It's All about My Mother [Language]:

The Effect of Mother Language on Spoken Errors

Made by EFL Arab Students

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Abstract

There is a paucity of empirical research documenting the errors made by Arab learners, specifically those enrolled in higher education, when acquiring spoken English. The current study examined the most common types of verbal errors made by 20 Arab tertiary students of English in Israel. Data were collected based on in-class oral presentations made by first-year students and observations of English lessons taught by third-year students. The most frequent errors were classified into three main categories: (a) grammar and syntax, (b) pronunciation, and (c) vocabulary choice.

Errors were documented by the researchers, who also served as course instructors/mentors. A significant number of errors (1050) were documented in the delivery of the presentations and lessons. Analysis of the results suggest that the documented errors are largely attributable to L1 interference (*interlingual* causes), although some derive from challenges inherent to English itself (*intralingual*). The importance of this study is that it clarifies the difficulties Israeli Arab learners face while speaking English as a foreign language, which can cast light on potential remedies.

Keywords: Arab students of English; Arab EFL learners; L1 interference; EFL oral proficiency

1. Introduction

Clarity in communication and proper pronunciation, entailing "reproducing the sound of the word through speech in such a way that any fluent speaker of the language would effortlessly know and understand the message" (Saylor 2005) is a major goal of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. For native Arabic speakers attaining this goal is far from easy, particularly with respect to English (Ahmad, 2011; Alfallaj, 2013; Al-Shumaimeri, 2003; Elyas & Al-Grigri, 2014; Fareh, 2010; Mohammed, 2009).

Although English is of great importance in Israel and for the Arab minority living there, Arab students must allocate most of their "language learning energies" to acquiring other priority languages, specifically Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which enables communication throughout the Arab world and is used in written communications and schooling, and Hebrew, the language of the surrounding society in which they live. This leaves less energy and enthusiasm for English language acquisition (Shohamy, 2014). Not surprisingly, Arab students' matriculation marks in English are generally low, especially when compared to those of their Jewish counterparts (Jabareen, 2007; Shohamy, 2014).

Given the residual energies available for studying English, Arab Israelis are naturally less confident about their capabilities when doing so. These feelings may result in low motivation and poor performance in English classes (Tsai, 2020), which is the primary place where they employ the language since it is infrequently used in their daily interactions. The lack of opportunities for practice outside the classroom contributes to the challenges encountered.

Other prospective factors contributing to the deficiencies displayed by Arab Israeli students of spoken English include the unappealing content and unengaging methods utilized in teaching, issues intrinsic to the English language itself, and an attempt to apply Arabic language patterns to the target language, a phenomenon known as L1 interference (CAL, 2011). L1 Transfer is "the carrying-over of learned responses from one type of situation to another" (Jie, 2008) and can be positive or negative depending on the languages involved. When L1 and the target language share some linguistic features, the transfer is considered positive because it facilitates or has a positive influence on learning L2. However,

"When L1 and the target language are very different, as is the case concerning Arabic and English, the L1 transfer, particularly relating to rules, is considered negative because it 'impedes or has harmful influence on the command of rules of L2" (Mohammad, 2015, p. 54–55).

The status of spoken English by learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), specifically in higher education, is a fertile area of research in the Arab world given the paucity of empirical research employing data relating to verbal proficiency. Non-Israeli Arab EFL learners are diglossic, a language phenomenon described by Ferguson (1959) that refers to the Arabic language's dialectal nature: Speech patterns are unique to a specific geographical area and are usually not written and are used in parallel to Modern Standard Arabic, the language employed in formal contexts and in written documentation.

However, the most significant contribution to research English learners among Arab students in Israel, whose identity is complicated due to their Palestinian origins (although they all have the Israeli identification document as they live within the Israeli borders) relates to triglossia, the "coexistence of three languages within a speech community" (Garner, 2009, p. 1033), which is an obstacle unique to them.

