

## Modern Standard Arabic interference in Algerian English as a foreign language students' writings

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### Suggested Citation:

Lamri, C. & Cherifi, A. (2020). Modern Standard Arabic interference in Algerian English as a foreign language students' writing. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 10(2), 94–100.

Received September 27, 2019; revised January 23, 2020; accepted May 10, 2020.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc Prof Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University, Thailand.

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### Abstract

Linguistic interference is a phenomenon which occurs when the learner's knowledge of his/her first language or mother tongue interferes with his/her knowledge of the language that is being learnt. This problem is recurrent among foreign-language learners. A case in point: in Algeria, Modern Standard Arabic interferes with English in students' oral and written production. Hence, stylistic errors are reproduced by learners because their knowledge of the foreign language has been established incorrectly. Therefore, this article will explore the types of errors stemming from linguistic interference made in written English by pupils at Bouazza Miloud High School in Tlemcen, Algeria. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of first-year pupils' written production has revealed various syntactic, lexical and semantic errors. These findings underline the need for a detailed analysis in order to propose pedagogical solutions, such as using authentic materials and a focus on reading, that will enable students to write correctly and coherently.

**Keywords:** Modern standard Arabic, language interference, negative transfer, interlingual errors, writing

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## 1. Introduction

Developing linguistic and cultural competence in a new language is a different process from first-language acquisition. In second- or foreign-language acquisition, the process is more complicated as learners already have knowledge of their first language (Hulya, 2009). This knowledge of their first language interferes with the process of learning another. This is referred to as language transfer, which has been defined as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that the student has previously acquired (Odlin, 1989; Shatz, 2017). These differences can either facilitate or hinder language learning; therefore, language transfer maybe considered as either positive or negative. Positive transfer occurs when both the native language and the target language share the same form (Tavakoli, 2012). Negative transfer, on the other hand, describes the use of native language patterns or rules leading to language errors or inappropriate forms in the target language. These errors are studied using the error analysis approach. In fact, scholars (Al-Khresheh, 2010; Brown, 1980; James, 1998; Richard, 1974) have recognised two sources of errors, which they have labelled as intralingual and interlingual errors. Intralingual errors occur when the second language is the cause of the difficulty, while interlingual errors occur due to the interference between the first and target languages.

Concerning the context of our study, Algeria is a multilingual country with a constitution that acknowledges only Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Tamazight as official languages, while the remaining, widely-used varieties of language and dialects remain unrecognised by law. Algerians' daily verbal interaction is through dialectal Arabic, French and Berber (Tamazight, Tachalhiyt, Shawiya and Tuareg). However, the Algerian academic curriculum offers instruction through several languages, starting with MSA and continuing into Tamazight, French and English. After Algeria became independent in 1962, MSA was imposed as the main language in education, but French was present in all spheres of everyday life and was used as a second language within certain public institutions, including universities. With the emergence of the globalisation phenomenon in the 1990s, Algeria began to readapt its socioeconomic policy and significant changes were made in the organisation of workplace systems. English has increasingly become a requirement for specific groups in Algerian society that communicate with specific purposes. In this context, Miliani (2003, p. 13) states that 'the introduction of English is being heralded as the magic solution to all possible ills including economic, technological and educational ones'. In fact, Arabic, French and English are all considered components of today's Algerians society. The national government, being aware of this reality, has tried to find a balance between the national and foreign languages in the educational system by introducing each language at an appropriate level. At the same time, the authorities have attributed more importance to the English language as it is considered a tool that helps to integrate Algerians into a worldwide process.

The Algerian educational system is multilingual, supporting the learning of four different languages: Arabic, French, English and Berber. Because of cultural and historical reasons, greater emphasis is placed on Arabic. However, knowledge of these languages might sometimes interfere with learning the others, leading to either positive or negative language transfer. According to Lado (cited in Thyab, 2016), those elements that are similar to a student's native language will be simple for him/her, while those elements that are different will be more difficult. Since English and MSA are from different language families (Germanic and Semitic) with different structures, negative transfer is more likely to occur between them, leading to interlingual errors. A case in point: Algerian EFL learners, in their written English, make a variety of interlingual errors, as they transfer their knowledge of the MSA writing style to English. According to Nunan (as cited in Sabbah, 2015), when the rules of the second language are not the same as in the first, errors are likely to occur as a result of interference between them. Arabic and English have different writing styles. The most fundamental characteristic of Arabic and all the Semitic languages is the tri-consonantal roots: Arabic consists of root consonants carrying meaning, while vowels are secondary. However, in the English language, vowels are primary and they play the role of the phoneme. Arabic is written from right to left, while English is written from left to

