

## The Impact of Raising Awareness of Arabic and English Word Order Differences on Arabs' English Use

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### Abstract

English is a language with a rigid word order, whereas Arabic is more flexible. Canonical English word order is often a challenge for users whose first language is flexible. This study explores how Arabic learners transfer their knowledge of Arabic word order styles into the English language, and it compares Arabic learners' use of English word order before and after raising learners' awareness of Arabic and English word order differences. The significance of this study is manifested in its employment of both Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis to determine priorities for efforts. The study employed an action research design to investigate the impact of adapting Galperin's teaching model alongside explicit teaching of differences in Arabic and English word order. Four Arabic English language teachers and 142 Saudi students participated in the present study. The participating students were taking a beginning-level English course at a Saudi university. Through mixed-method approaches, the findings of the pretest and posttest showed that some learners used their knowledge and experience of Arabic standard and slang word order to compose sentences in English. This study concludes that the intervention helps Arabic learners avoid committing word order errors, as the posttest scores are better than the pretest scores at a statistically significant level.

**Keywords:** awareness, contrastive analysis, error analysis, interference errors, teaching word order, typological differences

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## Introduction

The linguistic production of English language learners is influenced either positively or negatively by their First Language (L1) (Bukhari, 2019; Kasper, 1992). Knowledge of previously acquired languages may affect the learning process of another language (Bukhari, 2019). Behaviourists believe that the habits, forms, and patterns of L1 are carried over into another language (Lado, 1957). Odlin (1989) described language transfer as the influence that results from similarities and differences between the target language and previously acquired languages. Language transfer in the process of second language learning is defined as the use of the characteristics of L1 in the acquisition of the target language (Gass & Selinker, 1992). The role of L1 transfer in language learning has long been a controversial issue in applied linguistics. In the 1980s, the role of language transfer in language learning was acknowledged by many researchers, such as Kellerman, Smith, Ringbom, and Odlin (Temime, 2010). According to contrastive analysis hypothesis, language transfer is considered positive when the similarities between the prior language and the target language facilitate the learning process (Weinreich, 2011). Corder (1983) pointed out that learners easily master the target language through positive language transfer when the patterns or syntactic features of L1 and the target language are identical or similar. Language transfer is called 'L1 interference' when the dissimilarities between the prior language and the target language hinder the acquisition process (Odlin, 1989; Ringbom, 1992; Weinreich, 2011). In contrastive analysis approaches, learners' errors are viewed as an outcome of the differences between the two language structures (Temime, 2010). Perkins and Salomon (1992) asserted that it is easier for users of a certain language to learn another syntactically related language than to learn a syntactically unrelated language.

However, these views have been questioned by some scholars because the differences between L1 and the target language do not always highlight particular difficulties in language learning (Grami & Alzughaihi, 2012). Still, many studies reported L1 interference as one of the sources of language learners' errors in syntactic production. For instance, Torrijos (2009) gave an English vocabulary test to Spanish students. The error analysis of the students' answers showed that the Spanish students did well with the English words whose spellings were identical or similar to words in the Spanish language. The syntactic and semantic similarities between some English and Spanish words positively facilitated the learning process. The syntactic properties of English and Arabic languages are different (Hanania & Gradman, 1977; Li & Thompson, 1976; Tomlin, 1986). Temime (2010) investigated the transfer of simple prepositions from Standard Arabic into English by Algerian learners. A fill-in-the-blank test with simple prepositions was given to 30 learners. Contrastive analysis and error analysis approaches were then used to explore types, reasons, and sources of the learners' errors. The results showed that Algerian learners used their knowledge from French, Standard Arabic, and Algerian Arabic to use prepositions in English. Consequently, Algerian learners made some of the same errors caused by the negative transfer from Arabic and French. Al-Jarf (2007) and Grami and Alzughaihi (2012) recommended English language teachers explicitly address differences between Arabic and English to make learners aware of errors they commit due to L1 interference. Igolkina (2018) argued that differences in word order typology between L1 and the target language should be taught explicitly. However, such recommendations of previous studies have not been seriously considered in the actual classroom environment (Grami & Alzughaihi, 2012). When the present study's researcher began to investigate this topic in depth, it became

apparent that not many studies in this area of research had been conducted in the Arabic context. The significant of this study is manifested in its employment of an error analysis and contrastive analysis while filling such a literature gap.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how adapting Galperin's teaching model alongside explicit teaching of differences in Arabic and English word order impacts the learners' skills in using English word order. The main objective of this study is to compare Arabic learners' use of English word order before and after raising learners' awareness of Arabic and English differences in word order. For this objective, the study employed an action research design and proposed two research questions:

