

THE OMISSION OF VERB TO 'BE' WHEN ACQUIRING THE PRESENT TENSE BY EFL ARAB STUDENTS: AN ERROR ANALYSIS APPROACH

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Abstract:

This paper pinpoints errors made when acquiring verb 'to be' as an auxiliary or main verb in the present tense in English by a group of one hundred native speakers of Arabic studying to become EFL teachers at Faculty of Education, Zingbar-University of Aden, Yemen. All participants were first year students who had studied English grammar in this year. To collect the data of the study, a translation task from Arabic into English was performed. The objective of this investigation is the identification and analysis of students' errors regarding the use of verb to be in the present tense in English in the students writing. The researcher chose statistical package for social sciences, which is the most commonly, reliable, and applicable system, to be used in the process of data analysis. This paper deals with the review of related literature, methodology, data analysis and interpretation, conclusion and suggestions. The errors have been showed through various tables and diagrams. And findings provide useful information to design remedies to help students to become successful in the use of verb to be in the present tense in English. Since Arabic does not require copula verbs in the present tense, the study reveals that most of the intended students when translating the six Arabic sentences given into English omitted verb to 'be' in forming the present tense. Undoubtedly they resorted to their first language (Arabic) using literal translation to solve this problem. Therefore, it has shown that the vast majority of the students' errors are due to the effect of their mother tongue (interlingual), and a few are as a result of intralingual errors when acquiring the present tense in English. The present study focuses on Intelingual and intralingual errors.

Keywords: *Verb to 'be', Interlingual and Intralingual Errors, Arabic, English, the present tense, EFL, L1, SLA.*

1. Introduction

English is considered as an international language in many countries in the world. It is communicated in different fields and it is taught in schools, universities, and many institutes facilitating and simplifying English language learning and using in real life situations as well. In the country like Yemen, English is regarded as a foreign language so that it is limitedly used. As a result, there are many errors committed by the learners even after their education or training for a number of years. The aim of the present paper is to investigate the omission of verb to be when acquiring the present tense in English by Yemeni (Arab) students, and to analyze them, identify their causes and suggest remedies to solve problems. Before contemplating on this, it is crucial to highlight the sight into the related literature of Error Analysis: sources of errors; types of errors; and previous finding of errors made when acquiring 'verb to be' by Arab.

2. Related literature

2.1. Error Analysis

The spreading of Error Analysis started in the 60s and 70s of the previous century. This theory explains the errors made by L2 learners, as well as the reasons behind such errors and their causes. Moreover, as stated in (Ali, 1996:1) “it is the examination of those errors committed by students in both the spoken and written medium”. On the other hand, many scholars gave different contributions to define errors made by learners as well. Corder (1967:167) argues that “a learner's errors are significant in that they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language”. Another contribution in this field is adopted by Norrish (1987) who defines errors as a systematic derailment “errors are a systematic deviation, when learner has not learnt something and consistently gets its wrong” (p. 7). Also, Gass and Selinker (2001:78; 2008:102) define errors as “red flags”. This means errors are warning indications which show that learners have lack in their linguistic repertoire of L2. As observed, the applied object is to enable the learner to learn more efficiently using the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes. At the same time, the investigation of errors is not regarded as “...signs of failure. In contrast, they are the clearest evidence for the learner's developing systems and can offer us insights into how they process the data of the language.” (Littlewood, 1984, p. 22). The study of error analysis and inflectional morphology has been of a great interest for researchers in different regions (Pervaiz & Khan 2010; Qaid & Ramamoorthy 2011a and b; Saeed & Fatihi 2011, among others).

Among the most frequent sources of errors Brown (1980) counts four types of errors: (1) interlingual transfer; (2) intralingual transfer; (3) context of learning; and (4) various communication strategies the learners use. However, in Brown's (2000:224) view, there are two main sources of errors; interlingual; and intralingual.

