



Unraveling Arabic Learning Challenges: A Case Study at SOAS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper investigates the linguistic struggles of a learner of Arabic as a foreign language at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). It is intended to offer a thorough assessment of the linguistic challenges faced by the learner and to develop strategies to overcome them. **Methodology:** Through a variety of methods, including a deep analysis of a writing sample, a case-study questionnaire, a recorded interview, classroom observations, and a self-assessment form, the study pinpoints the learner's weaknesses in speaking, reading, writing, and listening. **Results:** The findings reveal that the learner has problems in the construct phrase *idhafah*, conjugation of verb tenses, mixing colloquial with Standard Arabic, adjective-noun agreement, and comparative and superlative adjectives. **Recommendations:** The study concludes by proposing recommendations to tackle these types of errors by identifying their sources and offering tailored remedy activities and materials.

Keywords: TAFL, Learning Arabic, L2 Interference, Dialectical Interference, Heritage Learners

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تحديات تعلم اللغة العربية بوصفها لغة أجنبية: دراسة حالة في كلية الدراسات الشرقية والإفريقية
- جامعة لندن

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ملخص

الهدف: يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة الصعوبات اللغوية التي يواجهها متعلم اللغة العربية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في كلية الدراسات الشرقية والأفريقية وتقديم تقييم شامل للتحديات اللغوية التي يواجهها المتعلم ووضع استراتيجيات للتغلب عليها. **المنهج:** من خلال مجموعة متنوعة من الأساليب البحثية، بما في ذلك التحليل العميق لعينة الكتابة، واستبيان دراسة الحالة، والمقابلة المسجلة، وملاحظات الفصل الدراسي، واختبار التقييم الذاتي، تحدد الدراسة نقاط الضعف لدى المتعلم في مهارات التحدث والقراءة والكتابة والاستماع. **النتائج:** تظهر النتائج أن لدى المتعلم مشاكل في تركيب الجملة (الإضافة)، وتصريف الأفعال في الزمن المضارع، وخلط العامية مع اللغة العربية الفصحى، واتفاق الصفة مع الاسم، وصفات المقارنة والتفضيل. **التوصيات:** تختتم الدراسة باقتراح توصيات لمعالجة هذه الأنواع من الأخطاء من خلال تحديد مصادرها وتقديم أنشطة ومواد علاجية مخصصة لعلاج نقاط ضعف المتعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعلم اللغة العربية كلغة أجنبية، التداخل بين اللغات، التداخل اللغوي بين الفصحى والعامية، متعلمو العربية من أصول مسلمة

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Introduction

Mastering a foreign language does not come without its own obstacles. The experience, in essence, is like climbing a mountain with falling rocks and ice, but with each step forward, one gets closer to the best views. The challenges that foreign language learners typically face could be attributed to a multitude of factors, including the learners' age, their aptitude for language learning, individual differences, and the amount of exposure to the target language (Naqeeb & Awad, 2011; Ortega, 2009).

This paper uses various research tools to diagnose and address the kind of errors made by a learner of Arabic as a foreign language. We begin with a brief overview of the participant's ethnic and religious background, followed by an explanation of the learner's current proficiency level in Arabic and his own previous attempts at learning Arabic. We then highlight three main errors, which were repeatedly found in the participant's spoken and written production. The errors include L2 interference-related challenges, dialectical interference errors, and developmental errors. After a comprehensive description and discussion of the nature of these errors, the paper presents a series of steps along with four remedial activities designed to assist the learner to overcome the observed challenges.

Learner's Ethnic and Religious Background

This case study examines a bilingual male learner of standard and colloquial Arabic aged 22 at the time of the experiment with Gujarati as his mother tongue and a near-native fluency level of English as his second language. In addition to his main two languages, the participant is a beginner speaker of Indonesian. In the self-assessment form, the participant expressed the belief that his status as a native Gujarati speaker with advanced English skills and basic Indonesian proficiency did not significantly enhance his Arabic learning experience (see Appendix 1). Instead, he attributed his progress in Arabic to his practice of Islam, considering it a significant advantage (see Appendix 5). The learner's interest in Arabic, stems, in part, from his religious upbringing as it is the language of the Holy Qur'an. This is evident in his response "Thanks to

the Qur'an" when expressing his gratitude upon our astonishment at hearing his clear pronunciation of the Arabic letters (see Appendix 5). Emphasizing his passion for learning Arabic, he suggested that it was important for gaining a better understanding of his religion Islam (see Appendix 1). This can be interpreted as an indication of the positive impact that the learner's knowledge of the Quran has on acquiring the correct articulation of Arabic alphabet. Moreover, it is indicative of the great advantage of having an integrative motivation, which gives the learner a unique edge in mastering Arabic fluency. According to Zhang (2020), integrative motivation is "the desire to associate with speakers of the target language out of interest in their language or culture" (p. 2). Unlike instrumental motivation, which takes practical reasons as its motivating factors to learning a specific language, integrative motivation proves more effective as suggested by Harmer (1998). This shows the immense advantage that this learner has for learning Arabic.