right. Arabic has multiple possible word orders [subject-verb-object (SVO), verb-subject-object (VSO), verb-object-subject (VOS)], while English has only one word order, which is SVO. Arabic does not attach much importance to punctuation marks; as a result, Arabic includes longer sentences; however, English sentences are shorter and punctuation is a very important feature in its written form. English nouns have two number formations—singular and plural—whereas Arabic nouns have three number formations: singular, dual and plural. The plural formation is also divided into two kinds: the sound plural (masculine and feminine) and broken plural (Attia, 2004). English uses capital letters for proper nouns (countries, lakes, etc.); however, capitalisation does not exist in Arabic. The Arabic language has a specific type of sentence called the verbless sentence, i.e. a sentence that does not feature a verb (inchoative or predicate), but English sentences cannot exist without a verb.

Extensive research has already been conducted in the area of native language interference with the target language (Bhela, 1999). This research, however, is different because it does not explore the effect of the native language, which is Algerian Arabic (AA) (or Berber in some cases), on the target language, but rather the effect of MSA, which is sometimes considered the pupils' third language, on English, which is considered the second foreign language in Algeria. The reason for choosing English instead of the first foreign language (French) is due to the significant role that English currently plays in Algerian society. Hence, the main concern of this study is to investigate the negative language transfer which occurs among EFL learners due to the interference from MSA. The researchers use the approach of error analysis, which provides them with both qualitative and quantitative data about the types of errors, as well as those most common among first-year EFL pupils in an Algerian high school. As a result, solutions might be suggested to help avoid those errors in written English and to improve students' writing in this global language.

## **2. Method and tools**

### **2.1. Participants**

This exploratory case study was constructed using two categories of informants that represent the target group. The first sample consisted of a whole class of first-year pupils registered at Bouazza Miloud-Algeria High School. The lists of first-year pupils were established in an alphabetical order and distributed across the classes proportionally. Hence, a systematic sampling method was adopted for class selection that would represent all first-year pupils. The control class consisted of 40 pupils whose ages vary between 15 and 17. We have focused on first-year pupils because they have studied English for 4 years in middle school and they are supposed to have reached an intermediate level in the language: i.e. they have acquired the linguistic and strategic knowledge needed to produce correct English without any language interference.

The second sample included all (four) of the teachers of English for the first year in the same school. The teachers were important informants in this study as they gave their opinions regarding the difficulties their pupils encountered while writing in English, defined the types of linguistic interference errors that were most common among the learners and provided some potential solutions for this phenomenon.

### **2.2. Instruments and procedures**

Two research instruments were used to gather information about the influence of Arabic on learning English: the pupils' written texts and a semi-structured interview with the teachers. Pupils were asked to narrate within a paragraph their experiences or their views regarding some selected topics, such as exams management, favourite sports or healthy diets. These topics were selected on the grounds that they were not highly emotional and that the content was culturally neutral. The pupils were free to verbalise their thoughts for thirty minutes. The compiled performances were then

assessed against standardised measures of written language. The analysis was based on measuring the syntactic, semantic and lexical errors reproduced by pupils due to linguistic and cultural interferences.

Regarding the teachers, the semi-structured interview was designed in observance of three rubrics. The aim of the first section was to identify the status of the English language in Algeria. The second was intended to define the difficulties faced by pupils due to negative transfer, and to identify which type was most frequently observed. The last part invited suggestions as to how the issue being studied might be overcome. Participants' answers were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively following a sequential explanatory design with both methods employed to clarify the observed issue. Statistical data then helped the researchers to quantify the answers given by pupils and teachers, while the qualitative method was used to gather opinions and perceptions from the respondents as to how and why MSA interferes with pupils' written English.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Analysis of pupils' written production

Pupils' papers were carefully analysed to extract the errors committed, which were then classified in terms of three levels of analysis: syntactic (prepositions, singular/plural, articles, word order, coordination, copula omission), lexical and semantic errors.