2.2. Sources of Errors

a. Interlingual Errors

Selinker (1972) introduced the term of interlingual for first time. He referred to as “the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learner's L1 and the target language” (Abi Samra, 2003:5). Error Analysis theory considers interlingual transfer as errors made by L2 learners as a result of transferring knowledge from their L1. Kellerman & Sharwood-Smith (1986) substituted “transfer” by “cross linguistic influence”. Odlin (1989), on the other hand, stated that transfer is “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been obviously, and perhaps imperfectly, acquired”. Moreover, (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 85) viewed that learners' L1 influenced the acquisition of the L2, positively, if L1 and L2 were similar, or negatively, if they were not. Similarly, Ali (2007pp. 1-14) mentioned that there are many factors leading students to make mistakes. One of them is the interference of the student's L1. He states “Where the first and second language rules are not the same, errors are likely to occur as a result of interference between the two languages” p.3. (Schumann, 1988) viewed that the focus is no longer on whether L1 plays a role in L2 acquisition but, on how, where, why and what to transfer (p. 67). (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994, 1996) stated that L1 has a strong effect in the initial states of L2 acquisition. Taylor (1975) extracted that “learners who know less of L2 are more reliant on transfer from L1”. Furthermore, Ringbom (1987) revealed that “at lower levels of proficiency, L1 influence is stronger than at advanced levels”. Cook (1992:589) who states that “the L1 is present in the L2 learners' minds, whether the teacher wants it to be there or not. The L2 knowledge that is being created in them is connected in all sorts of ways with their L1 knowledge”. As a result, it is recommended that when working with L2 learners, teachers must not treat the L2 in isolation from the L1. On contrast, they should make the process go on naturally.

b. Intralingual Errors

On the contrary, some errors are, as Brown (2000, p. 224) mentioned, “are processing the second language in its own term... and are called intralingual errors” p. 23. Actually, they are developmental errors which students commit whatever their mother tongue languages are; this proves that there is a kind of universality in these errors (Ellis, 1994). In addition, James (1980: 185-187) goes into more details. He refers to intralingual errors as learning-strategy based errors and lists 7 types of them: False analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, exploiting redundancy, over-elaboration, hypercorrection and overgeneralization. Clearly, Intralingual errors are the errors which result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer (Keshavarz, 2003:62; Fang and Xue-mei, 2007:11). Erdogan (2005:266) adds "intralingual errors occur as a result of learners' attempt to build up concepts and hypotheses about the target language from their limited experience with it". These errors are common in the L2 learners' speech and they are often analyzed to show what kinds of strategies are being used by the learners. Intralingual errors include: overgeneralization, simplification, communication-based and induced errors. (267)

Thus, these errors are referred to as 'interference' errors which have long been considered as one of the main reasons causing handicaps in the acquisition of a L2.

2.3. Types of Errors

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) introduced the surface structure taxonomy (SST) and classified errors committed in the area of inflectional morphology with reference to their types according to SST as follows:

Types of Errors	Definition	Subdivisions
1. Omission Errors	Omission is the absence of an element that its presence is necessary for the grammaticality of the structure.	1. Plural morpheme omission 2. Third person singular present tense morpheme 3. Past tense morpheme 4. Past Participle Morpheme 5. Present Participle Morpheme
2. Addition	Different types of errors are committed by learners by adding an unnecessary affix which makes the structure ungrammatical.	1. Double marking 2. Regularization 3. Simple addition
3. Misformation	Misformation errors prevail in learners competence of a language.	1. Regularization 2. Archi forms 3. Alternative forms

2.4. Previous findings of errors made when acquiring verb to be by Arab learning English

Arab students of English face serious problems when acquiring 'verb to be' in forming the present tense in English due to the differences found between English and Arabic in the ways of using this tense. In fact, English is more marked than Arabic. In O'brien's (2003, p. 183) study of tense and aspect in the interlanguage of Arab students of English, she shows that verb to be is not required in Arabic educational statements. That is the problem is with the absence of using such auxiliary verbs in the present tense in Arabic language which lead to producing errors when acquiring the English present tense by Arab students of English. Stromswold (1990, 36) assumes that using the auxiliary verb 'to be' to form the present tense by

Arab learners is difficult and lead to committing errors. In addition, he observed cases of auxiliary-less, doubled marking questions and the inversion errors with the auxiliary 'be' override inversion errors with other auxiliaries. Haznedar (2003) documents a similar result, where the appearance of inflection was missing early, but developed gradually. On the other hand, in his minimalist program, Chomsky (1995) extracts that "the acquisition of modal auxiliaries (can and will) is less difficult than 'be' and 'do'. In addition, compared to 'be' and 'do', these modals may be generated at a faster rate". Clearly, the influence of L1 when acquiring verb 'to be' is documented and this is compatible with Perales et.al (2009), Perales (2010) and Yazdfazeli & Maleckzadeh (2014).