The Learner's Arabic Proficiency Level

The learner's self-assessment paper (see Appendix 1), shows that he perceives his proficiency level in Arabic as elementary A2. The learner also states that he feels more confident about speaking and reading than his writing and listening skills. That is not surprising when you consider that the learner is an Arabic heritage student. According to Saadah (2011), Arabic heritage learners typically possess a native-like accent in their heritage language. These students are exposed to a lot of Arabic input through reading the Qur'an or having discussions with their families about certain religious issues. Such discussions typically include the use of some Arabic words so they can express the exact meaning of the words they are using. Heritage students therefore are at an advantage because they can easily practice their Arabic skills through having conversations and through reading, especially when it comes to self-taught learners of Arabic as the participant classified himself in the self-assessment form (see Appendix 1).

Previous Arabic coursework and immersion experiences in the Arab world

Beyond the Arabic course the participant is currently taking at SOAS this term, he has had additional experiences studying Arabic and living in two Arab countries. This includes undertaking a one-month Arabic course in 2012 at Eton Institute in Dubai. The participant mentioned spending a total of five years residing in the UAE and a two-year period living and working in Saudi Arabia. These experiences of studying and working in Arab countries may have contributed to enriching the participant's Arabic proficiency. However, it is important to emphasize that Arabic is gradually being replaced by English, which is taking on the role of a lingua franca, thus displacing Arabic as the primary means of communication among the diverse Emirati population, which consists of over 150 different ethnic groups (Randall & Samimi, 2010). Therefore, it may be less likely that he significantly benefited from the time spent in the UAE. In contrast, his experience in Saudi Arabia, where Arabic is the dominant language of communication, may have been more conducive to the development of his Arabic language skills.

Theoretical Framework

There are various perspectives through which we can analyze errors made by second language learners. These errors can be categorized based on their sources, such as interference errors, or according to their syntactic or pragmatic aspects. However, for the purpose of this case study we are classifying L2 learners' errors based on their sources.

Al-Khresheh (2016) discussed two major theories of error analysis in foreign language learning: Contrastive Analysis theory (CA) and Error Analysis theory (EA). The CA theory assumes that errors in second language learning result from negative transfer of rules from the learners' native language. However, criticism of this theory's limitations in addressing all types of errors led to the development of the EA theory, proposed by Corder in 1967. The EA theory acknowledges that errors can stem not only from interlingual factors but also from intralingual ones. This means that errors may arise from the target language itself, as learners

may generalize rules based on their limited understanding, resulting in errors such as using "childs" as the plural form of the word "child" instead of the correct form "children" (Al-Khresheh, 2016).

According to Brown (2000 as cited in Kirmizi & Karci, 2017), novice L2 learners often try to apply the rules of their native language to the target language, leading to a higher frequency of errors compared to advanced learners. This tendency stems from their limited proficiency in the target language. Similarly, Al-Khresheh (2016) confirms that novice learners' lack of proficiency in the target language makes them more vulnerable to generalizing or simplifying certain rules and applying them to various contexts.

Research Questions

This case study seeks to identify the challenges encountered by Arabic learners as they navigate the language learning process, as well as propose effective remedial strategies to address these challenges. To achieve these goals, three research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What types of errors do the participant typically make?
2. What are the underlying sources of these errors?
3. What actionable steps can be taken to mitigate these challenges and facilitate effective learning?

Research Tools

The research employed a variety of instruments to gather data on the participant's proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and listening in Arabic. The research instruments are as follows.