- How does Arabic word order influence Arabic learners' skills of composing English sentences?
- Is there any statistically significant difference in the tests' scores before and after raising learners' awareness of Arabic and English differences in word order?

Finding answers for these research questions contributes in proposing suitable recommendations for improving English teaching techniques.

### Literature Review

#### *Contrastive Analysis vs. Error Analysis*

Contrastive Analysis is an approach that aims to make language learning and teaching more effective by determining the cross-linguistic differences in second-language learning. This approach assumes that learners transfer forms of their previously acquired languages to the target language (Lado, 1957). The strong version of Contrastive Analysis claims that difficulties in learning a target language may be predicted by identifying the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and other linguistic differences between L1 and the target language (Schachter, 1974). The weak version of Contrastive Analysis claims that a particular structure in L1 should be analysed if language learners commonly make a specific type of error in constructing a particular structure in the target language (Torrijos, 2009). Contrastive analysis studies claim that errors in the target language can be predicted by identifying the differences between forms and patterns in L1 and the target language. As discussed by Grami and Alzughabi (2012), contrastive analysis studies consist of four common procedures: description of the two languages, selection of a certain item for comparison, identification of areas of difference and similarity, and prediction. The present followed these procedures. Then, it analysed the participants' actual errors in the light of the contrastive analysis predictions.

Traditional contrastive analysis approaches have mainly been criticised because they do not study the actual errors made by language learners (Temime, 2010). As an alternative approach, Error Analysis analyses learners' actual errors and explores the reasons and sources for those errors (Temime, 2010). Error analysis hypothesis claims there are different sources of language learners' errors, such as L1 interference, teaching strategies, learning resources, and developmental progress in acquiring the target language. According to error analysis approaches, there is a distinction between errors and mistakes (Grami & Alzughabi, 2012). Mistakes are tongue slips, whereas errors are systematic and may occur frequently. There are multiple

different error analysis models present in the research. Corder's (1975) error analysis model consists of three phases: data collection, description, and explanation. Ellis's (1996) error analysis model consists of four phases: data collection, classification of errors, analysing each error, and explanation for each type of error (James, 2013). Gass and Selinker's (1994) error analysis model consists of six phases: data collection, identification and classification of errors, quantifying errors, analysing sources of errors, and remediation of errors (Gass, 2017). Error analysis approaches focus on learners' actual errors, but they do not track when learners correctly produce a specific form or when learners avoid using a particular form. The present study employed both Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis to complement each other. It followed Grami and Alzughabi's (2012) contrastive analysis procedures to make predictions. Then, it followed Gass and Selinker's (1994) error analysis model. The predictions made by Contrastive Analysis were checked by the results obtained from Error Analysis. In other words, Contrastive Analysis was used as a part of the explanatory stage in Error Analysis.

### ***Arabs' Errors in English Word Order***

Previous research documented the influence of Arabic language on English language (Bukhari, 2019). This study focuses on word order language transfer from Arabic into English. The notions of 'errors' and 'interference' have long been a controversial issue in studies of World Englishes, which differentiate between errors and variants (Bukhari, 2019). Errors are divergent usages from Anglophone English usages, and they do not have any sociolinguistic or sociocultural justifications in research. Variants are different usages from standard English models and Anglophone English usages, but research could document their sociolinguistic and sociocultural justifications. Research on World Englishes and English as lingua franca has positively described such variants as a purposeful transfer. Based on Kachru's (1992) distinction between errors and variants, Bukhari (2019) described English variants of Saudi users of English, none of which includes Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order. Accordingly, Saudis' misalignments with English SVO word order are viewed as errors resulting from negative language transfer or low language proficiency.

