Interlanguage Analysis as a Tool for Improving Instruction for Arabic Language Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of interlanguage analysis as a pedagogical tool for improving instruction of Arabic as a second or a foreign language learner (ASL/AFL). The second language learners develop an evolving system of language as they advance towards target-language competence; this is referred to as interlanguage. Developmental regularities in this system are influenced by L1 transfer, instructional input, overgeneralization and strategies of communication. Using a mixed-methods research design, writing samples, oral records, and classroom observations of both beginners and intermediate Arabic students were examined as to common phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and orthographic patterns. Instruction was subsequently adjusted based on interlanguage outcomes. Findings showed that most errors were systematic and developmental especially in gender agreement, verb morphology, pluralization, vowel representation and emphatic consonant production. Specific instructional intervention resulted in definite improvements in accuracy in language spheres, especially, morphology and pronunciation. The results justify the need to integrate interlanguage analysis in the diagnostic testing and curriculum development in teaching Arabic.

Keywords: Interlanguage, Arabic as a Second Language, Error Analysis, SLA, Instructional Design

Introduction

The last decades have witnessed the growth of the field of teaching Arabic as a second or foreign language because of geopolitical, cultural, and economic reasons. Arabic is one of the most difficult languages to learn even with the boost in enrolment still, as the learners whose first languages are majorly Indo-European have a hard time with it. Challenges are associated with the diglossic nature of Arabic, complicated morphology, phonological repertoire, and unclear orthographic code (Ryding, 2014). The conventional teaching of Arabic also emphasizes the sequencing of prescriptive grammar without giving attention to the stages of development of learners which leads to constant mistake of the learners and poor communicative skills.

In the second language acquisition (SLA) field, interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) is a conceptual model that redefines the errors of learners as developmental processes instead of linguistic

deficiencies. Interlanguage focuses on the dynamic character of the learner grammars and provides a diagnostic perspective in the light of which teaching could be adjusted to the cognitive maturity and communicative requirements. Although interlanguage theory has had a bearing on the pedagogical practice in the European language set-ups, its application in Arabic classroom is not well developed.

Statement of the problem

Although Arabic is widely taught as a foreign language, many learners continue to struggle with persistent linguistic errors even as their proficiency increases. Existing instructional approaches often rely on generalized grammatical sequencing and standardized curricula rather than on empirical evidence of how learners' interlanguage systems actually develop. As a result, teachers may be unable to clearly distinguish between errors that reflect natural developmental stages and those that signal fossilization, leading to ineffective or mistimed instructional interventions.

Furthermore, limited research has systematically documented the interlanguage patterns of beginner and intermediate Arabic learners across linguistic domains or investigated how such patterns can be translated into practical instructional design. Without grounded interlanguage analysis, pedagogical decisions remain largely intuitive, potentially overlooking learners' specific needs and developmental readiness. There is also a lack of evidence evaluating whether instruction explicitly shaped by interlanguage findings produces measurable learning gains or leads to reduced fossilized errors. This study addresses these gaps by examining interlanguage patterns in Arabic learners, differentiating developmental errors from fossilized forms, and testing the pedagogical value of interlanguage-informed instruction in improving language outcomes.

Research Questions

This research paper aims to fill the gap between theory and practice by showing how interlanguage analysis can be employed to help provide more effective teaching to Arabic learners to address the following questions:

1. What interlanguage patterns characterize beginner and intermediate Arabic learners?
2. Which errors represent development stages versus fossilization?
3. How can interlanguage analysis inform instructional design in Arabic classrooms?
4. What learning gains result from instruction shaped by interlanguage findings?

Research Objectives

Overall Aim

To investigate interlanguage development in beginner and intermediate learners of Arabic and examine how interlanguage-informed instruction can improve learning outcomes.

Specific Research Objectives

1. **To identify and describe** the key interlanguage patterns produced by beginner and intermediate learners of Arabic across major linguistic domains (phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon).
2. **To distinguish and categorize** learner errors that reflect normal developmental sequences from those that indicate fossilization or persistent non-target-like usage.

3. **To analyse how findings from interlanguage analysis can inform** the design of targeted instructional strategies and pedagogical interventions in Arabic language classrooms.
4. **To evaluate the effectiveness** of instruction informed by interlanguage findings by measuring learners' linguistic gains and changes in error patterns over time.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based mainly on Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), which assumes that learners of the second language (L2) acquire dynamic linguistic system, which is systematic, rule-governed and not identical to the first language (L1) and the target language. Interlanguage theory offers the focal point on which learner language is analysed as a dynamic process that is informed by transfers of the first language, overgeneralization of rules, simplification and fossilization as some of the strategies. The framework facilitates the exploration of differences between the interlanguage pattern among the beginner and intermediate learners of Arabic (Research Question 1) and how some of the errors they make can be seen as a natural developmental stage or fossilized (Research Question 2).

Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967) is also used in the study as it regards the mistake that the learner does not make as constructive or due to the language development, but not as a sign of weaknesses. Error analysis allows determining the origin and the processes of errors and distinguishing between the transitional developmental errors and stabilized errors that are the fossils. Within this paradigm, learner production is methodically examined to determine the frequency, persistence, and variability of errors, which can be distinguished into progression-based errors and resistant ones that can be indicative of fossilization.

Secondly, Process ability Theory (Pienemann, 1998) also helps in describing developments in learner language. This theory holds that learners learn grammar structures in set stages limited by the cognitive processing ability. The use of this theory will aid in categorizing the newly developed linguistic components of the Arabic learners by their developmental readiness and reinforce the decisions on which mistakes are stage-based and fossilized.

In order to connect analysis and pedagogy, the framework is based on the concepts of Focus on Form Instruction (Long, 1991) and the form-focused instruction theory, which is concerned with instructional focus on linguistic forms as they occur during meaningful communication. Interlanguage analysis can therefore be used to inform the design of instruction by focusing on structures and not grammatical syllabi, which are based on the developmental stages of learners (Research Question 3).

Finally, Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) forms the basis of assessing the outcome of the instruction. The ideas of mediation, scaffolding, as well as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) can be used to describe how differentiated instruction, which is designed on the basis of the actual interlanguage levels of learners, can lead to more constructive learning outcomes. Teaching that is student-guided based on the needs of their development is likely to help internalize the linguistic forms and provoke the quantifiable increase in the proficiency levels and the decrease in errors (Research Question 4).

These theoretical views (Interlanguage Theory, Error Analysis, Process ability Theory, Focus on Form instruction, and Sociocultural Theory) can be combined into a comprehensive

structure that explains the development of the language in learners, determines the way interlanguage results can be implemented in the pedagogical process, and offer the means to assess the learning outcomes in the teaching of the Arabic language.

Literature Review

Interlanguage Theory

Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of interlanguage to refer to the autonomous linguistic system which learners of a second language develop. This is a dynamic system that is transitional and which is determined by five interactive processes that are *language transfer, transfer of training, learning strategies, communication strategies and overgeneralization*. Through exposure to the target language learners actively test language hypotheses and restructure their grammars. In turn, mistakes are viewed as replications of rule-based systems as opposed to fortuitous gaffes.

This framework was further developed by Ellis (1997) who showed that errors made by learners are associated with developmental sequences that can be predicted. There are certain structures that cannot be learnt until cognitive preparedness is attained and this is the reason why some grammatical features are not easily learnt.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) went on to suggest that effective learning requires that the instruction should match the present level of the interlanguage of the learner instead of his or her textual or grammatical advancement.

One major dimension of the interlanguage research is the phenomenon of fossilization, that is where non-target forms do not disappear in the course of further input and instruction. According to Selinker (1972) and Ellis (1997), fossilization is usually brought about by intense L1 interference, lack of sufficient corrective feedback, or lack of communicative pressure to be accurate in communication beyond intelligibility.

In the methodological context, error analysis is still among the major methods of analysing interlanguage development. Through systematic classification of errors of learners, the researchers and the instructors will be able to pin-point the learner hypotheses and gaps in development (Corder, 1981). Error analysis is a research process and a pedagogical diagnostic tool that contributes to the customized teaching (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

The Arabic Second Language (ASL)

Arabic shows unique acquisition issues because of its root-and-pattern morphology where the words are built up of interlaced consonantal roots and vowel template. Abu-Rabia (2001) also discovered that learners have a difficult time internalizing this non-linear morphological system, relying, as they do, upon memorization and simplified pattern analogies, which provide them with inaccuracies in verb formation and pluralization. In this regards integrating language immersion into Arabic language instruction plays significant role to overcome this non-linear morphological system. Nasirudeen (2024) also stated that language immersion arrangements are equally effective to promote language speaking and listening proficiency with Arabic language speaking. This shows how actual practise is useful when the audience had marked increase fluency on the comprehension part of the language compared to the ease and ease of understanding before the audience before.

Verbal agreement and aspect marking further tax learners' cognitive processing. Arabic makes the learners encode person, gender, number, tense and aspect at the same time, and this is usually lead to overgeneralized masculine or default forms (Alhawary, 2011).

Gender and number concord remain fossilisation prone fields. Errors in agreement between adjectives and their nouns and verbs with subjects indicate L1 systems interference or lower morphology of agreement. Such miscalculations are common among the higher-order learners (Alhawary, 2011).

Another significant challenge is Arabic case endings (i r a b). According to Ryding (2014), because case endings mostly are acoustically shortened or not pronounced in spoken Arabic and are inconsistently written in the instructional resources, learners perceive them as unnecessary and do not use them both in written and verbal production.