Specifically, Arabs in Israel speak a variety of vernaculars in daily situations, including code-switching with Hebrew in daily interactions and academic spheres, as well as employing MSA, which is studied in schools (Chaleila & Garra-Alloush, 2019). The challenge of triglossia is compounded by how very different the Arabic and English languages are in terms of syntactical, morphological, phonological, lexical, semantic, rhetorical and orthographical properties. These differences lend support to the thesis that L1 interference is a factor in explaining errors made by Arab learners when speaking English (e.g. Ali, 2007; Sabbah, 2015).

The current study focuses on L1 interference and the role it plays in explaining in the errors that Arab learners in Israel make in spoken English. The results presented in the following corroborate the thesis that Arabic interference is the main causes that result in verbal errors among Arabs when acquiring verbal English competency. We also note that structures inherent to the English language itself explain additional errors.

Accordingly, the research questions addressed by this study were:

(1) What types of errors do EFL Arab-Israeli students make in their spoken English? and

(2) To what extent can these be explained by first language interference?

These insights can be applied in improving the effectiveness of EFL language instruction among Arab students, which is a major goal of this research.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

Students in an academic course on oral proficiency were given an in-class assignment requiring them to recount a personal story of three- to five-minutes duration to their peers. Separately, third-year students were assigned to teach fifteen English lessons at a junior high school as part of their practicum requirements.

The oral presentations and lessons were observed by a pedagogical mentor who documented language errors made by the presenter. The errors were compiled and categorized and the frequency of occurrence within each group was analyzed and compared.

2.2 Approach

Keshavarz (1999, p. 11) discusses two main approaches to the study of language acquisition errors by foreign learners: Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA). The focus of CA is the comparison of the learners' mother tongue to their target language. EA centers on the linguistic aspects of learners' errors that apply to the study of any foreign language, which subsequently leads to a typology of errors that foreign learners make and the origin of these mistakes (Kim, 2001). We applied the CA approach, analyzing the errors made and identifying the sources within the students' L1 from which they derive.

2.3 Participants

The subjects involved in this study were twenty Arab Israeli EFL students, including 20 freshmen, in the English department of institution X, located in the Haifa District, Israel. First-year students, rather than more advanced students, were selected specifically so that they could also serve as a baseline for a comparative study that would later involve juniors or seniors. Also, this would be the first "academic" course taken by these students in which they would have to speak spontaneously in English.

We evaluated the spoken English of these students in order to identify their most frequent errors and to identify the logic behind these errors.

3. Results and Analysis

The errors detected were organized according to three categories: (a) Pronunciation, (b) Semantic/Lexis and (c) Grammar/Syntactic. These general categories were then differentiated by sub-categories and the results tabulated (Table 1).

Table 1. Presentation Errors by Category and Subcategory

Category	Sub-Category	Error type	Frequency	Subcategory Percentage	Category Percentage
Pronunciation	A1	Pronunciation	77	23	
	A2	Vowel Pronunciation	118	36	
	A3	Pronunciation of [p] as [b]	136	41	29
	Subtotal		331		
Semantic/ Lexical	A4	Wrong word choice	64	46	
	A5	Wrong preposition choice	74	54	12
	Subtotal		138		
Grammar/ syntactic	A6	Wrong tense	97	17	
	A7	Incorrect subject verb agreement	125	12	
	A8	Passive voice	24	2	
	A9	Articles (adding "the" as needed)	59	6	
	A10	Wrong sentence structure	140	24	59
	A11	Plural	46	8	
	A12	Dropping the helping verb	90	15	
	A13	Incorrect question form	86	15	
	Subtotal		581		
TOTAL			1050		

The results indicated that students made twice as many Grammar/Syntactic errors than those relating to Pronunciation, which were more than twice as prevalent as Semantic/Lexical mistakes (Fig. 1).

