SLT in Wish Sentences of Iraqi Postgraduate Students of a Malaysian University

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Abstract

This research explores the Syntactical Language Transfer (SLT) process of Iraqi postgraduate students in UKM when expressing wishing sentences in English. Data were collected from thirty Iraqi postgraduate students in UKM from different faculties. This research is qualitative in nature in that data was collected through close ended interviews where participants were asked to answer three particular questions: the first is how to express his/her wish in future, the second is how to express his/her wish in the present time, whereas the third is how to express wish in the past. Data was collected by audio-record these answers using high quality recorder in order to ensure fine quality of recordings. These recordings later were transformed into textual data and triangulated for analysis using Error Analysis approach as proposed by Corder (1976). Results indicated that 33.3 % of the answers regarding the first type of wishing formula (i.e. express future wishing) were syntactically wrong. While in the second type of wishing formula (i.e. express present wishing) 50 % of the answers were syntactically wrong. The third formula (i.e. express wishing in past) was found to be the most problematic for Iraqi students in UKM where 90 % of participants had serious syntactical errors in this type of formula. The research concluded that negative language transfer is the source of errors in the usage of "wish" among Iraqi students in UKM.

Keywords: Syntactic Language Transfer; Source of errors; Wishing Formula; Negative Transfer; Error Analysis,

1. Introduction

When a person becomes familiar with two languages, these two languages cannot stay separate and they affect one another in different ways and process (e.g. language transfer, borrowing, code switching, etc.) (Odlin, 2001). The phenomenon of language transfer had attracted many researchers in applied linguistic area over the last century particularly in the area of second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g. Dulay, Burt, & Krashan, 1982; Kellerman, 1977; Krashen, 1982). According to Oldin (1989) language transfer or cross-linguistic influence in SLA is viewed as effects of the first language or a previous learned language (L1) on the acquisition or use of second or additional language (L2). In this process, learners' previous linguistic knowledge influences the acquisition of new language in contrastive way (Doughty and Williams, 1998).

SLA scholars had distinguished two types of language transfer the first is positive while the second is negative (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Positive transfer includes cases in which correct target language structures are produced because of source language influence. While negative transfer results in incorrect target language structure under the influence of the source language.

Understanding the effects and the process of language transfer and the vulnerability of different linguistic subsystem (i.e. lexical, semantics, syntactic, orthographic, etc.) in the target language acquisition and development is one of the key issues in SLA instruction. This valuable knowledge can lead to awareness of the target language so that language learners will pay much attention to certain language forms and structure. Moreover, instructors and curriculum developers can benefits from this knowledge generated to improve second language learning and maximize language learners potential in achieving high levels of language proficiency.

2. Literature Review

Literature in the 21st century demonstrated that language transfer is a contributing factor in SLA and development. For instance, many researchers argued through their researches that language transfer has a variable effect on different linguistic subsystem (i.e. lexical, semantics, orthography, discourse and pragmatic). For instance, Marian and Kaushanskaya argued that language transfer is more evident in the semantic subsystem, while Hulk and Muller (2000) argued that language transfer is more evident in the syntactic subsystem.

Lexical transfer that could result in the lexical borrowing of phonological and morphological or orthographical adopted words from the source language into the target language has always been an issue among Arab speakers of English (Swalmeh, 2013). For instance, Swalmeh (2013) demonstrated through empirical study that Arab speakers of English negatively transfer the

phoneme /b/ into their target language in words which consists the phoneme /p/. This phonological negative transfer resulted from the fact that Arabic language system does not have such phoneme in its sound system. Therefore, speakers tend to employ their phonemic source system into their target system in a process that negatively affects the lexical system of their target language.

Albadawi (2012) identify the common phonetic, morphological and syntactic errors committed by 20 Saudi native Arabic-speaking learners of English during speaking tasks using Corder's (1967) and Dulay's (1982) descriptive approach towards error analysis. Results of this study shows that the most common phonetic, morphological and syntactic errors were respectively substitution of the consonants /f/ for /v/ and /p/ for /b/ and the vowel /ə/ for / ɔ/, /ə/ for /ʊ/ and /ɛ/ for /ɪ/. Moreover, lack of subject agreement, erroneous use of preposition, and erroneous addition and deletion of certain auxiliaries were among the errors identified in this study.