To add to these problems there are orthographic problems of a consonant-based script which fails to represent short vowels in standard documents. Diacritics are often omitted, gemination (consonant doubling) is distorted, and letters shapes are confused (Ryding, 2014). Current research is mainly recording repeat errors but not much incorporating findings into pedagogically practical frameworks informed by the interlanguage theory. Such a descriptive focus creates a gap in classroom-based applied research.

Interlanguage and Pedagogy
Gass and Selinker (2008) discuss pedagogically that interlanguage analysis serves two critical purposes: diagnostic assessment and developmental curriculum sequencing. Error profiles are clinically used to indicate the developmental preparedness and fossilization risks of the learners. In the curriculum, interlanguage data-informed instruction guarantees the timeliness of target forms introduction. As Ellis (2006) illustrates, explicit form-based teaching is quite effective when directed to those forms that arise in the interlanguage of learners and reinforced with corrective feedback interventions, the recast and metalinguistic explanation. Lightbown and Spada (2013) also provide that feedback enhances acquisition when it is applied to systematic errors and not to single mistakes.

Nevertheless, as much as all these advantages are exhibited, the teaching of the Arabic language is still marred by the sequencing and unorganized approach to correcting the language. It is uncommon that learner's corpora and systematic diagnostic systems are adopted and as such the benefits of interlanguage pedagogy are limited.

Methodology
Research Design
An error frequency analysis and classroom observation based on mixed methods approach were employed.

Participants
The participants were 40 learners of Arabic in their university level (n = 22 in beginner course and n = 18 in intermediate course). They had English, Hausa, Malay, Yoruba and Urdu as their L1 backgrounds. None of them were heritage speakers of Arabic.

Data Collection
The data was collected using three sources:
1. **Written materials:** Short essays, translations (exercises), grammar worksheets (around 3,200 words of learner writing)
2. **Oral samples:** Structured interviews and role-play discussions.
3. **Observations in classrooms:** Teacher correctional measures and learner reactions in eight weeks.

Data Analysis
The errors were classified according to the SLA standards (Ellis, 1997) into following categories:

no	Category	Examples
1.	Phonology	Simplification of /h/ and /'/.
2.	Morphological	wrong conjugation of the verb, incorrect use of gender.
3.	Syntactic	Transfer-based VSO over SVO order.
4.	Lexical	False lexical cognates, root confusion.
5.	Orthographic	Omission of vowel, wrong doubling of letters.

Error frequencies were analysed and matched with **Selinker's interlanguage processes** to determine development versus fossilization tendencies.

Results
Interlanguage Features
High frequency errors were:
- Feminine nouns used in masculine form of default (31%).
- There are wrong forms of plural sound that use the wrong sound plurality (24%).
- Failure to write short vowels (29 percent).
- Irregular use of definite article (22%).
- Reduction of emphatic and guttural consonants in speech (19%)

Patterns of Fossilization and Development
The errors of the development were in word order variation, the experiments with tense marking, and experimental plural formations.
The possible fossilization clues were those of the constant gender agreement errors, the incorrect use of articles even in intermediate learners, which agrees with the results of Abu-Rabia (2001).

Instructional Intervention and Outcomes
Teachers implemented:
- Overt morphological teaching founded on learner mistakes.
- Strategies based on corrective feedback (metalinguistic explanations, recasts).
- L1 contrastive explanations

After eight weeks:
- There was an increase in morphological accuracy by 28% percent.
- The orthographic accuracy improved by 19%.
- There was an increase of phonological accuracy by 23%.

Discussion

Findings verify that the errors committed by Arabic learners are systematic and developmental and therefore interlanguage analysis can be used in pedagogical planning. Treatment based on actual learner challenges was more successful than general grammar teaching. In addition, the fact that the possible patterns of fossilization were identified enabled the instructors to use more corrective methods sooner.

The findings reflect those identified on SLA research (Ellis, 2006; Lightbown and Spada, 2013) and apply it specifically to Arabic instruction.

Pedagogical Implications

Arabic instructors should:

- Use learner corpora in needs analysis.
- Correlate grammar teaching and developmental course.
- Use types of feedback in a strategic way:
1. *Revisions of phonological errors.*
2. *Morphology: Metalinguistic feedback.*
3. *Syntax consciousness-raising activities.*
- Introduce L1-Arabic contrastive analysis particularly morphological and orthographic issues.
- Follow-up on fossilization by continuous interlanguage evaluation.

Limitations

- Limited time of data collection.
- Small sample size
- Minimal evaluations of long term acquisition profiles.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that interlanguage analysis can be used to enhance outcomes of instruction in Arabic L2, diagnose instructional focus, and instructional outcomes. Viewing learner errors as constructive information other than failure will help teachers to establish effective and reactive curriculums. The future studies are to investigate the large scale learner corpus and longitudinal instruction intervention.

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