Within the Grammar-Syntactic category, which encompass the majority of the mistakes, nearly fifty percent of the errors are due to incorrect sentence structure (subcategory A10, 24%) and incongruous subject-verb structure (A7, 22%). The use of the wrong tense (A6) accounts for 17% of this category of mistakes, and dropping the helping verb (A13) and incorrect question form (A13) each contributed 15 percent. Approximately 30% of the

mistakes relating to syntactical issues are due to neglecting the use of articles (A9), inappropriate employment of the passive voice (A8) and incorrect plural forms (A11).

Semantic and lexical mistakes constituted the smallest proportion (12%) of identified errors. In this category, the mistakes were more or less evenly divided between wrong word choice (A4, 46%) and the incorrect use of prepositions (A5, 54%).
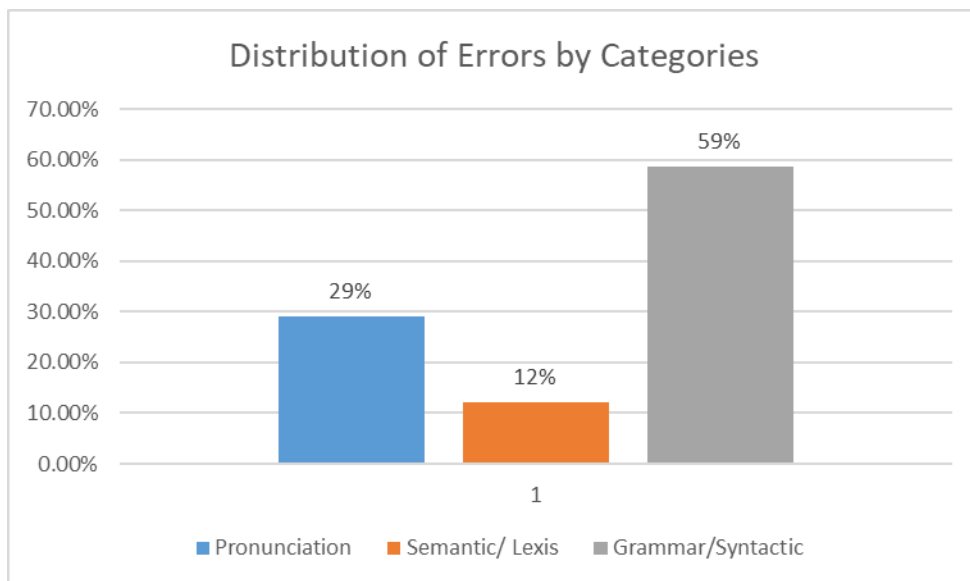

Figure 1. Relative Proportion of Errors by Category

Nearly a third (29%) of the errors detected were due to mispronunciation and the largest subcategory was the substitution of the consonant [b] for [p] (A3), which accounted for 41% of the errors in this category. This was followed by difficulties with vowel pronunciation (A2, 36% of errors) and more general issues of pronunciation impediment (A1, 23%).

Overall, 24% of errors are attributable to issues relating to vowel pronunciation (A2) and substituting the [b] consonant for [p] (A3). Incorrect subject verb agreement (A7) and wrong sentence structure (A10) accounted for another 25% of mistakes with the other 11 subcategories making up the other ≈50% of errors.

4. Analysis

4.1 Pronunciation Errors

Sharpling (2012, p. 1) asserts that "pronunciation is probably one of the hardest skills in English to learn."   One of the main language barriers that EFL Arab learners in Israel confront is that their L1, vernacular Arabic, in contrast to English, is considered an orthographically deep language. As Cook suggests (1997, p. 474), this generates orthographic difficulty resulting in potential problems with the phonological route to spoken English is taken given that these learners' L2 (SMA) and L3 (Hebrew) are orthographically shallow languages. Consequently, Arabic pronunciation and communication style interferes with that of the target language, English, resulting in accented speech (CAL, 2011).