Diab (2008) examined through error analysis approach 73 English essays written by Lebanese learners of English at the American University of Beirut. Results of this study show that participants' mother tongue (i.e. Arabic) linguistic structure had considerably affected the English writing structure of these Lebanese students on the grammatical, lexical, semantic, and syntactic levels. In syntactic errors results show that participants committed various errors in word order, coordination, and omission of copula.

Moreover, Abushihab, El-Omari and Tobat (2011) investigated the syntactic language transfer errors in the writing of 62 Arab students from different nationalities including Iraqis. Results revealed that students commit various negative transfer errors in grammar marked cases. For example, the majority of Arab students tend to employ the article "the" in case if the equivalent in Arabic language to "ال" exist in their L1. Furthermore, Abushihab et al. (2011) found that Arab speakers of English face various and serious difficulties in English tenses. These difficulties particularly take place when there is a difference between time and verb form.

In this regard, Al-Noori, Al-Shamary and Yasin (2015) examined the frequency of subject-verb agreement errors among 30 Iraqi secondary school students in Malaysia in order to explore the prevalent type of errors and the causes of such errors by adopting task and questionnaire as data collection instruments. It was found that subject-verb agreement errors are frequent among Iraqis in that the verb found to be the most contributors to the subject-verb agreement errors. These errors were mainly due to the negative transfer of first language linguistic structure to the second language linguistic structure production.

Abushihab, El-Omari and Tobat (2011), investigate and classify the syntactic errors in the writing of 62 students in Department of English literature and translation at Alzaytooneh private university in Jordan. Results show that the following syntactic errors were the most problematic for Jordanians namely, morphological errors, articles, verbs, active and passive and tenses. However the highest error recorded in this study were the tenses errors in that Jordanian negatively transfer their Arabic linguistic verb structure into their target language production (e.g. simple past instead of present perfect, simple present instead of present perfect, etc.).

Similar study conducted by Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) investigated the Jordanian students' writing errors. Results found that tense errors are the most frequent ones committed by Jordanian learners of English. Researchers argued that this type of errors take place due to the fact that Arabic language has three tenses only. Therefore participants tend to commit negative language transfer whenver they try to produce tenses in English language.

AbiSamra (2003) analysed the errors committed by 10 Arabic speakers in their English writing discourse in order to find out the type of errors that these 10 students in their 9th grade commit while they are writing their assigned essays in school. Results of this study revealed that one third of students' errors resulted from interlanguage factors (i.e. the effect of mother tongue on second language production). Moreover, results of this study revealed that the highest of errors (35.09 %) that these students commit were under syntactical errors particularly tense errors.

Muftah and Rafik-Galea (2013) analyzed the errors of present simple tense among adult Arab English learners where this study focused on the errors of third person singular present tense agreement morpheme (3sg). The findings suggest that adult Arab English language learners seem to have difficulties mastering the use of the 3sg due to first language (L1) interference.

Al-Buainain (2010) analysed 40 students' exam scripts of the first writing course in Qatar University. This study adopted errors analysis method or technique in order to find out the most common subsystem errors that students committed during their writing exams. Result of this study revealed that the highest errors subsystem is the syntactical errors particularly verbs and tenses. Analysis revealed that students misuse the verb tenses in English due to substitution of one tense for another. Moreover. These errors resulted from negative transfer (i.e. interference according to Selinker, 1969) from Arabic that has different concepts of time.