Tomlin (1986) defined word order as the order of subject (S), verb (V), and object (O) in a basic sentence and defined word order typology as the study of distinguishing languages according to the preferred word order employed by each language. Based on these definitions, there are six possible word orders for basic sentences: SVO, VSO, SOV, OVS, VOS, and OSV. Most languages use SVO and SOV word order, though a significant number of languages employ VSO word order. VOS, OSV, and OVS word orders are rare (Tomlin, 1986). Li and Thompson's typology (1976) classified languages into subject-prominent languages, such as English, topic-prominent languages such as Mandarin, both subject- and topic-prominent languages such as Arabic, and neither subject- nor topic-prominent languages such as Tagalog. Subject-prominent languages put the doer of the action first, whilst topic prominent languages put the topic first. English is subject prominent, but Arabic is both subject and topic prominent.

English word order can be a challenging issue for those learners whose L1 word order is more flexible (Igolkina, 2018). English is a rigid SVO word order language, whereas Arabic is more flexible. Arabic arranges elements within sentences according to pragmatics, and the choice between SVO and VSO is related to the context (Al-Jarf, 2007). In general, Arabic users prefer

VSO unless there is a purpose for shifting from VSO to SVO (Abdul-Raof, 2013). Through conducting a translation test and translation projects, Al-Jarf (2007) collected an error corpus of deviant SVO structures. Data were collected from Arabic senior undergraduates at a Saudi university. The findings revealed that Arabic undergraduates encountered serious challenges in English word order. Al-Jarf (2007) recommended English language teachers raise learners' awareness of Arabic and English differences in word order. The present study puts some of these recommendations into practice and utilizes the collected error corpus to capture SVO deviations. In addition, it investigates whether raising awareness of possible word order errors improves Arabic learners' English use.

### ***Raising Awareness of English Word Order***

In the field of English language teaching, the method of teaching grammar is a controversial topic for researchers. Plenty of theories have been proposed to carry out different approaches to teaching grammar and evaluating the language learning process (Andrews, 2007). Despite being an antiquated practice, choosing between explicit and implicit grammar teaching approaches is still a questionable topic for many linguists (Altun & Dincer, 2020; Andrews, 2007; Hammerly, 1975). In explicit grammar teaching, teachers explain the rules directly, provide examples, and give learners the opportunity to practice until the rule is fully acquired (Krashen, 1982; Nazari, 2013; Nunan, 1994). In implicit grammar teaching, teachers bring sentences from authentic texts, and learners deduce the rules without consciousness (Andrews, 2007). Andrews (2007) studied the effects of grammar instruction on 70 school students. The findings showed that explicit instruction is significantly better than implicit in terms of complex structures. Altun and Dincer (2020) compared these two methods in terms of grammar success. A total of 40 intermediate university students participated in their study. The findings revealed that the explicit group made fewer grammar errors than the implicit group. Implicit and explicit teaching methods have been frequently studied in the field of English language teaching, and their advantages and disadvantages have been documented by previous research (Altun & Dincer, 2020). As 'one-size-fits-all' strategy is questioned, and multilingualism frameworks are taken into consideration, Bukhari (2019) argued that choosing a particular teaching approach depends highly on the context. In other words, what suits a particular group in a particular place at a particular time and with a particular purpose may not suit another group with different circumstances and settings.