1. Self-assessment form (Appendix 1)
2. Questionnaire (Appendix 2)
3. Writing sample (Appendix 3)
4. Classroom observation (Appendix 4)
5. Semi-structured interview (Appendix 5)

The rationale behind using all these research tools was the necessity to obtain comprehensive insights into the learner's competence across the four language skills and to gain a deeper understanding of his prior experience with Arabic. According to Thompson (2015), self-assessment forms play a crucial role in determining participants' linguistic background and proficiency in second language acquisition research. They facilitate the exploration of data obtained through various research tools, placing it in the appropriate context based on learners' prior language learning experiences. Additionally, questionnaires, writing samples, classroom observations, and interviews are all important research tools that can be used to pinpoint areas of weakness in students' written and spoken production in the target language (Nunan, 1992).

Discussion and Analysis

The participant exhibits clear strengths, particularly in pronunciation and reading. During the interview, the student demonstrates the ability to accurately read and pronounce Arabic words. However, it should be noted that both written and spoken production display some weaknesses, particularly in grammar, writing, and vocabulary. These areas of weakness are further discussed below.

Examination of grammatical inaccuracies in the student's written work

The majority of the errors identified in the written sample (see Appendix 3) can stem from the influence of the student's second language (L2) or the student's effort to construct a grammar of Arabic based on his limited grammatical knowledge of Arabic. For instance, the student incorrectly wrote, *أنا طالب في الجامعة لندن* (I am a student in the University of London). However, the correct way to write the sentence is *أنا طالب في جامعة لندن*. When followed by a definite noun, the noun *جامعة* (university) does not require a definite article. That is because it is annexed with a proper noun, and that makes it known (definite) to the listener. Moreover, the learner could correctly construct questions in terms of word order as in: *ماذا يدرس يا ادريس؟* (What do you study, Idrees?). However, the Arabic written production includes a verb conjugation error. The correct way to

write the question is *ماذا تدرس يا ادريس؟*. Therefore, challenges with Arabic verb conjugation could be a plausible explanation for this particular error.

Examination of the learner's errors in oral production

Despite demonstrating impressive speaking skills during the role-playing activity, (see Appendix 4), some minor errors were identified in the spoken production of the learner that did not significantly impact the

flow of the conversation between the learner and his colleagues. A sample of these errors is shown in Table 1 below along with their types in reference to their sources:

Table (1): Linguistic errors observed in learner's performance.

Types	Examples
Cross-linguistic errors due to L2 transfer effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - أنت من الهولند؟ - الخبز أكثر غالي في لندن. - فراولة كويس. الأساتذة كويس.
Dialectical interference-related errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - لا يحب - عامل ايه الجو؟
Developmental errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - اللغة القران - أنا كونت في الامارات.

Cross-linguistic errors due to L2 transfer effects

The first column shows cross-linguistic errors due to L2 transfer effects. The learner accidentally used the wrong word for *the Netherlands* (الهولند) influenced by their source knowledge of their second language, i.e., English. In this case, the correct way to say the word is by removing the definite article *ال* from the word *الهولند* and adding the letter *ل* at the end of the word. This particular kind of error could also be attributed to interference from Arabic because the names of some Arab countries begin with the definite article *ال* (the) as in *البحرين، المغرب، الأردن* (Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain).

We can observe similar types of errors in the first row of Table 1, e.g., *أكثر غالي* (more expensive). This reflects the learner's tendency to mimic the comparative form from English, which is the learner's second language

(L2). This also applies to phrases like *الأساتذة كويس، فراولة كويس* (good strawberries, good teachers) where he overlooks Arabic's rule of matching nouns and adjectives in gender and number, unlike English. In essence, the learner's knowledge of English is influencing their acquisition of Arabic grammar.

Dialectical interference-related errors

The examples in the second row of Table 1 above demonstrate the learner's production during a class of Egyptian Arabic (see Appendix 4). Consequently, the learner's production should adhere to the grammatical rules of Egyptian Arabic rather than standard Arabic. The error *لا بحب* (I don't like) can be attributed to the overgeneralization of standard Arabic grammatical rules because, unlike standard Arabic, Egyptian Arabic uses the particle *ما...ش* instead of *لا* for negation. Therefore, the correct usage in Egyptian Arabic is *ما بحبش*.

Another example of Modern Standard Arabic influencing the learner's Egyptian Arabic production is the question *عامل ايه الجو؟* (What's the weather like?). It is possible that the learner applied the same structure used in Standard Arabic, where a question typically starts with a question word. The correct and more natural in Egyptian Arabic is *الجو عامل ايه؟* (i.e., placing the question word at the end of the sentence).