As the above disussion demsotrated, although various studies were conducted in context of Arab second language acqusition addressed the syntactical errors that writers or speakers commit in their spoken or writing tasks (e.g. Swalmeh, 2013; Abushihab, El-Omari and Tobat, 2011;

Albadawi, 2012; Diab, 2008; Al-Noori, Al-Shamary and Yasin, 2015; Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali, 2000), few studies found in literature addressed the syntactical errors that Iraqi students commit in both written and spoken tasks (e.g. Muftah and Rafik-Galea, 2013; AbiSamra, 2003). Moreover, none of these studies found in literature as far as the researcher is aware had addressed the issue of wishing in English among Arab speakers in general and Iraqi speakers in particular. Therefore, this study was conducted in order to fill the gap in literature by exploring the Syntactical Language Transfer (SLT) process of Iraqi postgraduate students in UKM when expressing wishing sentences in English.

The researcher argued that when Iraqi speakers of English intend to formulate a "wish" sentence they might encounter such difficulties since the main problem of the usage of "wish" is that there is no correspondence between the form of the verb and time references.

This concern stemmed from the fact that both Arabic and English language have different syntactic construction. For example, in Arabic language, the words "Laytani" and "Atamana" are almost equivalent and they can be used interchangeably without any significant difference in the meaning. However, there is a huge difference when they come to their usage and structure. Let us consider the following examples:

1. Laytani   osafer   ghadan

   I wish   I travel   tomorrow

2. Laytani   addroso   fe aljamia'a alaan

   I wish   I am studying   at the university now

3. Laytani   darastu   fe aljamia'a qabal sanawat

   I wish   I studied   in University before years

The above examples are distinctive proof of the difference in "wish" usage between the two languages (i.e. Arabic and English). In that the same expression of wish "Laytani" could be followed by the present tense "osafer" to express futurity action as in example (1), or could be followed by present continuous "addroso" to express present wish as in example (2), and could be followed by past tense "darastu" to express the wish in the past time as in example (3). Accordingly, the researcher had touched the need to explore the issue of "wishing" among Iraqi students in UKM in order to discover what type of language transfer do these participants apply when they forge their wishing in English language.

4. Significant of Research

By exploring the SLT process of the usage of "wish" among Iraqi students in UKM, the outcome of this research can be very helpful for Iraqi students at first place as this study can spot their syntactical errors particularly in the way they forge their wishing sentences in English so that they can pay more attention to these errors in future. Moreover, in second place, other researchers also can benefits from this research as they can address this problem in future research with recommendations on how to solve these linguistic problems.

From pedagogical perspective, the outcome of this study can also help ESL curriculum developer in Iraqi educational system to address this linguistic problem and thus modify their curriculum with pedagogical solutions on how to elevate this problem among Iraqi learners of English.

5. Research Question

- How do Iraqi postgraduate students in UKM express their wishing sentences?

6. Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were randomly selected from the pool of Iraqi students in UKM. 30 students were selected from different faculties (e.g. faculty of social sciences, faculty of information system, faculty of engineering).

7. Methodology

In order to address the above research question of how do Iraqi postgraduate students in UKM express their wishing sentences, this research was approached qualitatively. That is, the researcher had employed one-on-one interview where in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time (Creswell, 2012). These interviews were closed-ended in type where participants were asked to answer three particular questions: the first is how to express his/her wish in future. The second is about how to express his/her wish in the present time, whereas the third is how to express wish in the past.

For example, if participants wish to forge promise to express future he/she should use the "to infinitive" or "would" in the first sentence since these two ways are used when we want to talk about situation we are not happy about and we want it to be changed. While, if she/he wants to forge wish express nonfactual situation in the present, they should use the "simple past". But if he/she wants to express regret about the non-occurrence of the situation in the past, they should use "past perfect".

These questions were asked directly to participants without prearrangement between the researcher and participants in order to collect spontaneous and real answers. Meanwhile the researcher audio-recorded the participants' responses using a high quality voice recorder to ensure fine quality of the results obtained. Thereafter, these audio-recordings were transcribed manually and then triangulated for analysis using Error Analysis approach as proposed by Corder (1976) of identifying, describing, and finding the source of errors generated.

