

The Influence of Algerian Arabic Variety on RP English Language: A Review Article of Algerian Students' Negative Transfer



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Summary:

Communication competence is a necessary language skill for improving learners' language proficiency. Most Algerian learners of English may find it hard to be communicatively competent since they often fail to know what and when to say in certain contexts to start a conversation or write something academically. It is because opportunities for much practice are fewer than what is required. Learners are sometimes unable to understand English if it is spoken at its natural and normal speed as the natives do. They usually have trouble in understanding topics of different types of speech events, responding to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies and using language appropriately. Therefore, learners are expected to know what to say and how to say it to the right person at the right time in order to avoid misunderstanding. However, they often fail to do so because the language they attempt to produce in L2 (the foreign language) is based on the system of L1 (the mother/ native language). In this study, theories of negative language transfer are discussed, definitions of errors and mistakes are highlighted, sources of errors are stated, and different taxonomies of types of errors made by Arab students learning English are listed. This is for the purpose to contribute in finding suitable pedagogical strategies and techniques to overcome the transfer errors students still make. In the end, some recommendations are stated for the same purpose.

Keywords: language transfer, transfer errors, avoidance, overuse, fossilization

1. Introduction

It is widely known that English has become the language of international communication. As such, it is used by billions of native and non-native speakers to communicate with each other. The need to use English properly with some degree of sophistication is clearly felt among EFL professionals who see it as a suitable instrument to explore different domains mainly those which concern science and technology. Besides, EFL learners find it a necessity to learn to communicate in this language with people from different backgrounds and for different purposes, yet the task is not very easy because different obstacles confront both the teachers and the learners' will to reach their objectives. Among these obstacles the influence that the native language may exert on the target one; the case of Algerian Arabic and English

2. Language Interference / Transfer

Language interference, also known as cross-linguistic interference or transfer, is based on the influence of the learner's first language on the production of the target language as a result of the similarities and the differences between the TL and the one previously acquired (Odlin 1989: 27). Learners, particularly in the first stages of L2 acquisition, usually transfer items and structures that are different in both languages. This may take place at the phonological, grammatical, and lexical levels. L1 phonological and orthographic processes interfere with spelling L2 words with unfamiliar phonemes or graphemes; miscues in L2 reading can be attributed to native syntactical knowledge; and word order variation, complex noun phrases and other complex structural differences between languages can be misleading to the foreign language learner.

According to behaviorists, L1 interference is the most widely recognized source of foreign language problems as a result of the differences between the system of L1 and L2. Lado confirms this when saying that

“The student who comes into contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him and those that are different will be difficult.”
(1975:1)

Language interference is also concerned with transferability of speech acts from one language to another and the extent to which the learner is able to apply his intuitive knowledge of how to use his native language to the foreign language. Learners tend to translate in a literal word-for-word from one language into another and since not all speech acts are directly transferable between two

languages without a change of form that goes beyond literal translation, serious errors are made in the process.

Weinreich (1953: 1) discusses how two language systems relate to each other in the mind of the learner. His key concept is interference, defined as those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language. By implication, this will be likely to produce errors which led linguists to develop 'Contrastive Analysis' in order to predict learning errors by examining differences between L1 and L2.

2.1. Negative transfer

Perhaps the most known source of foreign language learning errors is that of L1 transfer (Corder 1973: 132). It refers to the errors a speaker introduces into one language as a result of contact with mother language (Crystal 1992:180). Although there are cases where the relevant features are similar for both languages and which results in a positive transfer. It is often assumed that most errors are derived from learner's negative transfer which occurs in any situation where someone has an imperfect command of L2 language, i.e. the learner appears to accumulate structural entities of the TL, yet demonstrates difficulty in organizing this knowledge into appropriate and coherent structures. This would create a gap between the accumulation and the organization of knowledge.

Not all speech acts are directly transferable from a language to another without a change from what goes beyond literal translation; this may lead to serious misinterpretations among the interlocutors, mainly when the structures of the two languages are distinctly different. In this case, one could predict a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L2, thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2 (Ellis 1994: 58). Lee says that

"the prime cause, or ever the sole cause of difficulty and error in foreign language learning is interference coming from the learner's native language' (1968:180)

When learning a foreign language, learners use some of the rules they have already acquired in L1 in the production and understanding of L2. This means that they exert some influence using L1 over L2. This influence is frequently apparent in the errors that learners make either orally or in writing. For example, Algerian learners of English make errors like: The man whom I spoke to him is a doctor. Which has the same form as in the Arabic /eradzulu el lađi taħadaθtu maħaħuħabi:b/. The learners' L1 not only affects L2 vocabulary and grammar but also its phonology.

