Ambiguity tolerance of Egyptian EFL undergraduates: A sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and pedagogical perspective[1]

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Abstract

T *he study examines why Egyptian EFL undergraduates find it difficult to comprehend the proper syntactic structures of their target language (i.e. English) and particularly translate the meaning of an Arabic-written source text into English. Such differences are analyzed in line with the gender variables (i.e. male and female Egyptian learners) and their ability to tolerate the syntactic and connotative differences which exist between the English and Arabic languages. This difficulty emanates from the syntactic differences which exist between their mother tongue (i.e. Arabic) and their target language (i.e. English). Such syntactic differences lead to linguistic uncertainty on the part of Egyptian EFL undergraduates. The ability of overcoming such linguistic uncertainties may vary among the Egyptian EFL learners particularly when they fulfill a translation-based task from a source text written in Arabic into English. This is attributed to the fact that translation from a mother tongue into the target language is the main field in which such syntactic differences become visible and tangible. The study provides implications for the teaching of translation as a core course at the Department of Languages and Translation.*

Key words: Ambiguity tolerance, Pedagogical perapective.

Introduction

Arab EFL learners may generally find it difficult to comprehend the proper syntactic structures of their target language (i.e. English) and particularly translate the meaning of an Arabic-written source text into English. This difficulty emanates from the syntactic differences which exist between their mother tongue (i.e. Arabic) and their target language (i.e. English). Below are some examples of the syntactic and morphological differences between both languages as stated in the study conducted by the Defense Language Institute (1974):

1. It is not necessary to use an auxiliary verb in forming question in Arabic (e.g. Min Ayna Ant?). However, the English translation of this sentence will not be considered correct should the auxiliary be deleted from the question (where are you from?).

2. The Arabic noun phrase does not need a preposition (e.g. bab al-fasl) in contrary to the English noun phrase (the door of the classroom).

3. Possessive adjectives are usually placed after the nouns in Arabic (e.g. qalami). They, however, precede nouns (e.g. my pen).

4. Adjectives are usually placed after the nouns in Arabic (Al-kitab Al-jadid) in contrary to its English equivalent (the new book).

5. The tense differences between the two languages, particularly the present and past perfect tenses in English which are usually expressed in the Arabic language by using the present and past simple tenses (e.g. I have done it today, ?malthu Al-youm; I did it yesterday, ?malthu Alyoum). The perfect and past forms of the English verb 'do' are expressed in Arabic by the same form '?malthu' even though there is a difference in the meanings of the two sentences.

6. The different marks of verb inflections in both languages.

Furnham and Marks (2013) reported that ambiguity intolerance affects the productive skills of ESL learners and ESL

learners may differ in their ability to tolerate ambiguity; some learners learn more effectively when there are opportunities of risk, experiments and interaction (i.e. ambiguity-tolerant students). Other learners may learn more effectively when there are less risk and less flexible and more structured situations (i.e. ambiguity-intolerant students).

Statement of the problem

This study will investigate into the performance differences in English grammar among Egyptian EFL learners in relation to their ability to tolerate the linguistic uncertainty resulting from the syntactic differences between their mother tongue (i.e. Arabic) and their target language (i.e. English). The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

Questions

The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How does the ability of translation from Arabic into English differ among Egyptian EFL learners according to their gender differences?
2. How do Egyptian EFL learners vary in their ability to translate from Arabic into English according to their learning style in terms of ambiguity tolerance and intolerance?
3. How do Egyptian EFL males differ from their Egyptian EFL females in their tolerance/ intolerance of ambiguity?

Aims:

The study aims to analyze the variance in the ability of translation from Arabic into English between Egyptian male and female undergraduates. It also aims to determine how Egyptian male undergraduates differ from their female counterparts in tolerating the syntactic and connotative differences between the English and Arabic languages. The present study aims to provide implications to EFL lecturers as it provides them with an opportunity to find out to what extent the psychological factor of

ambiguity tolerance/intolerance can affect the learning ability of their students.

Significance of the Study:

The study is significant since it has implications on the improvement of English language learning ability in the Egyptian context in general and it sheds light on the process of Egyptian EFL undergraduates' performance in English grammar and translation in particular. This study is significant as well because it sheds some lights on the structural features of the Egyptian English as a variety of the non-native English speaking varieties.

