Language Transfer and Grammatical Speaking Errors among Saudi Students

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Abstract
The English language has certainly become the most prominent international language in the world. Various initiatives in non-English speaking countries have sprung out to promote the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language and the Arab world is certainly no exception to the rule. The study will focus on Saudi Arabia where new plans, are to be initiated to improve students' language proficiency in view of the tremendous importance of English as an international language and its critical role in the commercial, industrial, technological, and audio-economic development of the Kingdom. This brings up to surface the issue of language transfer errors and its crucial role on speaking proficiency. This paper aims to discuss grammatical errors resulting from language transfer amongst Saudi students. The study will discuss the extent to which the language transfer theory is accepted or rejected. Accordingly, thirty Saudi students were interviewed in the process in Saudi Arabia The study will be accordingly divided into three main sections: firstly, it will look into the acceptance and the rejection of the language transfer theory. Secondly, an analysis of students` grammatical speaking errors will be presented according to the source of errors. Thirdly, this study will provide education practitioners to place greater focus on improving spoken English skills in order to raise speaking proficiency in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the paper will conclude with some suggestions to tackle the issue of speaking errors among Saudi students.
Keywords: Language transfer, Saudi Arabia, speaking, grammatical errors, learning input

1.0 Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language in the Arab World is certainly witnessing increasing interest and higher demands due to the many opportunities it provides to its speakers in many fields. However, one needs to keep in mind the challenging and often complicated process of learning English especially to Arab speakers. This is due to the completely different Arabic and English language systems. Being a Semitic language, Arabic enjoys many characteristics and features that distinguish it from other languages. Its grammar is very different from English grammar. This on its own, results on a large potential of errors when Arab learners produce written or spoken English unlike their English learning peers from Indo-European language families.

This paper is interested in studying language transfer speaking errors amongst Saudi Students. It provides a broader theoretical content in which to place the subject matter of language transfer and look at how this latter has developed in the Arab world. The study will then attempt to understand whether speaking errors in Second Language (L2) production are the result of language transfer. It will also seek to find out the most common grammatical speaking errors according to their importance and consistency in order to identify the major causes of L2 errors among Saudi speakers of English. It also includes an insight into.

The concept of language transfer was first introduced in the contrastive analysis hypothesis theory. Language transfer was considered to be a major component of this theory approximately 50 years ago. The concept of transfer according to the contrastive analysis hypothesis, assumes that certain elements in the first language hinder second language acquisition through negative interference or facilitate learning through positive interference. Therefore, linguists assume that by contrasting first and second languages, they could foresee those areas in which learners would encounter difficulties.

One of the general hypotheses concerning second language acquisition and language transfer in particular is contrastive analysis. According to Gass and Selinker (1983), the major assumption of this theory is that second language learning difficulties can be predicted and compared with the patterns of the native language and teaching materials can be chosen according to the similarities and differences. This theory was formulated by Lado (1957) and, in his view, in regard to linguistics across cultures, "we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and the culture to be learned with the native language and the culture of the student."(p.1–2) Thus, it might be suitable to refer to Fries' famous statement regarding the remarkable nature of contrastive analysis in regard to language learning: "The most effective teaching materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learnt, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner."(1945, p. 9)

Earlier studies of contrastive analysis had been tremendously successful for a long period of time until their rejection by many theoreticians in the field of linguistics and language learning. Such theoreticians claimed that the difficulty or ease of learning can sometimes be determined by other factors rather than the differences between the systems of two languages. Additionally, it is not possible for learners to learn only about the differences between languages while ignoring the similarities, which it is already assumed will facilitate learning since every language has its unique system and language patterns (Gass&Selinker,2008).

In spite of the rejection of perspectives of contrastive analysis in language learning and teaching, there remain a number of beliefs about the validity and reliability of that theory.

According to Wardhaugh (1970) in his reviews of the contrastive analysis hypothesis in relation to teachers of English and to speakers of other languages, it might be interesting for teachers and researchers of linguistics to accept, to some extent, contrastive analysis in the teaching and writing language curriculum, though it is difficult to practise the theory with respect to choosing teaching materials.