ʔ, d/ in its phoneme inventory. Similarly, CA and AA do not have the English consonants / p, v, tʃ /. But this does not mean that all the learners of English fail to produce these sounds. There are many who face no problem to articulate them in words or even in long sentences. Here are some of the cases of the pronunciation problems encountered daily in class.

1) The phonemes /θ/ and /ð/ are dental in both English and Arabic, yet some learners of English have problems in pronouncing the two and usually substitute the /θ/ by /t/ as in [tɜ:sti] instead of /θɜ:sti/ (thirsty) and /ð/ by /d/ as in [dəuz] instead of /ðəuz/. This creates a non-sense for some words or changes the meaning of others. The word 'through' /θru:/ is pronounced as [tru:] (true) and 'thine' /ðain/ as [dain] (dine).

2) In English the alveolar lateral /l/ has three realizations: the clear [l] as in late /leit/, the dark [ɫ] as in will [wil] and the syllabic [l̩] as in cattle [kʌtl̩]. However, Arabic has only one realization, i.e. the clear /l/ in all distributions: initially as in [laħm] (meat), medially as in [jalʕab] 'he plays' and [jaħmal] 'he works'. Thus, learners very often find it difficult to pronounce the two different realizations. They make the dark [ɫ] as in 'hell' clear, [hel] and the syllabic [l̩] as in bottle [bɒtl̩] also clear, [bɒtəl̩]. This substitution, however, does not have any negative effect on meaning and on communication, in general, yet this may indicate the identity of the speaker.

3) The absence of the post-alveolar fricative /tʃ/ in Arabic makes learners in some instances substitute it by the post-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ and therefore, a word like 'watch' /wɒtʃ/ is realized as 'wash' [wɒʃ]. This would completely change the meaning of words and hence, bring about serious troubles in communication. In the following two sentences:

- [dəʊnt tʃmi:] "Don't touch me."
- [hiz fəʊnd ə dʃ] "He's phoned a Dutch."

The two wrongly pronounced words 'touch' and 'Dutch' respectively in the two sentences may divert the listener's attention towards ambiguity since /tʃ/ and /dʃ/ do not exist in English.

On the other hand, consonant sequences (clusters) also present a serious obstacle for the Algerian learners since CA has no more than two consonants either before or after the prominent vowel (nucleus). In AA the sequence could reach 3 consonants in words like /ndrabt/ (I was hit), i.e. CCCVCC. In English, the maximum would reach three consonants in the onset of the syllable as in 'spray' /sprei/ and four consonants in the coda as in 'texts' /teksts/, i.e. CVCCCC.

1) Algerian learners, though being accustomed to producing the sequence of CC, have some difficulty with the English consonant clusters. CCC initially or finally is usually reproduced as CVCC as [s e t r l : t] 'street' instead of /stri:t/ and [t e k e s t s] instead of /teksts/. Still longer sequencers as in straight, scrambled are similarly broken up.

2) Other sources of difficulty lie in the learners' incorrect articulation of certain sounds in different distributions. Fortis plosives /p,t,k/, for example, are aspirated initially in the syllable as in [p h l n]'pin', [k h a : d]and [t h a : g ə t] 'target'. Learners tend not to produce the 'aspiration' feature. Although it is not distinctive in English, aspiration is a feature that helps differentiate initial fortis plosives from initial lenis plosives. Thus, [p]in [p a : k]'park' , (without aspiration) would sound like [b] in [b a : k]'bark' and here the problem may arise.

3) / l,r,w,j/ are devoiced after initial fortis plosives /p,t,k/. Learners usually keep the voicing feature as if these sounds were produced in isolation. The word 'play' is pronounced as [p l e l]instead of [p l e ɪ] and 'twice' as [t w a i s] instead of [t w a i s], etc.

4) Length in English refers to "*relative durations of sounds and syllables where these are linguistically contrastive.*" (Crystal 1992:197). Learners are used to add more length to the short vowels in words like 'sit', 'book' and realize them as [si:t] and [bu:k] instead of their correct form [sit] and [buk]. This would make things troublesome and may negatively affect the correct senses of words, the important units in communication.

2.1.2. Lexical transfer

In the comprehension or production of L2, lexical transfer strategy operates from L1, the main source of learners' problems, mainly when there is no direct correspondence between NL and the TL words. Every word might have a variety of senses and connotations and, thus results in different meanings. This kind of transfer across languages is found in learners who have little exposure to, or have a limited proficiency in L2. There are different types of lexical transfer which may occur at word, phrase or sentence level. It can be manifested at the level of form, meaning, or distribution.

