level, seemed to apply their understanding of passive constructions in Arabic to their interpretation of English passive sentences. Consequently, they

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tended to favor structures that lacked the auxiliary *be*, which aligns with their familiar grammatical patterns. The significant association identified for this structure among beginner learners supports the predictions of the FTFA hypothesis and is consistent with prior research on L2 (e.g., Grüter, 2006).

The adoption of the FTFA hypothesis for investigation was motivated by its unique theoretical perspective in comparison to other frameworks that address transfer in language acquisition. The contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH), for example, emphasizes similarities and differences between languages to predict transfer (see Al-khresheh, 2016, for a review); any inefficiency in acquisition would thus be attributable to these differences. As for the passive construction, where surface structures differ between English and Arabic, the results of the present study suggest that the differences in language systems cannot be held solely accountable for faulty constructions. Notably, among advanced learners, verb conjugation errors were considerably more prevalent, which lends credence to the argument that a certain degree of language acquisition inaccuracy could be a product of both L1 and L2 (Mourssi, 2013). Accordingly, passive structures lacking the auxiliaries were neither favored nor adopted by advanced learners, even though these surface structures differ between Arabic and English. Thus, based on the cited evidence above and in line with the predictions of the FTFA hypothesis, it is plausible to observe similarities in the derivation of passives between English and Arabic. Due to such similarities, beginner learners tend to transfer their L1 knowledge to the TL, leading to the adoption of a surface structure that lacks an auxiliary. Hence, in the current study, a majority of beginners opted for the construction “The translation finished” to exemplify the passive form.

Additionally, this portion of the current results confirms the line of research regarding the acquisition of the English copula in past and present tenses by Arabic L2 learners, as discussed by Steiner (2019). Steiner’s experimental work suggests that the omission of the copula in Arabic learners’ English speech is more likely due to performance-based factors than to representational deficits. Building upon this proposal, the present investigation provides further support by specifically examining the acquisition of passive voice constructions. Notably, the advanced learners in the study did not exhibit a similar pattern of omitting the auxiliary *be* in passive constructions, indicating a divergence in their language production compared to the beginner learners.

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This study assessed the challenges in the acquisition of passive construction. In the case of Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English, the current findings are consistent with the assertions that passive constructions are challenging to acquire (Alasfour, 2018; Khalil, 1988; Lghzeel & Radzuan, 2020; Shamsan & Attayib, 2015). Moreover, this study supports the findings of other research that the absence of the auxiliary *be* poses a hindrance for Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English (Adler, 2012; Alasfour, 2018; Lghzeel & Radzuan, 2020). The current findings also confirm the prevalence of a preference among beginner learners for language structures that lack an auxiliary construction. These findings also contrast those of previous studies that found that errors arising from the L1 tended to overshadow errors caused by the L2 in the acquisition of passive construction by Arabic-speaking learners (Lghzeel & Radzuan, 2020). Among the participants in this study, errors in accurate tense usage and proper conjugation outweighed those reflecting the structure of the L1.

6. Conclusion

This study tested the FTFA hypothesis, concentrating on the acquisition of passive voice constructions by Arabic-speaking learners of English as a second language. The participants' language production and comprehension of passive constructions were analyzed, demonstrating that beginner learners tended to apply their knowledge of passive constructions in Arabic to their interpretation of English passive sentences. This preference for structures lacking the auxiliary *be* aligns with their familiar grammatical patterns. The significant association found among beginner learners supports the predictions of the FTFA hypothesis and is consistent with prior research. This study thus makes a meaningful contribution to the existing literature by shedding light on how Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English acquire passive constructions.

7. Limitations

Despite its merits, this study is subject to some limitations. There were relatively few beginners in this study due to a lack of participants who had successfully completed their proficiency tests. Since prior exposure to the target language is thought to influence the initial state of language learners (Grüter, 2006), I sought to utilize proficiency tests as a further indicator. However, since the concept of "initial state" is complex and multifaceted, a single test

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of proficiency may not be able to capture it accurately. In addition to the small number of participants, the tasks used in this study were relatively limited in scope, as participants were confined to predetermined questions. The use of more naturalistic methods such as a picture-description task may contribute to greater understanding. Another limitation of our understanding is the narrow range of constructions attested. The scope of the investigation should be expanded to include a wider range of passive constructions.

8. Future Directions

This study provides insights into the acquisition of short passive constructions among Arabic L2 learners of English, highlighting the need for future research to explore additional aspects in this area. One area of interest is the acquisition of the by-phrase in passive constructions and the concept of markedness as elaborated by Eckman (1977). Further investigation is required to comprehend how Arabic-speaking L2 learners of English navigate the subtle aspects of marking agency and identifying the agent in passive sentences, which differ between Arabic (lacking) and English (optional). It is advisable to examine the extent to which understanding the markedness of the by-phrase in English can provide insights into this dynamic, considering the relationship between markedness and the FTFA hypothesis.

[i] Agree:

"An uninterpretable feature F on a syntactic object Y is checked when Y is in a c-command relation with another syntactic object Z which bears a matching feature" (Adger, 2003, p. 134).

[ii] Finite T refers explicitly to the functional head that carries tense features, while TP refers to the larger phrase that includes the finite T and its associated constituents within the tense domain of a sentence (Adger, 2003).

[iii] According to Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG) principles, the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) states that "a finite tense constituent T must be extended into a TP projection containing a subject" (Radford, 2004, p. 45).

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