The language transfer theory has been studied by a plethora of researchers in the Arab world. For example, Hamdan(1994) studied the problem of language transfer and the acquisition of the English dative alternation by native speakers of Arabic. This often occurs when students use grammatical forms from their first language and apply the rules from their native language to the target language. Although this is a syntactic-based study, the results show that the issue of language transfer is a common problem among Arab learners. Many researchers have conducted studies to research this phenomenon. In a Saudi study, Alsamadani (2010) focused on the issue of language transfer as it occurs in written form in the Saudi context. Kamel (1990) studied the factors affecting writing performance in English as a foreign language; the results of this study showed that transfer from Arabic to English remains a problem for Arab learners and affects their writing skills. Labidi (1992),Rui (2011),and Ibnian (2011) all studied the learning strategies used by English as Foreign Language (EFL) students who were learning either vocabulary or grammar. These studies indicated that learners at various stages use forms of their native language and apply them to the target language.

Many additional studies have investigated this phenomenon (Khan, 2011; Samra, 2003; Al-Saidat, 2010). Alsamadani (2010) studied the possible relationship between Saudis' first language (Arabic) and second language (English) in relation to writing competence and students' ability to express themselves in the second language. Studies in the field of language transfer suggest that various first language elements, both oral and written, are transferred during second language (L2) linguistics production. Other studies involving language transfer have examined in depth the transfer of simple prepositions from standard Arabic to English (Mansoor, 2010). The type and classification of errors that is, whether they are grammatical or phonological in nature or whether they relate to vocabulary is an area that has been studied by researchers, such as Ahmad (2011), who focused on pronunciation problems among Saudi Learners at Najran University, Saudi Arabia. This study showed that the most common phonological errors involve those sounds that do not exist in the students' first language (Arabic) and that these are the ones that are most frequently mispronounced and affected by the sounds of the first language.

2.0 Methodology

The paper will be based on an analytical study whereby Interviews have been conducted on thirty Saudi Students in Saudi Arabia in order to identify the most common grammatical errors made by Saudi students in Saudi Arabia and to find out the level of language, the kinds of errors produced, and the procedures that students learn to overcome the transferred errors. Participants' speech will be analysed and grammatical speaking errors pointed at. The research uses interviews to collect the students' data, which is a very common method of conducting research according to Robson (1993). Interviews which will be recorded and used as main research instrument consist of open-ended questions, for instance, 'What major will you choose at university?' and 'What subject areas are you particularly interested in?' The aim of these questions is to turn the interview into a kind of conversation between the students and the interviewer. Some items will have follow-up questions, which will be used with some students in order to elicit their responses and encourage them to talk more as some of them may be shy to

speak when being recorded. The follow-up questions will serve to maintain the conversation alive as the aim will be to hear students speak, and not to solicit the correct answers to questions. Robson (1993) states that interviews, as a speech genre should contain an introduction at the beginning and a warm-up stage, after which the main body of the interview contains the main content. Finally, there should be a cool-off period, which indicates that the interview is about to end, followed by a concluding statement. Initially, the interviews will give the students a general idea of the purpose of the interview. The interview itself will be divided into three sections. First, there will be an informal interview in which the students will introduce themselves. Secondly, I will ask them to narrate a story or describe a television programme that they like to watch. This will help discern which aspects of grammar are produced as a result of language transfer. Thirdly, we will discuss most heard of or read about current affairs. Finally, in order to bring the conversation to a close, the interviews will be summed up with two or three sentences, such as thanking participants for their cooperation and for taking part in the study.

3.0 Literature review
3.1 Earlier Studies on First Language Transfer
The understanding of the nature of second and foreign language learning has developed significantly in recent years as a consequence of research into many dimensions of language and behaviour that were previously unexplored. Studies of the acquisition of different aspects and terms of language learning and teaching have been expanded. The concept of language transfer was initially taken from Lado (1957)'s remarkable claim about second language acquisition. He stated that "individuals tend to transfer the forms and meaning, and the distribution of forms and the meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and respectively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the cultures as practised by the native"(p.2). This quotation and the associated research have been a famous source for hundreds of bodies of empirical studies related to the field of second language acquisition in contact situations and the phenomena of language transfer. In, *Language Transfer and Language Learning*, Gass and Selinker (1983) illustrate the development of the language transfer concept, while Fries (1945) formulates the need for contrastive analysis in language learning by observing learners' errors and how they relate to the differences and similarities between the two languages, which will be explained more in the next section. In 1954, Harris proposed a model of "Transfer Grammar", basing his views on the translation type model as language learning founded upon a purely structural comparison of the two languages. Thus, the early notion of language transfer discussed a number of views on the importance of understanding how a second language is learned.