3. Research Methodology and Sampling:

To collect the data for the study, a translation task was given to the students. Six Arabic sentences in the present tense were given to the students to translate into English. About 100 students of the first year, English Department / College of Education-Zingibar were randomly chosen to be the sample of the study. Interpretative, analytical and investigatory methods have been used in order to arrive at the conclusion of the present study.

4. Data Analysis:

The data collected from the students has been analyzed and interpreted in the following way. Various tables have been used to classify the errors and show the percentage of errors committed by the selected students. There are six statements summated to the students. They were instructed to translate all sentences from Arabic into English. Half of the sentences were in present simple tense and the rest were in the present continuous tense. Participants committed a variety of deviant structures when deleting or using 'verb to be'. The researcher has called these deviant structures 'errors' since their occurrence is systematic. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) have introduced the surface structure taxonomy (SST); the general way the learner's sentences look different from what seems to be correct in the target language. It is generally preferred to use the clause 'what seems to be correct in the target language' rather than 'the target language sentence' for the reason that in many cases a learner's sentence is vague and can be corrected in different ways; thus, more than one target language form is possible A-Saidat (2012, pp. 22-23). In this study the researcher depends heavily on the context to decide about what seems to be correct in the target language.

Errors committed in the area of inflectional morphology in the present study are classified with reference to their types according to SST.

The sentences translated from Arabic into English

Sentence No. 1

Hamid is my friend.

Table: 1. The percentage of omitting 'is' morpheme after translating sentence No. 1 into English

Sr. No.	College	Correct Responses	%	Deviant Responses	%
1.	Zingibar	21	21%	79	79%

Observation:

In the first sentence in the sample which is about using the verb to be (is) as a main verb in the sentence to form the simple present tense, only 21% of the participants from College of Education Zingibar gave correct responses and 79% of them gave deviant answers. On the other hand, the majority 88.5% of the deviant responses were due to omitting 'is morpheme' (*Hamid my friend*) and they produced such a strange sentence. Thus, such errors were regarded as intralingual errors resulting from interfering the students' L1 (Arabic) when acquiring verb to be in the present tense in English. The rest 11.5% of the deviant responses were as a result of intralingual errors (*Hamid are my friend*) in which they replaced 'is'

morpheme with 'are'.

Interpretation:

More than half students face difficulty when they tried to translate sentence no1. The reason is that there is no equivalence of verb to be in Arabic when forming the present simple tense. As a result, they depended on their L1 knowledge and omitted 'is morpheme'. On the other hand, a few of them replaced only the auxiliary "is" with "are" which is regarded as developmental errors.

Thus, as shown students need more knowledge of using verb to be to form the present tense in English. In addition, they need to have awareness about the difference between the two languages in forming verb to be in the present tense.

Sentence No. 2

Look! Fatima and Husna are eating burger.

Table: 2. The percentage of omitting 'are' morpheme after translating sentence No. 2 into English

Sr. No.	College	Correct Responses	%	Deviant Responses	%
2.	Zingibar	28	28%	72	72%

Observation:

In the second sentence in the sample which is about using the auxiliary verb to be 'are' to form the present continuous in sentence No. 2, while only 28% of the participants answered correctly, 72% of them gave deviant responses. For the deviant answers, 88.9% of them were as a result of interlingual errors (*Look! Fatima and Husna eating burger*). The rest 11.1% of these deviant responses were due to intralingual transfer (*Look Fatima and Husna are eats burger*), (*Look! Fatima and Husna is eating burger*).

Interpretation:

From the above observation more than half students committed errors in the second sentence by omitting 'are' morpheme to form the sentence in the present continuous tense.

Sentence No. 3

I am hungry.

Table: 3. The percentage of omitting 'am' morpheme after translating sentence No. 3 into English

Sr. No.	College	Correct Responses	%	Deviant Responses	%
3.	Zingibar	31	31%	69	69%

Observation:

In sentence no. 3 in the sample which is about using the verb to be (am) to translate the Arabic sentence into the English form of the simple present tense in English, while only 31% of the participants gave correct responses, 69% of them answered wrongly. For the deviant answers, 96.3% of the responses were as a result of interlingual errors (*I hungry*). The rest 3.7% of these responses were due to intralingual transfer (*I is hungry*).

Interpretation:

From the above observation more than half students committed errors in the third sentence and resorted to using their L1 rule to translate this sentence by omitting 'am morpheme'.

Sentence No. 4

Ahmed is speaking on the phone at the moment.