Among the pronunciation problems that an Arab speaker encounter while speaking English are the following:

4.1.1 Consonant Clusters. The English phonetic system includes a wide range of consonant clusters, including two-segment initial clusters (pr, pl, gr, thr, thw, sp), which are not widely used in the Arabic phonetic system; English's three-segment initial consonant clusters (e.g., spr, skr, spl) are not found in Arabic at all. The absence of these consonant clusters in the phonetic system to which Arabic speakers are accustomed, leads learners to insert short vowels in order to "assist" pronunciation as, for example, in saying sipring* for "spring," or even more extremely perice* for "price" (Mohammed, 2009).

Terminal consonant cluster systems also represents a dramatic contrast between the two languages. Arabic has no three-segment or four-segment terminal clusters, while English has 78 three-segment terminal clusters and 14 four-segment clusters (Mohammad, 2009). Arabic speakers adapt to this by "pushing in" of short vowels to assist pronunciation. For example, "arranged" would be pronounced as *arranged**, and, more awkwardly, *monthiz** would be expressed for "months" (for more examples see Mohammad, 2009).

4.1.2 Insertion of /ɪ/. Many Arab speakers automatically tend to ease the pronunciation of some English monosyllabic words. A famous Egyptian movie, called *Assal Eswed* (*Black Honey*; Mar'iee, 2010) spotlighted this awkward phenomenon: After the leading actor enters a classroom and disrupts a lesson underway, the movie heroine, playing an English teacher, shouts "*inta izay tiqtahim* ilkilas *bishakl da*?" which translated means, "How dare you enter the class like this?" "*Kilas**" is a mispronunciation on the part of the teacher of the English word "class." The interloper mocks her by retorting "*kilas*!" which is   his own mispronunciation of "class," softened by   the vowel */ɪ/*, albeit with different positioning.

As English contains many monosyllabic words that are preceded three consonants, Arab learners opt to "break-up" this pattern by inserting a high short vowel /ɪ/ in order to smooth pronunciation. Mohammad (2009) refers to this vowel pushing as a rule-governed process, as all participants in the study he reported on inserted this vowel after the first consonant in the initial clusters, e.g., /sɪpreɪ/* for spray.

These divergences between the phonetic systems of English and Arabic challenges the dream of Arab learners to speak indistinguishably from native English speakers. This is made all the more cumbersome by English spelling.

Influence of English Spelling on Pronunciation. The Arabic writing system sharply contrasts with the English one. Arabic spelling is phonetic with the uttered sound corresponding to letters. English pronunciation is not phonetic and Arabic speakers tend to apply their native phonetic system to English words, sometimes ending up with words that do not exist at all in the target language. An example of this is the world "foreign," which is often mispronounced as forigin* (Mohammad, 2009).

4.2 Semantic/Lexical Errors

The results described in the foregoing show that the use of inaccurate words, inappropriate word choice and the incongruous use of prepositions and articles is common (Sriwantaneeyakul, 2018), which suggests that deficiencies in knowledge of the semantic properties of lexical items, accounting for only a small proportion of errors (12%), are likely of similar origin to those made by non-Arabic speaking EFL learners and therefore cannot be attributed to L1 interference.

4.3 Grammar/Syntactic Errors

Part of being a fluent speaker of any language requires syntactic competence, the ability to articulate the right word order. In particular, syntactic knowledge involves the ability to produce a coherent array of words which through their arrangement reflects grammatical relations that convey specific meaning. Inevitably, any language expression which involves an error in the syntactic rules of the target language is syntactically wrong and obfuscates meaning.

As English is a subject-verb-object language, verbal expression must abide by the syntactic and grammatical rules of that language (Branigan et al., 2006), which many Arab EFL students find difficult.