1) Form

The form may include sound segments and stress and varies according to the formality of situation, speed of talk, position in the sentence, etc. Lado (1959: 76) gives the example of the English word 'and' which varies from three segmental phonemes /ænd/ through degrees of reduction, /ənd/, /æn/, /ən/, to one segmental phoneme, / n /.

The form of may also include parts of words such as suffixes as _ (a)tion and _al in observation and observational respectively, and which do not have their equivalence in other languages such as Arabic or Turkish. Other lexical forms

comprise patterns of separate words like 'call up' 'to phone' (Lado: 1957: 77) which are not permitted in many other languages.

2) **Meaning**

Meaning of words can be arranged according to the forms they attach to. Those which attach to words as words are called lexical meanings. For instance, the form 'house' is a lexical meaning to 'the building for human habitation'

Linguists study meaning and use it as a criterion to study other aspects of language. Meaning in the context of language necessitates reference to non-linguistic factors such as thought, knowledge, situation and intention. These factors are used in every utterance in people's speech or in any piece of writing. Kramsch states that

"meaning is never achieved once and for all; it must be conquered anew in every utterance through the verbal actions and interactions of speakers and hearers, writers and readers."

The words people exchange in communication are associated with the situational and cultural context in which they occur. Thus, for example an Algerian will not understand the English tourist's question: "*Would it bother you if I had a chat with you for just a moment?*" unless he knows English and is able to grasp the meaning of each word of this utterance. If one or two words such as "bother" and "chat" are not understood, the message may not be well decoded. The foreigner's request in which words are related to the pragmatic context of their utterance leads, at once, the Algerian to recognize that his interlocutor is not from his society because those non-verbal signs he uses such as smiles, tone, and voice belong to a foreign culture which is not his. Contextualization cues as explained by Kramsch very often evoke the cultural background and the social expectations which are necessary to interpret speech. For her

"The way in which people use the spoken, written or visual medium itself creates meanings that are understandable to the group they belong to."

3) **Distribution**

Linguists such as (Bloomfield, 1933; Lado, 1959; Fries, 1972) consider the "word" as the basic unit of communication. They measure language learning by how much vocabulary has been memorised. They talk about words in isolation as

parts of speech like nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on. These words have exact meaning, mainly when used in sentences. In most languages, each word has more than one meaning in different situations depending on the context in which it occurs and its relationship with other words in the same sentence.

By distribution, is meant the range of positions where words or any other units can occur. The distribution of words determines the change of sentence. In English, for example, a noun can change into a verb or adjective according to the position it takes in the sentence, without a change in its form. In English the word "room" which is a noun has different meanings depending on the position it takes in the sentence. In the sentences:

- a) He wants a double room.
- b) Ask room 18 if they need coffee.
- c) Move along and make room for me.

In sentence a) "room" is a division of a building separated by walls. In b) it refers to the people in one such division of a hotel or large office building. In c) it means space for occupying or moving in.

Lado (1957: 79) stresses the importance of the distribution of words because each language has its own habits of restrictions in distribution. The English word "water", for example can be used as a noun as in 'a glass of water', as a verb as in 'water the garden' and as a noun adjunct as in 'water meter'; however, in other languages this word might have only one usage, as the Spanish word "agua" which is used only as a noun.

Because learners, especially those lacking the intuitive knowledge about L2, tend to make up a sentence, first in L1, and then translate it word-for-word into the L2. This means that some of the rules they already acquired in L1 in the lexical fields are also used when dealing with L2. This would result in what is referred to as lexical interference. Here are some cases introduced by the Algerian learners of English.

1) "*My brother reads in the secondary school*" instead of "*My brother studies at the secondary school*". The word 'reads' is translated from the AA word [jeqra] in [χ u:ja jeqra feli:si].

2) "*I have 16.*" (I'm 16.) In AA one would say [ʃ endi seʔa:ʃ eʃnʃ a:m]. This means that the equivalent of the AA [ʃendi] is 'I have'. The learner, in this case has thought in AA and made a direct translation into English.

3) "*Please, remember me of the score*" instead of "*Please, remind me of the score*". The word 'remember' is an equivalent to [jataðakar]. In English 'remind' is not the same thing. It is 'to make someone remember'. Learners very often substitute 'remind' by 'remember' because they think it provides the same idea.