Transfer is a highly ambiguous term that has been intensively investigated by numerous researchers. Dechert and Raupach (1989) mention Weineriach (1953) and Juhasz (1970), who argued that "transfer in production…is found not only in second language productions in that they resemble the primary language, but also in the absence of appropriate target language structures as a result of an interaction from L1 to L2."(p. xiv) This signifies that the target language is facilitated by the structure of the native language and transfer usually occurs in a target language contact situation. Thus, the notion of transfer was first considered a major source of learner error before follow-up studies provided further evidence of transfer as a learning process rather than focusing on the negative role of the first language in understanding second language learners' errors. However, after the 1960s, the role of the native language in the

learning of the target language began to be considered as facilitative rather than as a source of errors resulting from the underlying similarities between languages. Selinker (1966) was the first to discuss language transfer from the native language to the second or foreign language by providing further evidence of transfer as a major process of language learning and by researching the relationship between transfer and interlanguage, which was always his primary area of focus. Though Selinker (1969; 1972) did not characterize what the learner's interlanguage should look like (Corder, 1981), he did repeatedly imply that transfer was one of the factors associated with the unique system of the learner language (Lui, 2001). It is important to acknowledge that after Selinker's revolution in the field of linguistics and his ccontroversial theory about language transfer, there were other views that argued that language transfer was relatively unimportant in language learning. For example, Krashen (1981) and Burt and Dulay (1974) believed that learning a second language was based on habit formation and that the first language played only a minimal role in learners' second language acquisition. Nevertheless, Gass and Selinker claimed that "there is overwhelming evidence that language transfer is indeed a real and central phenomenon that must be considered in any full account of the second language acquisition process."(1983, p.7)

Language transfer has also raised numerous questions in the field of language learning; these include what language transfer entails, what is actually transferred, how language transfer occurs, and what type of language transfer has been proven as truth. The main concern of language transfer is linked to second language learning and the level of language performance. Building upon Gass and Selinker's (2008) findings on Theories of second-language acquisition, "The identification of transfer was also discussed by Corder (1981), who remarked that it is the duty of both teachers of languages and native speakers of the language to point out the transfer according to the rules of language. At the same time, Corder implied that the source of data for transfer research lies in the learners' production or utterances" (Lui, 2001, p. 4). This means that it is important to observe second language learners' production of the target language in order to identify which area is being transferred from the native language. In this regard, the concept of transfer has been subjected to a host of studies that concern the role of the first language in second language learning. Ringbom illustrates the role of the first language as follows: "We are naturally inclined to assume that the nearer the foreign language is to our own, the easier it is" (1988, p. 44). Nevertheless, relevant findings and research carried out until the 1990s have revealed that the issue of transfer is still uncertain regarding whether the linguistic entities in the native language facilitate or hinder learning of the second language. Kasper (1996) identifies the concept of transfer in second language acquisition by comparing the differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language. This knowledge can then be used to determine whether transfer has a negative or positive influence.

In light of the arguments concerning the concept of transfer and, more specifically, whether it should be counted as an important stage in the language learning process or merely an unimportant notion in second language acquisition researchers have increasingly begun to focus their attention on this issue; it is obvious that there is, in fact, a need to delve more deeply into the concept of language transfer and its effects in light of the utterances produced by second language learners and, more specifically, by those who are beginners in this regard.

Gass and Selinker (1983) assume that, at some point of their learning process, most second language learners have experienced the effect of language transfer on their level of language proficiency and that serious treatment of this issue should refrain from examining different language learning and teaching approaches. The concept of language transfer is difficult

to pin down. According to Ellis (1997), language transfer refers to what can be used from the native language, 'the linguistics information' to use in a context of a second language. Osgood (1953, p. 520) defines transfer in the field with regard to training and learning a language as follows: "the effect of a preceding activity upon the learning of a given task". Ausubel (1963) provides yet another definition of language transfer, which is "the impact of prior experience upon current learning"(p. 28). According to these authors, an accurate definition cannot be given as the "preceding activity" or "prior experience" is related to the native language, while the "given task" or "current learning" is related to the foreign language. Moreover, Kellerman (1986) attempts to draw a distinction between transfer and influence. Transfer is not the same as influence. Transfer refers to those linguistic behaviours that are incorporated from the first language into the target language without capturing other elements of the effects of the second language, whereas influence, on the other hand, refers to those first-language effects, such as avoidance and other speech aspects of the first language, that act as constraints on second language learning and performance. Theoreticians and language teachers have also debated whether the term transfer is still a valid concept in second language acquisition. For instance, Lado(1957), Corder(1981), Selinker(1972), and Ellis(1997) propose that at least in one stage of the learning process, second language learners rely heavily on the patterns of their native language when communicating in the target language, usually they do in the beginning of learning a foreign language. Dulay and Burt(1974)argue that the term transfer is largely unimportant in the second language learning process. Thus, to determine the importance of transfer, it would be useful to briefly consider the relevant theories in which the concept of language transfers where first discussed.