##### 3.1.1. Syntactic errors

The analysis of pupils' written production has shown that syntactic errors are very frequent. Those errors are due to the linguistic interference from MSA in English. It was observed that the 40 pupils committed different types of errors, such as subject-verb agreement and the inappropriate use of tense. In this study, we reported only inaccuracies related to prepositions, singular and plural forms, article word order, coordination and copula omission because we consider that, at that level of study, pupils are aware of the existing grammatical differences.

##### 3.1.1.1. Prepositions

English prepositions are much more important in number than in Arabic. Commonly used Arabic prepositions can take on different meanings according to the verb in the sentence. Examples include 'from/of', مِنْ; 'to/toward', إِلَى; 'until/up to', حَتَّى; 'by/with/at/in', بِ; and 'in/on', فِي. In the papers submitted by the pupils, we noticed that this variety creates confusion and prepositional errors are very frequent (185 errors).

1. 'you have a problem **in** the period of exams' instead of '**during** the period of exams'
2. 'the most favourite sport **in** the teenagers' instead of '**among** the teenagers'
3. 'all them' instead of 'all **of** them'

##### 3.1.1.2. Singular and plural

In English, the plural of a noun is usually made by adding 's' to the singular form; however, in Arabic there are three major forms of the plural noun: sound masculine plural, جَمْعٌ مُذَكَّرٌ سَالِمٌ; sound feminine plural, جَمْعٌ مُؤَنَّثٌ سَالِمٌ; and broken plural, جَمْعٌ تَكْسِيرٌ. As in English, we add a suffix to the singular form for the sound plurals, but the structure of the singular form changes in the broken plural formation. However, the analysis in this study revealed that pupils confuse the singular and plural forms, incorrectly adding or omitting the 's' as a result. In fact, there were 60 errors observed within this sub-category.

1. 'football is the most popular **games**' instead of '**game**'
2. '**this** feelings are normal' instead of '**those** feelings'
3. 'it does not contain **fruit** or vegetable instead of '**fruits**'

### 3.1.1.3. Articles

The equivalent of the English definite article 'the' in Arabic is 'al/ال', e.g., 'the door', الباب. Concerning the English indefinite articles 'a/an', there is no corresponding prefix used in Arabic, but a nunation (تنوين, 'nun'/و) is added to the last letter of the word, e.g., 'a door', باب. Here, negative language transfer between MSA and EFL creates a problem with definite and indefinite articles (122 errors).

1. 'a number of informants' instead of 'the number of informants'
2. 'it is not healthy for body' instead of 'for **the** body'
3. 'they are a good losers' instead of 'good losers'

### 3.1.1.4. Word order

Arabic has multiple possible word orders (SVO, VSO, VOS), while English has only one (SVO). The analysis of the pupils' papers showed that they made errors in the word order due to the interference from MSA syntax. The following examples illustrate this interference:

1. 'all we know that the football...' instead of 'we all know...'
2. 'fast food teaches habits **impolite** and causes illnesses' instead of '**impolite** habits'

### 3.1.1.5. Coordinating conjunctions

The most frequently used coordinating conjunction in Arabic is و ('WA') and its equivalent in English is 'and'. WA (و) can be used without limits to connect items and its use does not imply ordering. As a result, coordinating conjunctions in English seemed to be a source of confusion for the pupils, i.e. the over use of 'and' in English reproducing the use of WA (و) in Arabic. Ninety-eight errors were counted among the pupils' written examples.

'You should prepare for the exam in group **and** be as relaxed as possible **and** eat very good in breakfast **and** finally have a good night sleep.'

### 3.1.1.6. Copula omission

The term 'copula' refers to a linking verb that has no independent meaning. In English, the main copular verb is *be*, but in Arabic there is no corresponding verb. Therefore, Arab foreign language learners have a tendency to omit copulas. In our case, 22 errors were noticed, as illustrated in the following examples:

1. 'who being anxious' instead of 'who **is** being'
2. 'they good losers' instead of 'they **are** good losers'
3. 'should not stressed' instead of 'should not **be** stressed'

### 3.1.2. Lexical errors

It is widely known that word choice can affect the whole meaning of a sentence. Foreign language learners tend to select inappropriate words because of the influence of their mother tongue on their target language vocabulary. Negative language transfer from MSA to English leads to lexical errors among the first-year secondary school pupils in our study. These are some examples of the pupils' lexical errors:

1. '**he** causes pain' instead of '**it**'
2. 'eat very **good**' instead of '**well**'
3. 'the most **like** sport' instead of '**popular**'

### 3.1.3. Semantic errors

Semantic errors can be observed when sentences do not make sense. This can occur when a literal translation takes place from the mother tongue into the second or foreign language. There were 25 semantic errors committed by the pupils, including the following examples:

1. 'but in the truth' = لكن في الحقيقة ('but in fact')
2. 'the side of health' = الجانب الصحي ('the health aspect')
3. 'it will come to bad' = سيعود بالسوء ('there will be bad consequences')

The above examples illustrate the different types of language errors reproduced by informants in the study. It is clear, from the statistical data, that the syntactic errors are the most frequent type, followed by the lexical and semantic ones. In order to verify the reliability of the research instrument – i.e. the pupils' papers – and to check the validity of the collected data, it is important to have another source of information: namely, teachers' views regarding the issue of the interference of MSA with English in the Algerian context.

### **3.2. Analysis of the semi-structured interview with teachers of English**

The results demonstrate that the four English teachers at Bouazza Miloud High School have a Master's degree either in didactics or language sciences together with a considerable teaching experience (between 5 and 16 years), which enables them to analyse their students' pedagogical needs. All the informants agree on the importance of English in Algerian society owing to the opening up of the Algerian market to the world economy. However, they reported that the dominant language outside the classroom is AA, followed by the French language. By contrast, MSA is not present outside the classrooms except in a few situations, like official institutions or in the mosques, and English is not used at all except within academic and some professional settings.

In addition, all English teachers reported that their pupils tend to apply their knowledge of MSA when learning English. As a result, they commit interlingual errors repeatedly when they communicate in English in general and when they write in particular. Teachers' categorisations of the frequent errors reproduced by their pupils are similar to the results obtained in the analysis of the written productions themselves. That is to say, the four teachers declared that syntactic errors were the most frequent of the main recurring written errors, followed by the semantic and lexical errors or vice versa, because of the interference from MSA and AA.

## **4. Discussion**

This study focused on exploring the syntactic, lexical and semantic inaccuracies reproduced by EFL pupils in an Algerian secondary school. The quantitative analysis of pupils' written production has shown that linguistic interference errors are very frequent. Pupils showed a lack of knowledge regarding the use of prepositions. They displayed a tendency to select inappropriate prepositions, since in English the same preposition serves several different functions, while in Arabic each preposition serves a specific one. Moreover, singular and plural errors also occur as a consequence of linguistic interference; the pupils add or delete the plural 's' randomly because English and MSA have different rules. Errors regarding the article can be explained by the fact that English has two types of articles: definite and indefinite; Arabic on the other hand has only one, which is the definite. For that reason, pupils either add or delete articles without proper attention. The results obtained support Thyab's (2016) view that Arab learners of English tend to make errors when they try to use the article system in ESL/EFL. Furthermore, pupils showed problems with word order in their written production because English has one-word order, which is SVO and the opposite of Arabic's multiple versions. Concerning the coordinating conjunctions used in the pupils' papers, an overuse of 'and' was observed: a process that is allowed in Arabic but not in written English. Finally, the last type of error in this category, copula omission, is due to the fact that it does not exist in Arabic. In addition, semantic errors were made due to the literal translation from Arabic to English, and the lexical errors are the result of poor word choices. All the results obtained were confirmed by the English teachers in the same school. In brief, the high frequency of errors made by the pupils in their written English is due to the drastic differences between Arabic and English (Sabbah, 2015), so it is important to raise learners' awareness regarding the existing linguistic and sociocultural variations.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, Algerian EFL pupils face problems when writing in English owing to the negative language transfer from MSA to English. They tend to carry over linguistic and cultural knowledge from the previously acquired language and apply it to the target language. To avoid negative interference, it is necessary to expose the learners to the target language culture. A full immersion into English culture via watching movies, listening to authentic interactions and reading books may help to contextualise linguistic items correctly and effectively. Moreover, poetic texts can and should be actively used when teaching syntax because prosaic sentences provide different structural variants in a cadenced way that is easy to remember. Finally, English teachers can test the repeated reading strategy in order to increase learners' sight recognition of words and phrases. These pedagogical suggestions can be tested in order to improve awareness among pupils of the existing differences between MSA and English languages.

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