4) "*She brought twins*" instead of "*She gave birth to twins*". In the case it is apparent that the learner makes a word-for-word translation from AA to English. In AA this would provide [dʒa:bet etwe:m].

5) "*All the house left*" instead of "*All the family left*". This sentence has its source of thinking from the AA [ga:ʃ eda:r ra:ħu].

6) "*He plays with money*" instead of "*He's very rich*". In AA this would be [jalʃab bedrahem]. The learner uses his knowledge of AA to express himself in English.

The examples above show that language interference has a negative effect on FL acquisition. These difficulties confronted by learners in expressing themselves may slow down the learning process and result in an undesirable behaviour that may both decrease the learners' motivation and put another heavy burden on the teacher's efforts.

2.1.3. Grammatical transfer

The most frequent elements shared among different languages to mark grammatical structure are word order, inflection (bound morphemes), derivation forms, etc. with which sentences or utterances are structured in the learner's mind.

In the process of L2 learning, at any given point in the development of a learner's Interlanguage (IL), the learner develops a kind of grammar which might be identical to the one of L1. As the distribution of words is not in the same way for all languages, i.e., word structure does not occur in the same environment, the L1 grammatical structures tend to be transferred to L2. The learner tends to transfer the sentence forms, modification devices, the number, gender, and case patterns of his native language (Lado 1957: 58). Here are some examples of grammatical transfer the Algerian learners of English very often make:

1) "*The trousers the new*" instead of "*The new trousers*". This sentence is derived from the AA [eserwe:lezdi:d]. In AA and CA the article is doubled on the qualifier of the noun (adjective) which is often placed after the noun. In English the adjective is used before the noun.

2) "*Today the see calm*" instead of "*today the sea is calm*". The omission of the linking verb 'is' in the first sentence. The noun phrase existing in AA: [elju:m elbħar zi:n] or CA: [eljawma elbaħru dʒami:lun] does not need a 'verb' to make a complete sense. In this case, the learner's sentence is implicitly taken from AA or CA.

3) "*He's big than me.*" instead of "*He's older than me.*" The AA [kbi:r] is 'big' in English, yet it does not provide the same sense as 'old'. There is also the

absence of the inflection 'er' which marks comparison. This indicates that the speaker thinks and expresses in his mother tongue.

4) "I'm speaking, no!" instead of "Don't interrupt me!" This sentence has also its derivation from the AA [ra:ni nehdar la].

The following table on the next page presents different types of transfer, as adapted from Schunk (2004, p. 220)

| Type | Characteristics |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Near | Overlap between situations, original and transfer contexts are similar. |
| Far | Little overlap between situations, original and transfer settings are dissimilar |
| Positive | What is learned in one context enhances learning in a different setting. (+) |
| <u>Negative</u> | What is learned in one context hinders or delays learning in a different setting. (+) |
| Vertical | Knowledge of a previous topic is essential to acquire new knowledge. (++) |
| Horizontal | Knowledge of a previous topic is not essential but helpful to learn a new topic. (++) |
| Literal | Intact knowledge transfers to new task |
| Figural | Use some aspect of general knowledge to think or learn about a problem |
| Low Road | Transfer of well-established skills in almost automatic fashion. |
| High Road | Transfer involves abstraction so conscious formulations of connections between contexts. |
| High Road/Forward Reaching | Abstracting situations from a learning context to a potential transfer context. |
| High Road/Backward Reaching | Abstracting in the transfer context features of a previous situation where new skills and knowledge were learned. |

Different types of transfer (Schunk 2004, p. 220)

3. Avoidance

Avoidance is a tendency for learners to avoid those aspects of production that they consider as a problem for them. This happens especially when certain

features of L1 are different from those of L2. Thus, a learner very often tries to avoid a difficult word or structure and uses a simpler one instead. This phenomenon in L2 learning is termed 'avoidance behaviour' (Schachter 1974). Richards and Schmidt 2002: 44) give the example of the learner who is not sure of the use of the relative clause in English. Instead of using the relative pronoun 'where' in the complex sentence "*That's the building where I live.*" He simply cuts this sentence in two simple sentences: "*That's my building. I live there.*"