Literature Review:

The review of previous studies is of three trends: first the syntactic differences between Arabic and English (Obeidat, 1998; Badr, Zbib and Glass, 2009; Ali and Abidin, 2011; Alduais, 2012; Zawahreh, 2013; Al Aqad, 2013; Momani and Altaher, 2015). Second, differences in relation to ambiguity tolerance among EFL learners in general and Arab EFL learners' performance in particular (e.g. Brown 2001; Maubach and Morgan, 2001; Kissau, 2006; Erten and Topkaya, 2009; Kamran, 2011; Nezhad, Atarodi and Khalili, 2013); third the effect of ambiguity tolerance on EFL learners' ability in translation (e.g. Ashouri and Fotovatnia, 2010).

As to the first trend of literature review Zawahreh (2013) conducted a contrastive study to determine the problematic differences result from translating the Arabic adjectives into English among Jordanian EFL learners. Zawahreh found that it is a difficult and misleading process to translate the Arabic adjectives into English because of the problematic differences between the Arabic adjectives and their English equivalents. Zawahreh recommended that Jordanian EFL learners should take into considerations three factors when translating the Arabic adjectives into English. These factors include context, parts of speech and collocation. Similarly, Momani and Altaher (2015) carried out a contrastive linguistic study between Arabic and English from a syntactic perspective. They indicated that there

are syntactic similarities between Arabic and English including the conditionals. Such a similarity helps Jordanian EFL learners learn the English conditionals through the positive transfer of Arabic. In addition, Badr, Zbib and Glass (2009) examined the rearrangement of phrase syntax resulted from machine translation from the English source language into Arabic. They provided rules of rearrangement of phrase syntax and they combined the rearrangement with Arabic morphological segments. This machine translation technique helps improve translations from both English into Arabic and Arabic into English. Alduais (2012) argued that the simple sentence structures exist in both English and Arabic and both standard languages share some similarities and differences as well. Alduais used Chomsky's theory of transformational generative grammar in order to explain the elements of simple sentence structures in standard Arabic and standard English. Chejne (1969:334-5) cited by Alduais (2012:805) explains "the basic syntax of Arabic sentence is not unusually complex, there are two basic sentences types usually referred to as the nominal and the verbal sentences. Simply, he goes on, a nominal sentence is the one which starts with a noun (NP) and a verbal sentence is the one which starts with a verb (VP)". Indeed Alduais' study is both qualitative and quantitative. It is qualitative in the sense that it contrasts the structure of simple sentence in both standard Arabic and standard English in the form of statement. On the other hand, it is considered as a quantitative study as well in the sense that its purpose claims that the simple sentence structure in the standard Arabic in the form of statement always consists of [VP+NP+..]. Meanwhile the same form of simple sentence structure in the form of statement in standard English always consists of [NP+VP+...]. Alduais collected corpus of 1000 simple sentences to represent the standard Arabic and English languages with 500 sentences for each one. In this regard, Alduais (2012:500) points out "Results indicated that SA is a free-word-order system in the case of structuring a simple sentence in the form of statement compared to the SE which proved a fixed-word-order language. Additionally and

predictively, learners of both Arabic and English as foreign language (AFL), (EFL) and as Second language (ASL), (ESL) have difficulties when attempting to write a sentence. For learners of English it is more difficult as they do not have verbal, nominal and equational sentences in their written language, so they move from one type to three or [four] types of sentences in the form of statement. For Arab learners, they have serious problems in subject-verb agreement but which was not the researcher's concern. Other problems according to this research-paper could be in translation in both cases but it is more in the case of Arab learners especially in the case of the verb (Be)". Furthermore, Obeidat (1998) compared different stylistics used in the translation of two literary English and Arabic texts. These literary texts are namely *The Thief and the Dogs* by Najib Mahfouz and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Obeidat randomly selected a corpus of one thousand words from each novel and compared that corpus to the translated texts. Obeidat analyzed the collected corpus based on the linguistic elements of lexis, syntax and textual features. An analysis of frequency was carried out between the lexical corpus and the translated texts in order to determine abstraction levels, specificity degrees and definition. Both types of analysis qualitative and quantitative were conducted on the grammatical categories exist in the source text and the translated text. In this concern, Obeidat (1998:2) stated "Apart from structural differences, the difference in the number of words between the Arabic and the English translations seems to suggest the existence of more significant differences in the distribution of vocabulary which can be attributed to differences in the style of prose writing in the two languages which is to a large extent governed by situations". Obeidat indicated that the Arabic texts were greater in number of nouns than the English texts, however, a fewer number of Arabic were modified by using other nouns or adjectives. Obeidat added that the number of adjectives in the English texts surpasses that number of adjectives in the Arabic texts. Moreover, in another contrastive study, Ali and Abidin (2011) compared the syntactic differences between the Arabic and Malay sentence structures.