When it comes to teaching English word order to Arabs, Al-Jarf (2007) and Grami and Alzughaihi (2012) recommended English language teachers explicitly address Arabic and English differences in word order. Traditional English language teaching methods and materials aim at a wider audience than Arabic users. Therefore, the particular differences between English and Arabic word order are not specifically addressed. Belmonte (1999) carried out a qualitative analysis of English compositions written by Spanish students and reported their most common problems concerning word order. Didactic lines of action were suggested to improve students' awareness of English word order. The suggestions include word arrangement and information gap activities. To familiarise students with English word order, Bardovi-Harlig (1990) developed a domino game. Igolkina (2018) discussed difficulties Russians find in English word order. To cope with such difficulties, the use of Galperin's teaching model was proposed. This model consists of four phases: orientation, communicated thinking, dialogical thinking, and acting mentally (Haenen, 2001). The orientation phase provides learners with all the information

necessary for the correct execution of a new action. The communicated thinking phase encourages the learners to think loudly about the new action as they perform it. During the dialogical thinking phase, the action becomes more routine. In the acting mentally phase, the action becomes almost automatic. The present study employed Galperin's teaching model to habituate learners to English word order. To contribute to the automaticity of English word order, Igolkina (2018) suggested specific activities such as rearranging words, use of substitution tables, sentence building activities, transformation exercises, discussion of emphatic word arrangement in English, and speech production with support on given schemes.

### **Methods**

This project aims to compare Arabic learners' use of English word order before and after raising learners' awareness of Arabic and English differences in word order. For this purpose, the study employed an action research design. Such a research design helps in bridging the gap between pedagogical theories and professional practices by improvising current practices.

### ***Participants***

The project employed Quota sampling technique. A total of 142 Saudi students participated in the present study. The students were taking a beginning-level English course at a Saudi university during the first term of the academic year 2021/2022. Students were divided into four groups. Each group was taught by a different Arabic teacher of English. The four teachers volunteered to conduct the intervention.

### ***Research Instruments***

A pretest–posttest design was incorporated to capture changes. Both tests were conducted using Google forms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each test consisted of two parts: a translation section and a jumbled-words section. Each section consisted of two items. In each item, students were asked to categorise each word as a subject, verb, or object and provide an Arabic equivalent or English synonym for it. Because all students were at a beginner level, the tests included only simple positive active declarative sentences. Given the limitedness of tests in data collection or in covering all aspects of the research phenomenon, the conclusion section proposes additional research instruments which can be adopted in future studies.

### ***Research Procedures***

The participants signed information and consent forms. The intervention took 50 minutes per day and lasted for 10 days. Before the intervention process, the teachers were guided to use both Arabic and English languages to directly and explicitly teach Arabic and English differences in word order. In addition, the teachers were guided to discuss with their students anticipated L1 interference errors in word order and employ Galperin's teaching model to habituate learners to English word order. All procedures were exclusively conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants with incomplete answers and semantic errors were excluded, leaving 123 participants included in the present study. Errors in spelling, tense, and subject–verb agreement were neglected as they are not within the interest of the present study. Answers were categorised based on word order styles. SPSS version 23.0 was employed to analyse the data. Percentages, means, degrees of freedom, and standard deviations were used to describe the variables. The

paired t test was conducted to test the variance between pretest and posttest scores. A p value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**Findings**

Table one answers the first research question. Overall, it shows that 65.04% of the pretest participants used SVO style to compose sentences in English, while 15.65% of the participants used VSO, as preferred in standard Arabic. The rest (19.31%) of the participants used OVS and OSV, as used in slang Arabic.

Table 1. *Pretest responses*

Word-order styles in responses	Examples from the data	%Responses to Item 1	%Responses to Item 2 %	%Responses to Item 3 %	%Responses to Item	%Total
SVO	‘Lana prepares the meal’.	60.16	62.6	69.92	67.48	65.04
VSO	‘Cooking Lana food’.	13.01	11.38	17.88	20.33	15.65
OVS	‘the meel made it Lana’.	17.07	17.89	7.32	8.13	12.6
OSV	‘The dishes lanah baiks them’.	9.76	8.13	4.88	4.06	6.71

As shown in Table two, the intervention helped in improving the skill of using English word order, as 77% of the posttest participants used SVO style to compose sentences in English, while 9.55% of the participants used VSO, as preferred in standard Arabic. The rest (13.42%) of the participants used OVS and OSV, as used in slang Arabic.