Avoidance behaviour has a direct influence on L2 performance. It may be employed at different levels: grammatical, lexical and phonological levels. Learners may leave out a necessary item so as not to run the risk of choosing the wrong one. Schachter (1974) in Robinett & Schachter (1986: 358-359) conducted a study on the number of errors made by some non-native speakers of English. The four language groups he chooses include Arab, Persian, Chinese and Japanese learners. The item under study is 'relative clause production'. The investigation reveals that Chinese and Japanese learners make less errors in the use of 'relative clauses' than do Persian and Arab learners. Yet, this might be because the number of relative clauses they use is less than the ones used by Persian and Arab learners. The difficulty they encounter as a result of the different ways the clauses are structured in both Chinese and Japanese makes them adopt the avoidance strategies as a sole resort to avoid possible errors. Schachter puts the stress on this point saying that

"It is plausible and I think correct to suppose that they produce fewer relative clauses in English because they are trying to avoid them, and that they only produce them in English when they are relatively sure that they are correct, which would also account for the extremely small number of errors they make.(1974: 359)

Accordingly, one may conclude that avoidance behaviour results from various causes related to the similarities and the differences between the L1 and L2.

4. Overuse

Overuse or 'over-indulgence' (Levenston 1971) is one of the learning strategies used in L2 acquisition. The learner uses the forms he knows rather than tries out the ones he is not sure of. This strategy which may be concomitant of 'avoidance' includes 'overgeneralization type of intralingual processes. Ellis (2000: 305) mentions the learner's overgeneralization of the regular past tense inflection to the irregular verbs in L2 English as the case of "costed" instead of "cost". Overuse for him can also appear as a result of the learner's transfer from L1; very

often a consequence of the avoidance or underproduction of some difficult structures.

5. Fossilization

Fossilization is a term referring to a permanent obstruction of progress towards L2 acquisition. It is considered as a natural stage for many learners to go through despite all efforts for a better learning. It includes those items, rules and sub-systems that L2 learners tend to retain in their interlanguage relative to a particular L2 regardless the age of the learner and the kind of instructions and explanations he receives in the TL (Selinker 1972: 215).

The phenomenon of fossilization, following a period where learning takes place, is most saliently manifested phonologically, syntactically and lexically in the speech of even those who have learnt an L2 quite well. For Selinker (1972: 212), the majority of L2 learners cannot overcome interlanguage fossilization, i.e., the number of L2 learners who are considered to develop the different language skills in the same way as the natives do is considered to be very small. This means that it is extremely rare for learners of L2 to achieve full native-like competence. Some examples of fossilization might include the following:

In syntax: - one may say:

‘I no understand good’ instead of ‘I do not understand well’

In morphology: - one may miss the inflections of words as in:

‘She dance’ instead of ‘she dances’

In phonology: - there might be a substitution of one sound by another as in the example of the French learners of English who use the uvular [ʁ] instead of the post alveolar /r/. Thus they may say: [ʁed] instead of /red/

These errors and others seem to resist whatever the number of years spent in L2 learning. Learners may continue to make progress in certain areas of study, yet return again to the same errors. Many advanced learners of English, for instance, could communicate with great skills and make only few errors; however, they still do not master the past perfect tense of the English verb, or know the difference between the gerund and the present participle...etc.

Some linguists argue that native-like performance in L2 is not possible in a certain level of proficiency, and fossilization phenomenon could be a result of a learning environment that is far from being suitable to the conditions needed to the learning process.

6. Conclusion

Errors in foreign language learning, especially in English are the cases which are difficult enough to avoid. Many aspects of language lead learners to commit errors. Some of these aspects, discussed, are interference, overgeneralization, induced errors, and interlanguage strategies of learning like, avoidance, overuse

and fossilization. These strategies, according to different linguists, have a negative influence on L2. It is certain that acquiring the competencies which would enable learners to speak and write appropriately, in an environment which is not theirs, is not easy enough, since these learners, most of the time, confront serious troubles in understanding the meaning of the foreign language, mainly those which are culture-bound. These learners are still unable to grasp what is read, or to speak or write correctly without breaking the structure of the sentence. It has become a challenge for school instructors to help their learners avoid translating the forms and the meanings from the native language and culture 'Arabic' to the ones of the target language 'English'. This sort of language interference has always brought negative impacts by making the process of acquiring English slow and complicated. The cultural background of the word on both languages also represents a pertinent obstacle towards learners' correct thinking because the two languages do not represent the same social and cultural reality. Thus, the suggested strategy is to teach the culture of the native speakers of English through the medium of language. This would help Arabic learners of English gain access to the life and thought of people, and understand the patterns and lexicon integrated any English learning material. The use of L1 may also be recommended as a suitable means of apprehension, yet this should be in the absence of the teacher, the most important element in foreign language learning. The teacher knows very well when and where it is possible and necessary to use it as a best tool.

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