8. Data Analysis and Discussion

Thirty recordings were collected that consisted of ninety answers from different participants in the study. In the first question on "how to express your wish in future", 33.3 % of the answers were wrong in that 8 participants used "will" as in the following excerpts:

1. I wish I will go to US
2. I wish I will finish my study from UKM

And 2 participants used "the simple present" as in the following excerpts:

1. I wish I find a job when I graduate
2. I wish I go to UK next semester

As discussed earlier, if participants wish to forge promise to express future, he/she should use the "to infinitive" or would" in the first sentence since these two ways are used when we want to talk about situation we are not happy about and we want it to be changed. However, as data analysis shown 33.3 % of participants committed errors in this type of wishing formula. The researcher argued that this could be related to negative language transfer in that Arabic language employ simple present form with the verb "Layta" or "atamana" as the following:

1. Wish-present-he   stop-present-he   preposition-talking layta-ni

    ara-hu   gadan

    Wish-present-I   see-present-him   tomorrow

    (I wish I see him tomorrow)

2. Laytahu   yatawaqafu   an alkalam

    (I wish he stops talking)

In excerpt 1 above, the present form "ara" is used to express a wish in future. So there is a very strong semantic tie between expressing "wish" in the future in both languages (i.e. Arabic and English). In excerpt 2 above, "Laytahu yatawaqafu an alkalam" is almost equivalent to the English sentence " I wish he would stop talking". That is, in both sentences, speakers talk about situation

they are not happy about and they want it to be changed. In other words, speakers in the above excerpts employed present tense to express future wish in their native language so that they generalized this role and apply it for target language (i.e. English).

Furthermore, when participants were asked to express their wishes in present time, 50 % of the participants' answered were wrong. That is, in most cases participants employed simple present or present progressive instead of simple past as the following excerpts demonstrated:

1. I wish I am rich

2. I wish I am living in Singapore

Participants seem to negatively transfer the role of their first language (i.e. Arabic) and apply it to their target language (i.e. English). That is, to express the same idea in Arabic speakers would say the following:

1. Atamana   an akun   gannyan

    Wish-present   that be-present-I   rich

    (I wish I am rich)

In examining the third type of wishing formula, results show that this type of wishing formula was the most problematic case for Iraqi students in UKM. That is, 90 % of participants were not able express his/her wish in the past. In most cases, the participants employed either simple past or past progressive instead of past perfect. The following excerpts demonstrated these errors in details:

1. I wish I went to UK

2. I wish I was working that time

Participants in excerpt 1 and 2 seem to negatively transfer the wishing formula from Arabic into their target language. This in turn resulted in various errors in this type of wishing formula. That is, if participants wish to express the same expression in Arabic they would say:

1. Laytani   thahabtu   illa   UK

   Wish-present   go-past-I   to   UK

   (I wish I went to UK)

In the above wishing formula, it seems that participants negatively transfer the role of wishing from Arabic into their target language by using the simple past tense instead of past perfect. The above results for the three types of wishing formula demonstrated that Iraqi students in UKM are not aware of the difference between Arabic and English language and they often apply their knowledge of their native language (i.e. Arabic) to forge wishing sentences in their target language (i.e. English). In this regard, Raven (1971) argued that learners' native language played a particular role

in the formation of the second language. Moreover, Odlin (2001) argued that if the learners of the second language keep thinking in their first language, they will keep employing their first language as a reference point to deal with the second.

The result of this study is in line with other research done in this area. However, scholars had examined different languages rather than Arabic. For example, Odlin (1997) through empirical study had reported that Spanish learners of English delete the verb "to be" in English sentences since Spanish language does not have verb 'to be". For example, "he is smart" normally articulated by Spanish learners of English as " he smart". These types of errors are attributed to negative transfer in syntactic level from first to second language. The results of this study demonstrated that language transfer is the source of errors in the usage of "wish" among Iraqi students in UKM.

9. Conclusion

As discussed above, Iraqi students in UKM were found to commit various syntactic errors in the way of expressing wishing sentences in English whether in expressing future wishing, present wishing, or past wishing. These errors are attributed to structural differences between Arabic and English language in the use of wish formula that in turn resulted with negative transfer in syntactic level from first language into target language.

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