5. Discussion

Speaking English accurately and fluently requires the application of English basics such as word order, subject-verb agreement, and pronunciation. When the results of this study were reviewed, it was clear that many of the problems faced by Arab learners in Israel encounter is due to numerous English-language constructions that don't exist in Arabic. Among the most important of these is the verb *to be*, the auxiliary *do,* modal verbs and the indefinite article. Given that they don't exist or are used differently in Arabic, Arab learners often leave them out or use them incorrectly when speaking English, as in these examples (Table 2).

Table 2. Mistakes in subject-verb agreement

Intended English statement	Incorrect Expression
I am going home.	*I going home.*
He is happy.	*He happy.*
Do you like pizza?	*You like pizza?*
I like chocolate.	*I like the chocolate.*

Another grammar problem that Arab learners must deal that reflects L1/L2 interference is English's present perfect tense, which is not found in Arabic. Accordingly, Arab EFL learners normally use the past simple tense instead of using the present perfect. So instead of saying, for example, "I have finished," they say "I finished."

Arab EFL learners also frequently invert word order, particularly with reference to adjectives. In Arabic, adjectives follow nouns, while in English they precede them, which is a frequent source of confusion. For instance, learners such as those discussed in this study would tend to say "the class big," when referring to a "big class." (TEFL Academy, 2017).

In addition to the challenges deriving from diglossia, the existence of two languages in one community (Ferguson, 1959) that all Arabic-speaking EFL learners must contend with, those in Israel have a further encumbrance in the form of triglossia, which not only complicates their English learning generally, but renders speaking that language particularly complex and daunting due to "three-faceted interferences" (Chaleila and Garra-Alloush, 2019).

Most errors made by Arab Israeli EFL students can be attributed to the strong influence of their L1/L2, that is, the negative transfer of Arabic patterns into English and which constitutes first language interference. According to Butzhamm (2003), this is consonant with the rule formulated by J.P.F. Richter in 1806, when he wrote: "All the praise that is heaped on the classical languages as an educational tool is due in double measure to the mother tongue, which should more justly be called the 'Mother of Languages'; every new language can only be established by comparison with it…" (cited in Butzkamm, 2003). In other words, a person's mother tongue is the prism through which all language development derives.

Greater clarity relating to the patterns of errors discerned when they are viewed in the context of Arabic language.

5.1 Pronunciation Errors

5.1.1 General Pronunciation Errors. In most cases, errors under this category where students articulated the specific word literally, as in the word "comb," which the final [b] is often pronounced, or the word "closure" which frequently results with the articulation of the 's' as [z]. Another very common example is expressing words ending with -ing as [ɪng] rather than [ɪŋ], again reflecting the literal presentation of the word. Apparently, the error has to do with errors commonly made by their English-language role-models, that is, their English teachers.

5.1.2 Vowel Pronunciation. The Arabic writing system includes three short vowels, referred to as diacritics (*harakaat*), which do not necessarily appear as part of the written word, but rather as an optional tier in the written orthography (they are employed, though, in religious texts, children's books, and grammars (see: Habash 2007, p. 9). However, long vowels, of which there are three, are obligatory in Arabic orthography as part of the written word, appearing as one long letter. In most cases, the Arabic orthography has an almost linear relationship between sound and orthographic representation.

Due to the extensive differences between Arabic orthography and the presentation of vowels in the English writing system, an Arabic speaker will find it difficult to articulate vowels in an unfamiliar English word, particularly if the speaker has not previously encountered the term in an audial context. The dissimilarity of the two systems with regard to vowels invariably proves cumbersome to the Arab learner.

The English writing system does not entail the same relationship between sound and orthography and, accordingly, articulation of uncommon words, specifically words not known from a previous audial encounter or used infrequently in daily contexts will prove challenging for the Arab speaker of English as a foreign language. Errors are made due to a literal phonetic transcription of the written word, as in the following examples (Table 3).