3.2 The Role of the First Language and Kinds of Transfer

After examining the general arguments related to the dissatisfaction with contrastive analysis as a major account of second language acquisition, the contrast between the systems of the two languages is understood as not being the only factor affecting second language acquisition and responsible for second language learners' errors. Another major factor is the role of the first language in language learning. According to Richards (1974) in his study of learners of English, the mother tongue is considered to be the first important factor in the language learning process. He assumes that, "Interference analysis tends to be from the deviant sentence back to the mother tongue. Contrastive analysis works the other way, predicting errors by comparing the linguistic system of the mother tongue and the target language"(p.5). Hence, current research tends to partly dismiss contrastive analysis and the comparison between the two languages; the focus is now placed on the learners themselves as they develop their own language competence throughout the process of learning using the mother tongue.

A definition of second language learning from the perspective of language transfer is provided by Ellis: "It is the way in which people learning a language other than their mother tongue using some elements of that language" (2000, p. 3). The process of learning undergoes different stages; learners' knowledge of the language gradually develops as they rely heavily on the use of the linguistic elements of the mother tongue. There is a common belief that second language (L2) acquisition is strongly influenced by the origin of the learner's first language (L1). Research has been conducted in the field of second language acquisition to measure the role of the native language and its effect on the process of learning a second language. The interest in this area stems from professional experience and from observing native speakers of the Arabic language learning English as a second language.

Many theories and approaches have been concerned with the transfer of the first language or the interference of L1 as one important stage in the process of learning as it has become increasingly accepted in the field of language learning as a phenomenon rather than a problem. Moreover, Corder states that, "Since most studies of error were made upon performance of learners in formal situation where it appears that errors related to the mother tongue are more frequent, it was natural that an explanation of the phenomenon was of considerable concern to the applied linguist"(1977, p. 85). Additionally, Gass and Selinker quoted George's claims as follows: "one third of the errors in his corpus could be accounted for by means of native language interference."(1983, p. 324) As a result, for many years, it was presumed that the only source of learner errors resulted from first language interference, though there were other factors that were considered to be major sources of errors related to the learner's environment. However, my reason for mentioning the issue of language transfer or interference is that I strongly believe that it affects the learner's performance at least in one stage of the learning process. Consequently, Krashen's1981 research findings regarding the role of the first language in the acquisition of the second language, which are also in keeping with the views of Banthy, Trager, and Waddle (1966), indicate that the first language interferes as it might be a "substitute" in some parts, while the second language is acquired as the learner uses his or her first language to convey a message in the target language as a lack of the target language acquisition. To some extent, what Krashen found could be true in some respects, such as the level of learners, as he linked his findings to the early stages of learning the language, beginners and intermediate learners; thus, some other evidence proved that even advanced learners may unconsciously transfer some elements from their first language to the target language, which is a case that is still being discussed in the field of second language learning. Gass and Selinker(1983) state that acquiring a second language is a creative process in which learners are interacting with both environmental factors and the mental process in order to produce unlimited utterances of the linguistic data of the second language to which they have already been exposed; thus, their language production cannot be predictable.

Moving on from the above mentioned theories and language transfer as the source of learners` errors, the study will look at the influence of the first language as a major source of errors which has been divided into three main components. According to Ellis (1997), Gass and Selinker (1983), and Odlin (1989), the learner's first language can be directly correlated with the type of errors accrued during the second language learning process. This is called 'negative transfer', which is referred to when the differences between the two languages appear to be the main reason behind certain errors. It is a process that can occur whenever there is a significant difference between the target language and the first language (mother tongue), and the learner's attempts to produce the target language by relying on the system of the first language. This kind of error has been examined in many recent bodies of research related to aspects of language such as grammar and phonology. A 1994 study of Arab speakers by Hamdan, proved that in speakers of the Arabic language, the English dative alternation is transferred from the system of the Arabic language and is applied to the second language (English) even among advanced-level learners. Though it is a syntactic-based study, the results still prove that negative language transfer is affected by language competence as a result of first language interference. However, not every transfer is negative. Also, the similarities between two languages sometimes facilitate learning, such as when similar elements already exist in the two languages, or at least have already been recognised by L2 learners. When such similarities between the two languages occur, the new language seems easier for learners to produce as a part of the process of acquiring