Developmental errors

Developmental errors are "...errors occurring when learners attempt to build up hypothesis about the target language on the basis of limited experiences" (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012, p. 1584). The analysis of the sentences in this category demonstrates the learner's weaknesses in the areas of vocabulary and grammar. This lack of familiarity with Arabic vocabulary and grammatical rules has prompted the learner to use English in answer to questions in Arabic (see Appendix 5 for the interview transcript). These types of errors are understandable because given the wide range of Arabic grammatical structures and vocabulary across Arabic dialects which can lead to confusion for learners.

In the first example, provided in the third row of Table 1 above, the learner said *اللغة القرآن* (the language of the Holy Qur'an) instead of saying *لغة القرآن* (language of the Holy Qur'an). Therefore, he defined the first noun when there was no need to define it with the article *ال* (the) because it is already defined by the second noun, which is *القرآن* (the Holy Qur'an). He may have confused the noun-adjective phrase agreement (e.g., *اللغة العربية*) with the construct phrase (referred to as *idhafah* in Arabic). The rule for the use of the Arabic definite article says that in the case of *idhafah* (construct phrase) the first noun does not receive the definite article, since it is already defined by the noun that follows it. However, in the case of the noun-adjective phrase agreement, both the noun and its adjective must receive the definite article *ال* (the) if they are to be definite.

In the second example *أنا كونت في الامارات* (I was in the Emirates), the learner is clearly confusing the short vowel (أ) with the long vowel (و). Therefore, he should have written *كُنْتُ* instead of *كونت*. According to Saadah (2011), this is a common mistake among learners of Arabic as a foreign language, who usually confuse the short vowels (أ, إ, و) with their corresponding long vowels (و, ي, ي).

Learner's Current Needs

The student's strengths lie in speaking and reading comprehension; while listening and writing require further development. Additionally, the learner demonstrates challenges with:

1. The construct phrase known as *idhafah*
2. Verb conjugation across sentences.
3. Blending colloquial and standard Arabic.
4. Maintaining agreement between nouns and adjectives.
5. Formation of superlative and comparative adjectives.

Recommendations

Based on our findings regarding the learner's current Arabic proficiency level and needs, we recommend the learner should:

1. Engage with Arabic audio materials across various genres, particularly by watching the news on TV channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Araby for standard Arabic, and Syrian or Egyptian drama series like “Spot Light”, or “Mirrors” for Syrian Arabic.
2. Immerse himself in writing Arabic by maintaining a daily journal or a daily shopping list in Arabic, or even by getting in touch with Arabic native speakers via virtual social platforms, which has been found beneficial in enhancing foreign language learners’ writing skills as confirmed by Bataineh (2010). The learner could also take up writing short stories or summarize Arabic texts. In doing so, the learner can familiarize himself with Arabic culture which will then enhance his confidence in speaking and writing in Arabic.
3. Gain understanding of the possible grammatical errors that learners of Arabic as a foreign language are likely to make by reading Table 2 below.

Finally, to address the previously discussed challenges, the learner can engage in specific activities such as the ones outlined in Appendices 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Table (2): Explanation of Errors.

Error	Explanation						
The construct phrase <i>idhafah</i>	<p>The construct phrase, also known as <i>idhafah</i>, combines two or more nouns to express possession or belonging. Learners can utilize their understanding of English possessive structures to grasp this concept more easily. Here are the various forms of <i>idhafah</i> and their corresponding English translations.</p> <table data-bbox="504 1375 1203 1516"> <tr> <td data-bbox="504 1375 730 1451">noun+proper N pronoun</td> <td data-bbox="730 1375 986 1451">noun+definite N</td> <td data-bbox="986 1375 1203 1451">noun+ N+</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="504 1451 730 1516"></td> <td data-bbox="730 1451 986 1516">مدرسة الطالب</td> <td data-bbox="986 1451 1203 1516">مدرسة أخي مدرسة بيتر</td> </tr> </table>	noun+proper N pronoun	noun+definite N	noun+ N+		مدرسة الطالب	مدرسة أخي مدرسة بيتر
noun+proper N pronoun	noun+definite N	noun+ N+					
	مدرسة الطالب	مدرسة أخي مدرسة بيتر					