Table 3. Examples made due to literal phonetic transcription

Word	Correct Pronunciation	Pronunciation of Literal Transcription
Mountain	[mawntajn]*	[mawntɪn]
Audience	[odjens]*	[odjans]
Closer	[klozɹɪ]*	[klozəɪ]

5.1.3 Pronunciation of [p] as [b]. In our study, many students said [b]art* for part, o[b]en* instead of open, [b]age* rather than page and [b]resent* sim[b]le* for [p]resent sim[p]le. Al-Saidat (2010) highlighted this phenomenon among Saudi students, who frequently replaced [b] with [p]. This can be directly traced to the absence of the consonant articulated as [p] in the Arabic phonological system. Given the influence of their L1, most Arab speakers including Arab Israeli EFL students apply the closest articulation to [p] that exists in the Arabic phonological system, that is [b], resulting in mispronunciation.

5.2 Grammar Errors

Grammatical errors were the most frequent ones recorded, which is consistent with what is observed in classrooms and other contexts when early learners speak in English. Such errors are prevalent in these settings.

By disaggregating the subcategories of grammatical/syntactical errors as described in Table 1 (subcategories A7-A13), it is apparent that these errors derive from the negative transfer of Arabic patterns to English (Table 4).

Table 4. Relationship of L1 to Grammatical Errors

Subcategory	Examples of Errors	Correct Form (positive form)	Explanation
Incorrect Subject-Verb Agreement (Subcategory A8)	The story take place at the village. I appreciate what she do for us. Let's see if Amal like to participate.	The story takes place in the village. I appreciate what she does for us. Let's see if Amal would like to participate.	Agreement between these parts is not required in Arabic, neither in verbal nor written forms (Chaleila & Garra-Alloush, 2019, p. 126).
Incorrect Question Form (A14)	What we are going to learn about? What you have done? What you think about John's behavior?	What are we going to learn about? (we are going to study) What have you done? (you have done) What do you think about John's behavior? (you think about John's behavior)	Students automatically translate word by word from their L1/L2, which lacks a helping verb constituent, or they express an exact translation of the positive sentence form rather than the question form.
	Then what we need to do?	Then what do we need to do? (we need to do)	

A third Grammar/Syntactic error subcategory that is widely evident in our results relates to the "fluctuation" of articles (A10), as manifested by the tendency among EFL Arab speakers to misuse this noun modifier by fluctuating between "the" and "a/ an" (Jaensch and Sarko, 2009). This observation has been described by other researchers including Folse (2008), Scott and Tucker (1974) and Chaleila & Garra-Alloush (2019) and can be attributed to the contrast between the English article system and that used in Arabic. Similar errors have been discussed concerning Japanese EFL learners, apparently due to the differences between the use of articles in Japanese and English, concerning the "fluctuation" of the definite article "the" with the indefinite article "a/an" among Japanese learners. (Ionin et. al., (2004).

5.3 Errors in Lexis and Wrong Word Choice (Semantics/Lexis Category

Twelve percent of the errors made by Arab-Israeli EFL learners in our study conformed to semantics and lexis, specifically to two subcategories, Wrong Word Choice (Subcategory A5) and Wrong Preposition Choice (A6). Chomsky (1965) defines competence as the speaker's ability to speak and understand a language; accordingly, when speakers make errors in word choice, this reflects deficient competence in using the target language.

The wrong word choice error could be attributed to the literal translation of words, or to the mobilization of similarly sounding words in the target language. Examples of the latter include "participating in decisions" instead of "participating in discussions," or using the term "predication" instead of "prediction." The fact that Arabic words can have different meanings tens to lead students to mistranslate terms into English out of context.

A prospective explanation of this type of error is what Corder (1973: 246) referred to as "post-systemic error," which echoes what other linguists have referred to as "performance errors." Chomsky (1965: 4) defines the latter as the application of a learner's L1 to the target language when speaking and in language behavior. Other linguists attribute such errors to students being in a hurry, inattentive or fatigue (see Ali, 2007: 2).