the target language. There is agreement today regarding the recent perspective on the language transfer issue; more specifically, that there is a clear and accepted relationship between L1 and L2and that, to some extent, the learner can perceive and use many similarities between L1 and L2 to facilitate his or her learning process. Learners who have an L1 that is closely related to the target language can, at the beginning of the learning process, make use of easily perceived formal similarities with their first language. However, according to Ringbom, "languages unrelated to the target language also influence learning. Even if learners cannot perceive cross-linguistic similarities to the L1, they tend to assume such similarities. In many cases, assumptions of similarity cause errors, especially in production" (2007, p. 6).

This type of effect is known as 'positive transfer', as it also leads to another aspect of language interference. For example, Ellis (1997) and George (1972) illustrate this aspect of positive transfer using the "avoidance" method in language production, which is considered to be the major role of L1 transfer. It usually occurs when some learners do not use a particular tense or verb form due to the absence of such tenses or forms from their first language. Thus, recent research correlated with the issue of language transfer for Arab students proved that most Arab learners are unfamiliar with the use of some English grammatical tenses that do not exist in their first language, resulting in their avoidance of the use of certain forms of the target language. This leads us to the third aspect of L1 transfer, which is 'neutral language transfer'. Gass and Selinker explain this as "the process which occurs whenever there is no statistically significant predominance in the native language of either of the two alternative linguistics entities, which is then paralleled by a lack of predominance in an analysis of the attempted production of the foreign language, one alternative linguistic entity being a non error since it concurs with an experimentally established norm of that foreign language" (1983, p. 51). In other words, when the learners produce some speech utterances that do not exist in the second language and attempt to apply them in an effort to communicate using the target language to give the impression of fluency, these learners use unconscious neutral transfer, which relies on the overuse of certain elements of the first language, such as applying certain forms or structures from the mother tongue to the second or target language. Ellis (1997) describes this as the "overuse of speech acts", where learners try to transfer their first language formulas, such as requests and apologies, to the new language. This kind of language use indicates the influence of pragmatic features transferred from the mother tongue. Littlewood consequently suggests that there is "a need to emphasise the linguistic features of the target language for second language learners in order to give them the opportunity to integrate separate structures into a creative system for expressing meanings" (1984, p. 91).These descriptions of the kinds of transfer from early studies are still uncertain as many other theoretical approaches provide other explanations for the errors produced by second language learners. Also, the reason for engaging in a brief discussion about them is the reasonable recognition of using some aspects of the first language function related to the learners' competence in the target language, a matter that will be discussed later against the background of error analysis.

According to the behaviourism theory, most errors are considered to be a result of transference from the mother tongue. However, this theory has recently been rejected. Language development is viewed as a formation of habit in which learners make connections between the system and the experiences of their mother tongue, and attempt to apply them to the new language (McLaughlin 1987). Although this theory suggests that the influence of the learner's first language may result in errors, learning a language is a more complex and complicated process than merely the interference of the habits and structure of the first language, which might

prevent learning. Ellis (1997) claims that comparisons between two languages are not always possible. As some researchers, e.g. Dulay and Burt (1974), claim, only 5% of errors are a result of the differences between two languages, and even the relationship between this theory and the contrastive analysis hypothesis cannot predict all of the kinds of errors that hinder learning. Some of the errors are unique and unpredictable (Krashen 1985). Additionally, Ellis states in regard to the use of the linguistic features of the L1 while speaking in the L2, that learners have a sense of which features of the L1 are, in some way, basic. They are more prepared to risk transferring such features than they are those that they perceive to be unique to their own language (1997, p. 53).

Moreover, errors resulting from transferring from the mother tongue are a significant aspect of all Second Language Acquisition theories, whether behaviourist, mentalist, or cognitive. Selinker (1975) assumes that the transfer of rules from the mother tongue is more frequent in beginners and intermediate learners rather than in advanced level learners. This is because the latter tend to use what they already know about the language in order to make sense of new experiences during the process of learning a second language. However, according to the above mentioned theories, many teaching materials and methods have been designed to serve the purpose of helping students to overcome these predictable errors (Littlewood, 1984). While other studies are concerned with the kind of grammatical features that result from the stages of development of the second language, which are not related to the transference of rules from L1 to L2, the main concerns of the language transfer hypotheses relate to language as a result of the cognitive process (Bot, Lowie, &Verspoor 2005). In other words, the transfer of the L1 and its relationship to L2 acquisition is still the most controversial issue whether the language is learned by transfer or by students' capacity to pick up the language by learning and practising what they learn. However, Ellis, Krashen, Littlewood, and Lightbown all suggest that learning is improved when we distinguish between the "acquired L2" and the "learned L2". However, the reason for my quick review of the role of the first language in the acquisition of the second language is to expand our understanding and experiences, and to help in my continued search for further explanations of language transfer, and to identify the source of learners` errors which will be explained more in the importance of errors analysis.