Error	Explanation
	<p>(Peter's school) (The student's school) (My brother's school)</p> <p>The construct phrase follows a specific logic: combining a noun (N) with a preposition (prep), a proper noun, or a definite noun (defined with the article <i>the</i>) transforms an indefinite noun into a definite one. This rule applies similarly in both English and Arabic, although some differences exist. Refer to Appendix 6 for additional details and practice exercises.</p>
Verb conjugation of the present tense	<p>While the learner demonstrates ease with present simple verb conjugation, they sometimes confuse the 3rd person singular pronoun هو (he) with the 2nd person singular pronoun أنت (you). This challenge can be overcome with practice exercises, as outlined in Appendix 7.</p>
Adjective-noun agreement	<p>Two groups of nouns are described in Arabic using adjectives:</p> <p>1. Rational nouns. (There should be agreement between adjectives and nouns in terms of definiteness, and other grammatical features such as, gender, number, and case). Examples:</p> <p>(the Palestinian female المعلمات الفلسطينيات – teachers)</p> <p>(the Palestinian male teachers) المعلمون الفلسطينيون –</p> <p>(an Egyptian boy) ولد مصري –</p> <p>(a Syrian girl) بنت سورية –</p> <p>2. Irrational nouns. (the adjective describing a plural noun is a feminine and singular). Examples:</p> <p>(productive trees) شجرات مثمرة –</p> <p>(the productive trees) الشجرات المثمرة –</p> <p>(a productive tree) شجرة مثمرة –</p>

Error	Explanation
	<p style="text-align: right;">– كرسي جديد (new chairs)</p> <p style="text-align: right;">– كرسي جديد (a new chair)</p> <p>See Appendix 8 for a remedial activity.</p>
Comparative and superlative adjectives	<p>1. Arabic allows direct comparisons using the pattern <i>أفعل</i> (Af'al) along with the preposition <i>من</i> (than) between the nouns. Imagine the pattern <i>أفعل</i> as a template; you extract the root consonants of the adjective (e.g., <i>احسن</i> / <i>احسن</i> for <i>حسن</i>) and fit them into the pattern while adjusting vowels. Examples include <i>أصغر</i> (smaller) from the adjective <i>صغير</i> (small) and <i>أجمل</i> (more beautiful) from <i>جميل</i> (beautiful).</p> <p>2. Building on the comparative pattern <i>أفعل</i>, Arabic forms superlatives similarly with only one key difference: placing the comparative adjective that rhymes with <i>أفعل</i> before the noun. For example, <i>هذا أحسن طالب</i> (This is the best student). The superlative adjective itself implies definiteness, eliminating the need for the definite article <i>ال</i> (the). Refer to Appendix 9 for more details and helpful exercises.</p>

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the linguistic errors made by a learner of Arabic as a foreign language in spoken and written production. It aimed to diagnose the errors made by the learner and provide techniques and remedies that could assist him in overcoming those errors.

The study identified several areas of weakness where the learner had difficulty learning and acquiring certain aspects of standard and colloquial Arabic. These areas of weakness include the construct phrase *idhafah*, conjugation of Arabic verb tenses, mixing between colloquial and standard Arabic, and forming comparative and superlative adjectives.

The findings of this study suggest that exposure to authentic Arabic language input through watching news channels or TV shows is crucial to

acquiring delicate aspects of the Arabic language especially when the learners have not been immersed in the Arabic culture. It is our belief that when learners of Arabic are exposed to news and TV shows, they are unlikely to mix between features associated with standard Arabic and others that can only be found in the colloquial varieties such as Syrian and Egyptian TV shows. We also recommend that learners of Arabic, especially those that are not directly immersed in a culture where Arabic is the main language should consolidate their writing skills by preparing shopping lists in Arabic and by writing short stories and summaries of any piece of writing that they read. Finally, we believe that it is important that learners of Arabic as a second language should use their current knowledge of Arabic to befriend and socialize with native speakers of Arabic on Facebook and social media applications. In doing so, they will gain exposure to the Arabic cultures and, as a result, simultaneously and implicitly enhance their Arabic reading, writing and listening skills.

Indeed, the implications of the present study go beyond treating the linguistic errors faced by a single learner of Arabic. Our experience shows that the kind of errors that were identified in this paper are typical of many learners of Arabic as a foreign language. Therefore, the activities that we proposed can prove fruitful for fellow teachers of Arabic as a foreign language and their learners.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethical approval and consent to participate

The participant has given consent to participate in this study. His personal details were kept anonymous.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request.

Author contribution

First author: collection of data and co-writing the article. **Second author:** Co-writing, analyzing the collected data and proofreading.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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