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The Cookie Theft Task: Measuring English oral language proficiency among Arabic speakers learning English as a foreign language

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Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is often a language of choice for interaction between individuals from different linguistic backgrounds. As native languages may be structurally completely different from English, acquisition of EFL for successful interaction should be examined to understand what specific elements of English may be problematic for speakers of other languages.

Additional language acquisition is subject to cross-linguistic transfer even between languages that are not closely related. *Interdependence Hypothesis* assumes that transfer will occur if native language proficiency (L1) is very high and can support acquisition of additional language (Cummings, 1979). The *Linguistic Proximity Model* (Westergaard, et al., 2016) suggests that if languages have overlapping features, there will be a facilitative effect on acquisition, but structurally distant languages may show interference. Arabic, a Semitic language is very distant from English, a Germanic language. Even though Arabic inflectional morphology is very complex compared to English one, it may still be problematic for Arabic speakers to achieve some proficiency in the use of morphosyntactic structures that are not present in their L1. It must be noted that Arabic speakers are considered bilingual even before they start learning additional languages, because it is a diglossic language: its oral form is different from the Modern Standard Arabic that students learn in school. In addition, research suggests that general L2 proficiency (EFL in our study) may surpass morphosyntactic knowledge, and even very skilled uses of EFL will still show deficits in the use of correct morphological inflections (Lazaro, 2012).

Present Study

This study investigated acquisition of English morphology among Arabic speaking 6th graders in their fourth year of learning EFL. English is a semi-official language in modern-day Israel and all students, Hebrew and Arabic native speakers, start learning English in 4th grade, to prepare for their High school exit exams.

The aim was to identify morphological inflections and morphosyntactic structures in EFL that may present specific difficulties for speakers of Arabic. We concentrated on **plurals, present progressive (-ing), past tense (-ed), 3rd person present –s, copula (form of the verb "to be" used as a main verb)** in obligatory context, as well as use of prepositions (*on, in, over, etc.*) and conjunctions (*and, because, so, etc.*) that created complex sentences. We also looked at word order (correct sentences), as English has rather strict SVO word order, while Arabic has VSO, with possible variabilities in the word order. The study examined the acquisition of EFL morphosyntactic structures by analyzing elicited oral narratives.

Methodology

Participants: 85 Arabic speaking students (44 f and 41 m) participated in this study. The study was approved by the Ministry of Education Chief Scientist Bureau in modern-day Israel. The participation was voluntary, and all parents signed the Informed Consent.

All the participants were between the ages of 10 and 11 at the time of data collection which was part of a longitudinal study in 2018. The Arabic speaking students were chosen from four different schools within the country. As the Arabic speaking participants were from several different cities, their spoken dialects varied in relation to the city where the participants lived. The average socio-economic index for the Arabic speaking schools was 5.66 on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is the highest and 10 is the lowest. However very large discrepancies can be found within the Arabic speaking populations that were included in the study.

Task: All participants were tested on Phonological memory (cognitive/linguistic skill), Arabic and EFL Morphological awareness (MA) and Reading comprehension ARC, ERC), to access current level of proficiency. All students were asked to tell a story in English based on a "Cookie Theft" picture. The narratives were recorded and transcribed. All the instances of morphological inflections under investigation were marked as 1 – present, or 0 - not observed. We also marked the instances of errors in the obligatory contexts.

Results

Data Analysis: The study is descriptive in nature. We present the total number of sentences, nouns and verbs, and the percentage of correct use of morphological inflections under consideration.
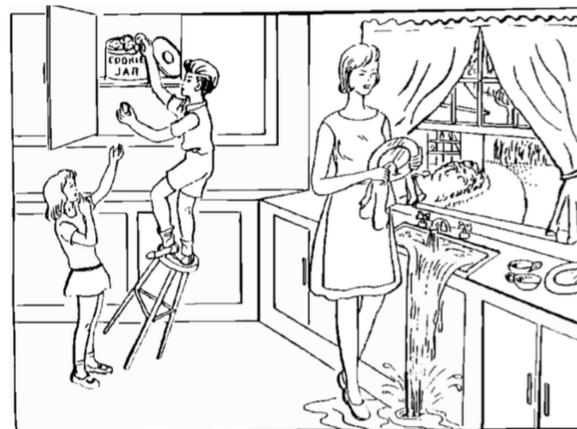

Figure 1. Cookie Theft (Goodglass & Kaplan, 1983)

Table 1. Test Results in Arabic and EFL

Task in %-le	Mean (SD)
Phonological Memory	93.08 (8.24)
Arabic MA (Root Pattern)	89.23 (15.69)
Arabic Reading Comp	76.34 (23.31)
English MA	44.97 (29.77)
English Reading Comp	43.37 (26.19)