4. Grammatical Speaking Errors amongst Saudi Students:

According to the data collected during our series of interviews conducted as part of the study, pronunciation errors were predominant due to the fact that English has three times as many vowels sounds as Arabic. Some consonants in English are very hard to reproduce by Arab speakers. Not surprisingly, Arabic speakers failed to distinguish between some of the word they heard such as the sound /th/ in words such as that and thin or the swapping of /b/ and /p/ at the beginning of words or the use of /f/ instead of /v/

Although our cluster of learners was able to clearly pronounce words, there were some sounds that were mispronounced or replaced with other sounds. In the term of the grammatical features, the learners' main problem was grasping the correct form of the verbs, particularly with regard to tenses. Also, they generally used the present tense instead of the past tense, and vice versa, and also committed some errors when using the unmarked form of the verb that was widely committed by them. Furthermore, most of them had the same problem with the third person(s), as they tended to use the singular instead of plural, and vice versa. Additionally, they sometimes used three different tenses to indicate the past tense, for example, 'I didn't', 'I can't' and 'I couldn't'. There were also problems distinguishing between regular and irregular verbs,

and using articles and pronouns. Moreover, the case of pronouns coping, such as "my father he, my mother she" as a result of following the structure of Arabic sentences was significantly committed. Additionally, some of students used sentences without verbs such as 'he tell', 'she busy', 'he tall'. Moreover, the influence of first language appears in some sentences used by students, for example, sentences with pronoun copying, such as 'the man he knocked on the door' and 'the girl she carry the bag'. Interestingly, some of the students were able to correct themselves instantly, for example changing 'I am study' to 'I am studying', as well as 'when it's rain' to 'it's raining'. Since the students were able to correct themselves and use some of the tenses in the correct forms, we can deduce that they were moving on in different stages of the learning process. This will be summed up in more detail later in the paper.

Table 1 below highlights a sample number of errors committed by each student in regards to the grammatical features:

Table 1: *Grammatical errors*
Illustrating a sample of the number of errors in each aspect for each student

Students	unmarked form of verbs	Third person (s) pronouns	Misused Singular and plurals	Regular And irregular verbs	Articles	Sentences without verb	Sentences with pronoun copying
Student 1	12 times	5 times	6 times	8 times	13 times	6 times	4 times
Student 2	14 times	6 times	8 times	2 times	9 times	5 times	3 times
Student 3	15 times	11 times	12 times	9 times	12 times	3 times	4 times
Student 4	11 times	9 times	10 times	12 times	8 times	3 times	3 times
Student 5	17 times	4 ti1mes	9 times	12 times	11 times	5 times	5 times
Student 6	15 times	5 times	12 times	7 times	14 times	4 times	6 times
Student 7	13 times	4 times	11 times	6 times	8 times	7 times	5 times
Student 8	12 times	6 times	12 times	8 times	7 times	6 times	7 times
Student 9	15 times	11 times	9 times	7 times	9 times	5 times	6 times
Student10	11 times	4 times	11 times	6 times	8 times	7 times	4 times
Student11	9 times	5 times	12 times	6 times	6 times	4 times	3 times
Studnet12	10 times	6 times	10 times	3 times	8 times	6 times	3 times
Student13	13 times	9 times	12 times	7 times	9 times	7 times	4 times
Studnet14	13 times	10 times	8 times	8 times	9 times	5 times	6 times
Student15	15 times	13 times	10 times	6 times	11 times	7 times	7 times