They described the syntactical features of Malay and Arabic languages including word order, noun phrase, passive voice, objects and sentences. They handled the nominal sentence and verbal sentence in both languages. As the researchers compared the subject of syntax in both languages, they reported that there are certain syntactic similarities and differences between Malay and Arabic particularly in the nominal sentences, conditional sentences and they determined the difference in subject noun phrase which is immediately dominated by the node S is the subject. Furthermore, Al Aqad (2013) syntactically analyzed the adverbs in Arabic compared to those in English using the X bar theory. The researcher examined the various positions of adverbs in six sentences written in Arabic and English with three sentences representing each language. The researcher found similarities and dissimilarities between adverbs in both English and Arabic.

As to the influence of gender on the EFL learners' tolerance of ambiguity, Kamran (2011) for example examined how the Iranian EFL learners vary in their tolerance of ambiguity. Kamran found that Iranian EFL learners have high tolerance of ambiguity scores when learning the English reading skills. However, their lowest ambiguity tolerance scores exist in the English writing skills. Kamran found no statistical significance between Iranian male and female EFL learners concerning their ability to tolerate ambiguity or linguistic uncertainty. In contrast, Maubach and Morgan (2001) found that male students of French and German have higher tolerant of ambiguity scores than their learning style of ambiguity tolerance. On the contrary to Maubach and Morgan's findings, Kissau (2006) and Erten and Topkaya (2009) found that females are more tolerant of ambiguity than their male counterparts. Furthermore, Nezhad, Atarodi and Khalili (2013) asserted the positive correlation between the Iranian EFL learners' ability of ambiguity tolerance and their development of comprehension reading skills.

As to the effect of ambiguity tolerance on EFL learners' ability in translation, Ashouri and Fotovatnia (2010) examined

the beliefs of 120 intermediate Iranian intermediate EFL learners about translation into English in terms of ambiguity tolerance and risk taking. Data were collected through four types of tests, namely ambiguity tolerance test adopted from Mclain (1993), risk-taking test, the inventory for beliefs about translation (IBT) which is originally designed by Liao (2006), and a placement test in English. The researchers found that the participants' tolerance of ambiguity is not statistically significant to their beliefs about translation. They explained that those Iranian learners of low ambiguity tolerance scores positively view translation and want to experience it because English differs from their mother tongue. Meanwhile, those Iranian EFL learners of high tolerance of ambiguity scores feel comfortable when learning English because of their positive belief about translation.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data were collected from 60 Egyptian EFL undergraduates who are enrolled at the Department of Languages and translation at the Higher Institute for Specific Studies. The participants were divided into two groups: group (A) and group (B). Whereas group (A) includes 30 Egyptian EFL male undergraduates, group (B) comprises 30 Egyptian EFL female undergraduates.

Instruments of Data Collection

Data were collected through two instruments, namely (1) a translation-based test and an ambiguity tolerance/intolerance questionnaire. The first instrument includes an Arabic text which participants were asked to translate into English. The second instrument of data collection were the Second Language ambiguity tolerance/intolerance Scale (SLATS). The SLATS consists of 12 items. It is a developed form of Christopher Ely's Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity scale which is published by Joy Reid's Learning Styles in the ESL/EFL Classroom, (Reid, 1995:216-17). Participants will be asked to circle the response that describes their opinions. The responses

are in the Likert-scale with four responses, namely Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Responses are coded as follows: SA=4; A=3; D=2; and SD=1.

Table 1: Scheme of SLATS Scores

Code	Score Range	Description
1	1-12	Very tolerant
2	13-24	Tolerant
3	25-36	Intolerant
4	37-48	Very intolerant

Data Analysis

Data were theoretically analyzed based on three principles: (1) rules of contrastive analysis between English and Arabic types of sentence structures; (2) the influence of gender as a social variable on second language performance and (3) the psychological variable of tolerance and intolerance of ambiguity among ESL and EFL learners. In addition, statistical analysis will be used in terms of One Way Analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to determine the differences between male and female participants in performance in the translation text; the differences in their ability to tolerate the syntactic and connotative difference between English and Arabic languages.