As seen from the table, Arabic speakers showed high scores in PM (cognitive/linguistic skill, important for language acquisition) and MA in Arabic. They showed above average scores in ARC and low average scores in EFL MA and RC. (Table 1).
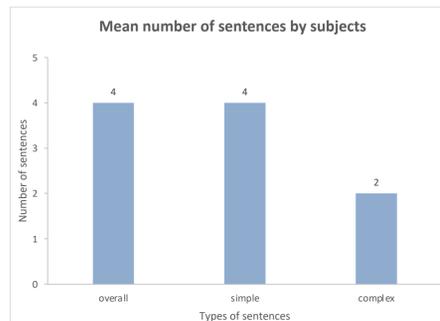

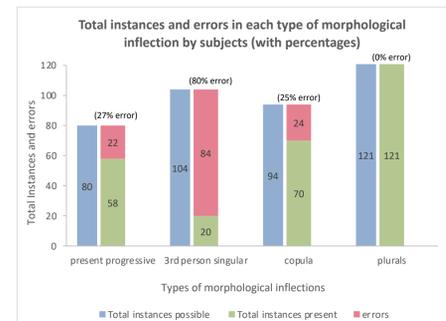**Figure 2.** Mean number of sentences by subjects

Figure 3. Total instances and errors in each type of morphological inflection by subjects (with percentages)
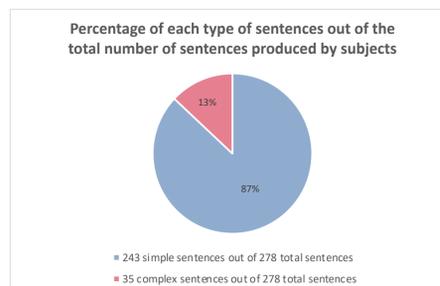

Figure 4. Percentage of each type of sentences out of the total number of sentences produced by subjects
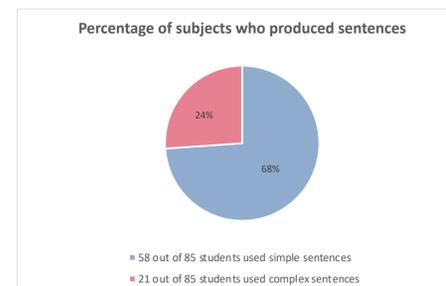

Figure 5. Percentage of subjects who produced sentences

Discussion

This study was conducted to examine acquisition of English morphosyntactic structure by Arabic speakers in their 4th year of studying EFL and identify specific morphological elements that may present difficulties. We chose to use oral narratives as a measure of EFL knowledge and use of morphological inflections, because oral narratives are a valid measure of linguistic growth among monolingual and bilingual/multilingual individuals (Soodla & Kikas, 2010). Producing narratives requires integration of different cognitive and linguistic skills, such as lexical and morphosyntactic knowledge, as well as knowledge of general discourse rules and metacognitive skills.

English and Arabic differ significantly in morphosyntactic structures. While Arabic inflectional morphology is very complex, and is considered morphophonemic, English inflectional morphology is relatively simple. However, typological distance between the languages, as proposed by the *Linguistic Proximity Model (*Westergaard, et al., 2016) makes it difficult for Arabic speakers to acquire specific morphosyntactic structures used in English and absent from Arabic. This was seen in the number of errors produced by Arabic speakers in the sentences that required the use the verb inflections that they are not using in their native language. In particular, we saw most of the errors in marking 3rd person present tense, which does not exist in Arabic. Present progressive marking was not as problematic. But this form is used very often, and it is also the form that children acquire very early.

Arabic speakers also had difficulties producing correct sentences, because the word order in Arabic is different from English. However, the Arabic speakers were able to produce some complex sentences, which means, that they can acquire the correct morphosyntactic structures in English, but it may take some time. Since every student in modern-day Israel is taught EFL in the same way, it may also be important to have a more individualized approach to teaching that will help students to achieve better success.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The morphological differences in Arabic and English have an impact on the level of proficiency in acquiring English as a Foreign Language. Overall, the Arabic speaking students did have difficulty in acquiring English based on the errors in morphological inflections and structures that do not exist in their native language.

For future research, I will examine the narratives based on the same picture, produced by Hebrew speakers. I plan to examine the similarities and differences between Arabic and Hebrew in their acquisition of English morphosyntax. Another interest would be to observe how the sociocultural factors affect Arabic and Hebrew speaking students in their learning English as a Foreign language.

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