Table: 4. The percentage of omitting 'is' morpheme after translating sentence No. 4 into English

Sr. No.	College	Correct Responses	%	Deviant Responses	%
4.	Zingibar	28	28%	72	72%

Observation

For the Fourth sentence in the sample which is about using the auxiliary 'is' to form the present continuous tense when translating it from Arabic into English, only 28% of the students' answers were correct, and 72% of them gave wrong responses. On the other side, 89% of the deviant responses were due to intralingual errors (*Ahmed speak on the phone at the moment*), 11% were as a result of intralingual transfer (*Ahmed is speaks on the phone at the moment*).

Interpretation:

The above observation shows that the majority of the students deleted 'is morpheme' to translate the Arabic sentence into English which is in the present continuous tense. It clearly appears that L1 interference is the main resource of committing such an error.

Sentence No. 5

Abbas is a teacher.

Table: 5. The percentage of omitting 'is' morpheme after translating sentence No. 5 into English

Sr. No.	College	Correct Responses	%	Deviant Responses	%
1.	Zingibar	24	24%	76	76%

Observation:

In this sentence, only 24% of the students' responses were correct while 76% of them were wrong. On the other hand, 30.9% of the deviant responses were as a result of intralingual transfer from the target language (English) itself (*Abbas are teacher*), and 69.1% of the wrong responses, like (*Abbas teacher*) show that students were comfortable in omitting verb to be 'is' to translate such a sentence...When translating this sentence, the students committed another intralingual error, as well, by omitting the indefinite article 'a'.

Interpretation:

From the above observation it appears that the majority of the students resorted to omitting 'do-support morpheme' to build the first question.

Sentence No. 6

Keep silent! My children are sleeping.

Table: 6. The percentage of omitting 'are' morpheme after translating sentence No. 6 into English

Sr. No.	College	Correct Responses	%	Deviant Responses	%
2.	Zingibar	32	32%	68	68%

Observation:

In sentence No. 6, as appeared 32% of the students gave correct responses while 68% of them

produced wrong ones. On the other hand, 86.7% of the deviant responses were as a result of the omission of verb to be 'are' to translate the sentence which is regarded as interlingual transfer (*Keep silent!. My children sleep*). And only 13.3% of the deviant responses were as a result of interlingual transfer from the target language. (*Keep silent! My children is sleeps*).

Interpretation:

From the above observation it appears that the majority of the students deleted the auxiliary 'is' to translate the sentence into English in the present continuous tense.

5. Conclusion:

Six Arabic sentences in the present tense were provided to the students to be translated into English. The main aim was how to use verb to be in the simple present and present continuous tenses in English by the students. After collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data, the following conclusions have been drawn:

- i. The students' correct responses of adding (verb to be) while translating the Arabic sentences into English in the present are 164 responses out of 600 with a percentage of (28.9%).
- ii. The total number of the students' incorrect responses is 436 with a percentage of (71.1%).
- iii. The majority of students do not possess sufficient knowledge of English grammar in general and translating and forming the present tense by using 'verb to be' in particular.
- iv. Omission of auxiliary, double-marking and alternating 'verb to be' are the types of errors that are observed...
- v. In case of omitting auxiliary, the majority of students were comfortable with the no 'verb to be' morpheme when translating Arabic sentences in the present tense to form the present simple and present continuous tenses were influenced by their mother tongue. Actually, they have omitted "verb to be" when forming negative and interrogative in English. The reason is that there is no equivalence use of 'verb to be' in Arabic when translating into English in the present tense. This justifies the negative transfer of the mother tongue (interlingual transfer) while acquiring the English present tense.
- vi. The error of the type 'no inversion' (omission of verb to be), which comprised the highest percentage.
- vii. For double marked i.e. intralingual transfer, students committed different types of errors.
- viii. Intrelingual transfer is one of the major causes leading to committing errors by the students.
- ix. Teachers of the English language in Yemen should solve the problem of L1 interference by using useful remedies.

6. Suggestions and Recommendations:

Based on the conclusions drawn above, the following suggestions and recommendations have been given to the students, teachers and researchers:

1. Special attention needs to be paid to differentiate between the English and Arabic when acquiring 'verb to be' to form the present tense in English.
2. Since there was inadequate knowledge of using 'verb to be' when translating and forming the present tense from Arabic into English, students need to be paid extra attention for teaching this auxiliary.
3. ICT should be exclusively used to make the teaching-learning of 'verb to be' in the present tense in English more interesting.

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