In other words, One way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed in order to Analyze and compare the number of responses to the items included in the second language tolerance scale of within each group of participants (i.e. group A and group B) and between these two groups including the male and female Saudi EFL participants. It indicates the statistical significance of differences exist between the two groups at the probability level of $P < .5$.

Results

Performance in the translation-based task

Below are some examples of syntactic trouble spots of Egyptian EFL learners' performance in translation:

- Copula deletion such as auxiliary verbs

- Possessive adjectives which are usually placed after the nouns in Arabic (e.g. qalami). They, however, precede nouns (e.g. my pen).
- The tense differences between the two languages, particularly the present and past perfect tenses in English.
- Different ways of subject-verb agreement.
- The different syntactic order of the verb phrase (e.g. you must go with him; yajib ?an tadzhab m?ahu).
- A special feature of the passive voice in Arabic is that the agent cannot be expressed in it (e.g. the report was read by the officers/ quri'a al-taqrir).
- Selection of the exact equivalent due to word connotation

Impact of gender on L2 Performance

Female participants outperformed their male counterparts in translation-based task performance as their performance mean score is (6.4) compared to (3.5) for male participants. ANOVA indicates that there is a significant difference in translation performance in terms of participants' gender at the 0.05 level. Results are similar to those reported by Ali and Abidin (2011) and Al Aqad (2013).

Table 2: ANOVE of gender and participants' performance in translation

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	259.247	15	86.416	206.646	.000
Within Groups	4.182	15	.418		
Total	263.429	30			

Ambiguity tolerance and L2 performance

Results indicate that female students are more tolerant of linguistic uncertainty compared to their male counterparts as their ambiguity tolerance mean score is (8.4) compared to that of male students (4.6). ANOVA shows there is a statistically significant relationship between ambiguity tolerance and

performance in translation. Results are similar to those reported by Maubach and Morgan (2001) and Kamran (2011).

Table 3: ANOVE of ambiguity tolerance and participants'
performance in translation

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	241.862	15	120.931	61.680	.000
Within Groups	21.567	15	1.961		
Total	263.429	30			

Implications for teaching of translation

Egyptian EFL learners need further training to overcome syntactic differences between Arabic and English which impede their ability to translate from Arabic into English. Those in charge of teaching translation should find proper methods to make their students aware of the differences between Arabic and English. For examples, the different formations of NP and VP, the passive voice, tenses, verb expression in '-ing' functioning as subordinate clauses, word connotation in both languages.

The findings of the Second Language ambiguity tolerance/intolerance Scale (SLATS) give insight into Egyptian EFL learners' ability to tolerate linguistic uncertainty which affects their learning process due to the failure or success of teaching and learning interaction. Some participants expressed that it bothered them that they did not understand the explanation of their lecturers. Others indicated a degree of ambiguity intolerance related to the translation course being taught. They expressed that syntactic differences between Arabic and English bothered them to a certain extent, or it bothered them that they did not understand some grammar rules. Findings were similar to those reported by Norton (1975), Mclain (2006), Ely (2009). Norton defined an intolerant learner as the one who tends to consider contradiction and inconsistency in knowledge as sources of psychological discomfort and threat to the learning process. Mclain reported that ambiguity tolerance affects the productivity skills of EFL learners while Ely explained that ambiguity tolerance hinders the learning process at three levels: (1) learning all linguistic skills; (2) practicing all linguistic skills;

and (3) adopting threat and psychological discomfort as permanent strategies.

Conclusion:

Performance in the translation-based task varies among Egyptian EFL learners according to their gender as female participant outperformed their male counterparts. It also varies according to their ability of tolerating linguistic uncertainty. The higher the ambiguity tolerance score, the better the performance in translation is. Syntactic differences between Arabic and English and word connotation are influential to Egyptian EFL learners' performance in translation.

Suggestions for further research:

1. There is a need to replicate the study using different samples at different educational levels.
2. It would be a useful task to compare the ability of ambiguity tolerance of participants from two different higher learning institutions.
3. The present study can be replicated using other linguistic skills like pronunciation, reading comprehension and writing.
4. Other factor that may affect Egyptian EFL learners' translation performance like motivation and attitudes towards learning English can be investigated.

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