Table 2. *Posttest responses*

Word-order styles in responses	Examples from the data	%Responses to Item 1	%Responses to Item 2	%Responses to Item 3	%Responses to Item 4	%Total
SVO	‘Ahmed closed the doors’.	71.54	73.17	80.49	82.92	77.03
VSO	‘Cloz Amad doors’.	8.94	7.32	11.38	10.57	9.55
OVS	‘a door Ahemd is cloose it’.	13.01	13.82	4.88	2.44	8.54
OSV	‘the doors ahmd shut it’.	6.51	5.69	3.25	4.07	4.88

As displayed in Table three, there is a statistically significant difference ( $t = -5.49$ ,  $df = 122$ ,  $p > 0.001$ ) between the pretest mean score ( $2.60 \pm 1.82$ ) and the posttest mean score ( $3.08 \pm 1.56$ ).

Table 3. *Statistical significance of the difference between the pretest and posttest scores*

Test Statistics				t-test for Equality of Means			
Test	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p value	Mean Difference
Pretest	123	2.60	1.82	-5.49***	122	0.000	0.48
Posttest	123	3.08	1.56				
*** $p \leq 0.001$							

## Discussion

In line with the studies of Hanania and Gradman (1977), Ouhalla (1994), Al-Jarf (2007), and Temime (2010), this study reveals that Arabic learners transfer their knowledge and experience of Arabic standard and slang word order styles into the English language. Based on Al-Jarf's (2007) error corpus of Arabs' deviant SVO structures, there are three explanations for the participants' errors in the present study: inability to account for word order differences in both languages, tendency to translate word-by-word rather than by meaning, and/or inadequate competence in Arabic. The pretest and posttest findings showed that participants used SVO, VSO, OVS, and OSV to construct English sentences.

In line with the findings of Andrews (2007) and Altun and Dincer (2020), the present study's findings show that explicit teaching of the differences in word order typology between L1 and the target language improved the learners' skills in using English word order, as the improvement in the posttest scores over the pretest scores is statistically significant. This finding indicates that explicit teaching of differences in Arabic and English word order alongside employment of Galperin's teaching model could help Arabic learners avoid committing word order errors.

## Conclusion

This action research aims to examine the impact of raising awareness of Arabic and English differences in word order on learners' skills in using English SVO word order. Of the 142 Saudi undergraduates who participated in the present study, only 123 participations were included. The pretest and posttest findings showed that participants used SVO, VSO, OVS, and OSV to construct English sentences. Employment of Galperin's teaching model alongside explicit teaching of differences in Arabic and English word order could improve the learners' skills in using English word order, as the improvement in the posttest scores over the pretest scores is statistically significant. As the COVID-19 pandemic hindered classroom observations and face-to-face procedures, future studies are recommended to observe learners while conducting the intervention. In addition, it would be useful to conduct interviews and focus groups with the teachers and the students. Given that this study focuses on beginning learners and simple structures, future studies may replicate this study with advanced learners and complex structures. Moreover, future studies may investigate these issues in oral discourse.

Linguists and applied linguists identify the similarities and differences between L1 and the target language, analyse errors made by a specific group of learners, and diagnose learners' problems accurately (Banathy, Trager & Waddle, 1966). The task of teachers is to be aware of these differences and similarities and to be prepared to teach them by using suitable teaching techniques. Language teachers can capitalise on teaching any similarities between L1 and the target language and explicitly elicit awareness of differences between the two languages. Teachers may use the translation method to illustrate specific interference errors (Al-Jarf, 2007) and devote more time to delineating items and points in the target language that differ from the learners' L1 (Corder, 1975). Doing so can help students recognise the problems whenever they occur, which in turn helps students avoid committing interference errors (Grami & Alzughairi, 2012). Curriculum designers may develop tests, syllabi, textbooks, and course materials which are based on similarities and differences between L1 and the target language (Banathy et al.,

1966; Lado, 1957). As suggested by Richards and Sampson (1974), educational evaluators can assess textbooks, curricula, teachers' performance, learners' performance, teaching methods, test techniques, language programmes, classroom activities, and assignments on the basis of the results of an error analysis and contrastive analysis to determine priorities for future efforts.

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