

The background features abstract, overlapping green geometric shapes in various shades, including light lime green, medium green, and dark forest green, creating a modern and dynamic visual effect.

Negative transfer: a case study of undergraduate EFL students at JUST university

Lecturer Huda Yassin Abdulwahid

What is negative transfer?

Negative transfer refers to a phenomenon whereby previously learned knowledge impedes the learning of new knowledge due to differences between them both. This happens when there is ‘mismatch’ between the mother tongue structure and the equivalent target structure. The outcome of such an occurrence will be a deviation from the target norm, what is termed as a ‘negative transfer’ error or ‘mother tongue interference.’

Odlin (1989) defined transfer as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language previously acquired. Therefore, there are different types of transfer which result in either facilitation of the learning process, or in the impediment of it.

Moreover, Theo van Els, et al. (1984) showed that transfer can be either 'Proactive' which refers to the transfer of existing skills onto new skills or 'Retroactive' which refers to the transfer of new skills onto existing skills.

It is noteworthy to highlight that not all errors committed by learners of a new language are due to negative transfer but sometimes they are due to other factors such as learning environment, level of linguistic analysis, ...etc.

The researcher has raised the following hypotheses:

1) There is negative transfer among sophomore English major students at JUST.

2) This transfer is more conspicuous in the following syntactic areas:

Prepositions, word-order, articles, and subject-verb agreement.

The sample:

The sample of this study consists of second year English major students at Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST)- Jordan- in their first semester of the academic year 2008-2009.

The students were given seventeen sentences which were allocated 30 minutes. The sentences are as follows:

- 1) ذهب الولد الى المدرسة.
- 2) اكل الولد التفاحة.
- 3) هذه المدرسة جميلة.
- 4) سنرحل عند غروب الشمس.
- 5) رايت فتاة جميلة جدا بالامس.
- 6) تعرض حسن لحادث سير مرعب بالامس.

- 7) اشتريت كتباً جديدة من مكتبة الجامعة.
- 8) تأسست هذه الكلية عام 1998
- 9) سيقام الحفل يوم الثلاثاء في تمام الساعة الثالثة عصراً.
10. نحن لسنا في المنزل.
- 11) أمسكت بالقلم.
- 12) كتبت عن استراتيجيات التعليم في الجامعات الأردنية.
- 13) صعدت إلى الحافلة.
- 14) يدرس علي في الجامعة

ثق بي. (15)
(16) شربت الماء .
(17) يشرب علي الماء كل صباح

The results:

Seven errors have been identified in different syntactic areas. The errors, with the percentages of students who have found those areas problematic are as follows:

A) Prepositions:

Using wrong prepositions 49%

Deletion of prepositions 2%

B) Articles:

Deletion of articles 16%

Insertion of articles wrongly 34%

C) S-V agreement 10%

D) S-V inversion 2%

E) Deletion of -be- 14%

F) Excessive use of simple present 20%

G) Using active voice instead of passive 15%

Discussion:

Regarding prepositions, one can notice that students consider preposition problems to be the most problematic area. More specifically, the preposition (في) is found to be the most difficult one. This can be attributed to the lack of one-to-one match between prepositions in English and Arabic. In the case of the preposition ((في), not every (في) in Arabic can be correctly translated as “in”. That is (في) has to be translated as “in” with years such as (تأسست في عام) translated as (it was founded in). However, when it is used with places such as university and home, it has to be translated as “at”.

As a result, Arab learners of English as a foreign language are expected to encounter difficulties in using such prepositions. This was evident in the study when students were asked to translate the following sentence

(نحن لسنا في المنزل). Twenty three students out of forty translated it as “in”. The same error was found in (يدرس علي في الجامعة) whereby thirty five students translated the preposition wrongly as “in” instead of “at”.

Two more sentences are problematic in the same sense.

These are (سيقام الحفل يوم الثلاثاء في تمام الساعة الثالثة عصرا) (كتبت عن استراتيجيات التعليم في الجامعات الاردنية) where twenty nine students and nineteen students failed to provide the correct translation for the prepositions (في) respectively.

Conclusions:

The researcher has come up with the following conclusions:

1) Researcher's first hypothesis is clearly confirmed since the influence of the students' native language, Arabic, is clearly apparent with regard to articles and prepositions, less apparent with reference to simple present, passive voice, and V-to-be, and the least apparent in other syntactic areas.

2) Researcher's second hypothesis, however, is partly confirmed since negative transfer is clearly observable at the levels of prepositions and articles but not as that of S-V agreement and the word order.

3) Students depend on their mother tongue to help them in overcoming the obstacles they face in learning any foreign language. Besides, this dependence does not require any kind of proficiency so the lower the students' proficiency level in the target language, the more interlingual errors they tend to make.