4.1 Data Analysis and Discussion

According to the data, the average use of the unmarked verb among the 30 students was 43%, which indicates that each student in the intermediate level commits this error between 9 and 17 times while speaking. There was a 26% error rate with the third person(s) and around 36% for the misuse of singular and plural. During the 10 minutes of speech the students engaged in, the average error rate with regular and irregulars verbs was 23%. Errors with articles consisted of 31%. The use of sentences without specified verb was 31% among 30 students. This means that each student committed this errors a minimum of 3 times and the maximum of 7 times during their speech. And finally, the percentage of the errors in the sentences with pronoun coping were 15%, in total of 140 errors committed among the group by each student. However, we should not see errors as a sign of failure in learning the language, as teachers and students

should be aware of the process of learning. The process of learning undergoes different stages by means of which the learner's knowledge of the language gradually develops. A learner's production of a language is due to external and internal factors to which he or she is exposed. Moreover, as previously mentioned, learning a second language depends in some way on the learner's previous knowledge of his or her first language. Lightbown and Spada (2006) argue that prior knowledge can be advantageous in learning a second language as it gives the learner an idea of how language works. On the other hand, it can also be responsible for errors due to incorrect guessing as to how the new language might work. However, one way to investigate how a second language is developed is to analyse errors which tackle the issue in this case study. According to Ellis (1992), errors are quite important because they are a significant feature of language learning and they help learners to develop their knowledge through self-correction of those errors.

According to Littlewood, 'second language learners are actively constructing rules from the data they encounter and gradually adapting these rules in the direction of the target-language system.' (1984, p. 22) These errors can be construed as being a result of misinformation about rules, as students use one form of verb instead of another, which may lead to grammatical mistakes in particular. (Ellis 1997) Moreover, articles and irregular verbs can be traced back to their omission in second language learning, and also to over-generalisation errors.

> Both errors of omission and over-generalisation are common in speech of all L2
> learners, irrespective of their L1, in which learners are to be seen as actively
> involved in shaping the 'grammar' they are learning, and create their own rules.
> (Ellis 1997, p. 18)

Furthermore, students are at an intermediate level and have been learning English for six years at least, which means they already possess some knowledge of the second language, and most of the errors they committed were a result of the grammatical competence they already knew (Cook 2001).

Interestingly, the research also drew the attention to the use of the past tense, for instance incorrect usage such as 'maked' instead of 'made' or 'teached' instead of 'taught'. It is true that we can consider these as over-generalisation errors of the rules the learners have already studied, but it also indicates the learners' understanding of the second language system and mixing them with use the patterns of their own first language (Lightbown and Spada 1984). Although learners were able to communicate well using the second language, to which we should give prior attention among errors, they were trying to deliver the message fluently, but with the omission of articles and verb inflections which affected their language accuracy. However, Littlewood (1984) describes this as 'redundancy reduction', which makes the learners' speech easy to listen to but not clear in some particular points. What might concern us as English teachers is to help students interact effectively using the second language. By giving students more questions and extra comments on their answers during the interviews, the negotiation of meaning has arisen, which is considered to be a good sign in the process of language learning. According to Lightbown and Spada, one important feature of the process of speech in second language learning is 'accomplished through a variety of modifications which naturally arise in interaction' (1993, p. 122). Most students were able to self-correct their own mistakes relating to grammatical rules such as 'when I come' instead of 'I came' and 'I am interesting' instead of 'I am interested', which can be an interpretation of self-monitoring and 'a process that happens concurrently with the stages of conceptualisation, formulation, and articulation' (Thornbury 2005, p. 5). However,

the more interaction students have with their teachers or other students using the target language, the more awareness they will have regarding the language learning process.

Additionally, it is natural that the differences between the Arabic and English languages will lead to such errors, such as the "unmark forms of verp" especially in the grammatical features. The Behaviourism theory predicts that transfer from the first to the second language must exist as a basic stage in the second language learning process. Ellis states that,

> …the differences between the first and second language create learning
> difficulty which results in errors, while the similarities between the first and
> second language facilities rapid and easy learning. (Ellis 1985, p. 22)

On the other hand, teachers' awareness of these differences, and the errors that can be expected from students, will help to identify them and assist the learners to overcome the negative effect of their first language on their learning process. "The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of students will know better what the real problems are and can provide for teaching them"(Lado 1957, p. 23).