Likelier explanations for these semantic/lexical mistakes reported here, which is consistent with the explanations for the other error categories, are L1 interference and literal translation from L1. For example, one student asked

"What's the situation?" as a literal translation of the colloquial *shu-l-wadiʕ"* a phrase which is normally translated into English as "What's the situation?" Similarly, the use of the word "attach" as a substitute for the word "join" was obviously a literal translation because both terms are translated in Arabic dictionaries as *janDam*.

EFL learners in general struggle with English prepositions (Celce-Muricia & Larsen, 1983; Gass, 1983; James, 1996; Zughoul, 1979) and Arab EFL learners are no exception to the rule: Prepositions pose a number of challenges for them (Chaleila & Garra-Alloush, 2019). The larger number of prepositions in the English language (150; (Essberger, 2012) contrasts with Arabic, which has only twenty (Hassan, 1996). A single Arabic language preposition *fi*, for example, is variously translated into three English prepositions (as on, in, at). Due to the polysemous nature of Arabic prepositions (Nasser, 2013), on one hand, and the large number of prepositions in the English language and their range of specificity, on the other, the profusion of preposition-related errors is readily understood.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study suggests that the main cause for the majority of errors is referred to as being *interlingual* in origin, specifically due to L1 interference in English, which is a L3 for the non-Israeli Arab speakers given their diglossia and an L4 for Israeli Arab learners, who are triglossic.

The second major reason for error is *intralingual*, meaning that the source of difficulty emerges from the target language itself. Although the role of interlingual factors in explaining the errors made by Arab Israeli EFL students is emphasized in this study, there is no doubt that English itself, for example, its multi-consonant clusters and its plethora of prepositions, presents obstacles for these students.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

This study explores new ground research concerning verbal errors by Arab EFL learners living in Israel. However, given the Arabic language's diglossic nature, extending our findings to Arab EFL everywhere learners should be undertaken advisedly: There is a huge variety of dialects characteristic of native Arabic speakers and their diversity may result in patterns of errors different than those reported here.

The study is also limited by the heterogeneity of its subjects' background and proficiency varied: Information about their schooling and their previous exposure to English was not available. Also, the influence of emotional factors such as anxiety, which may be the cause for making errors, specifically in an oral context, were not considered.

6.2 Suggested Further Research

The current study addresses errors that Arab EFL learners make as a result of the interference of their mother language. However, given the variety of these errors, this study could only briefly address each subcategory. Future studies could productively and relevantly explore these issues further by focusing on the disparate error types (e.g., grammar, pronunciation) to characterize and explain them in greater detail.

Similarly, Mohammed (2009) notes issues pertaining to rhythm, stress, and intonation that result in frequent errors among Arabic-speaking EFL learners. Given the difficulty in documenting such errors during live recordings, they were beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, these issues are important and warrant particular attention.

Finally, Arab society in Israel is not a uniform group. It is comprised of multiple subgroups that live in different contexts (for example, homogenous Arab towns vs. mixed cities) and maintain different dialects. Future studies should investigate the association between certain contexts and the particular dialects associated with them and the type of errors made by those within them who study EFL.

6.3 Implications for EFL Teaching

W. Butzkamm's study (2003) calls for a drastic rethinking of the methodology of Foreign Language (FL) instruction. The findings of the current study support the principle that an individual's mother tongue comprise a "language supporting system" that affects all further language acquisition s/he undertakes. This is consistent with Bhela (1999, p. 22), who maintains that second language learners tend to depend on their L1 language structures when speaking a target language with respect to both syntactical structures and the phonological system. Our findings also support the findings of previous studies on the field, including Ali (2007) and Mohammad (2015) and of Chaleila and Garra-Alloush (2019) with relation to the written context.

Adapting EFL teaching methods so that they are adaptive to L1 interference will prove helpful not only to Arab learners in Israel but to all students whose first language diverges from the structures found in the target language.

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