4.2 The Role of Input and Interaction in L2 Grammar Acquisition

With regard to learning a second language, specifically learning English as a second language in Saudi Arabia, the majority of teachers believe that the language will not take care of itself, and that good input should be provided to students. In fact, Thornbury (1999) raised an important question that will lead to my discussion: Do we have to learn the rules and apply them in real-life situations in order to attain the knowledge of how to use language, or do we have to use the language in life-like communication in order to learn it? In other words, will learners be able to use the language of communication only by simply communicating? Ellis (1997) and Mitchell and Myles (2004) claim that there is very little empirical evidence that communication that results from receiving comprehensible input will facilitate the acquisition of grammatical features or new patterns. Moreover, a scale of communicative competence has still not been devised, since acquiring a language requires more than a communication function, and communication is not the only function of language learning (Rutherford 1987). However, Krashen claims that teachers and students are deceiving themselves if they are convinced that the acquisition of grammatical functions occurs through learning and participating in a suitable classroom environment, when the fact is that learning occurs in a free medium, not through the teacher's message in a learning environment (Krashen 1988). Ellis (1992), however, states that the acquisition of certain grammatical features can occur only by learning, and that communicating in a second language in a native community does not ensure the development of full-target language competence. In my opinion, there is always room for grammatical features and second language rules to be learned inside the classroom, and then developed further in real-life communication, and there is 'the possibility that some grammatical features (e.g. the resilient ones) may be learnt naturally, whereas others (e.g. the fragile ones) may not be' (Ellis 1997, p. 50). This may go against some views in teaching second language, which emphasise that the errors students commit result from not having enough exposure to the English language outside the classroom. However, learning English as a second language, and the acquisition of English grammar and success in overcoming this problem, is not always possible. It is still a controversial issue, and no evidence has proven whether, or to what degree, proficiency can be acquired by practicing the language in a native community or by learning it in a second language classroom setting.

The role of grammar within communicative methodology is elusive, sometimes
excluded as an irrelevance, sometimes 'done' latently in the classroom,

sometimes reinvented in what is deemed to be a more accessible, palatable format and centring on a discourse that focuses on language as 'patterns'. (Field, 2000, p. 142)

However, Ur (1988) puts the aim of practice for learners as an absorption of language structures, which means that, through practice, students will be able to transfer what they know from short-term memory (doing exercises in class) to long-term memory (producing the language they have learned). However, Larsen-Freeman (2003) assumes that even when students transfer what they have been taught and practiced inside the classroom, they will not be able to transfer their knowledge into real-life communication. In other words, the process of integrating new grammatical structures and phonological features into language production requires time. In this case, Larsen-Freeman suggests that,

> …instruction draws learners' attention to language features and permits them to develop knowledge of those features, but that learners will not incorporate such features into their interlanguage until they reach the requisite developmental stage. (Larsen-Freeman 2003, p. 103).

5.0 Conclusion

Based upon the outlined perspective on the problem of language transfer, operational research has been conducted to identify solutions to overcoming the errors that result from the influence of the mother tongue on second language learning. There is a very prevalent belief that research into theoretical and applied linguistics posits that the communicative approach is an effective comprehensible input that can resolve this issue. However, the use of linguistic devices, such as the model of grammar or phonology, in the process of developing a theory of human cognition in language learning is still being debated. In other words, those who are concerned with language teaching assume that using a model of linguistic theory is not always relevant to solving problems in language learning although there are some general principles and objectives that define some aspects of language transfer that must necessarily be applied in language teaching. Consequently, identifying errors is very important for investigating learners' performance and learning development. According to Richards, & Lockhart, "Errors are the use of linguistics items in a way that a learner of the language regards them as showing faulty or incomplete learning, they occur because the learner does not know what is correct, and thus errors cannot be self corrected." (1985: 95). Moreover, Gass and Selinker (2008) claimed that errors to some extent are systematic, sometimes they occur and not recognized by the learners and it is the teacher or researcher`s job to identify the source of errors.

EFL learners should provide themselves with, at least in language classes, the opportunity to practise the language while raising their consciousness about language competence. This would facilitate learning without giving too much attention to the errors that learners might produce as a result of the differences between their mother tongue and the targeted language to be learnt. Many researchers have assumed that raising learners' consciousness about the target language and certain grammatical functions facilitates their language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman 2003). Additionally, Ellis states in regard to the use of the linguistic features of L1 while speaking in L2, that,

> Learners have a sense of what features in their L1 are in some way basic. They are more prepared to risk transferring such features than they are those they perceive to be unique to their own language. (1997, 53)

The problem of learners' lack of ability to use the grammatical functions or phonological features of the target language might be alleviated by both practising the language and by raising their awareness of language competence. In other words, even though learners may not need explicit knowledge in order to communicate, raising their awareness of the grammatical features may help them to contribute to their own ability to communicate. Additionally, Rutherford states that,

> …learners require opportunities for both form-focused and function-focused practice in the development of particular skill areas, and if one or the other is lacking, they do not appear to benefit as much. (1987, p. 25)

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