Original Paper

Interlingual Transfer of Intralingual Errors: Lexical Substitution from MSA to EFL

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Abstract

This study takes a closer look at the adverse effects of the use of interlingual transfer as a compensatory communication strategy by EFL learners with a diglossic background. The data were collected from the Arabic-English translations of 80 male and female third year university students studying introductory courses in translation as part of the requirements of their BA English program. A total of 850 interlingual lexical substitutions were detected out of which 219 (26%) could be due to intralingual problems within Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Most of these errors were cases of failure to distinguish between formally or semantically related words in MSA due to the lack of competence in this variety of Arabic. Accordingly, the study underscores the need for improvement of the teaching and learning of MSA which may help not only translators but also EFL learners who rely on interlingual transfer as a compensatory strategy. The study also calls for a deeper analysis of the interlingual errors of EFL learners in situations of diglossia where their level of competence in one variety is higher than the other. Further studies may reveal more about the magnitude and types of the interlingual transfer of intralingual errors.

Keywords

EFL, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, lexical errors, MSA

1. Introduction

Second and foreign language acquisition research has yielded valuable insights into the language learning and communication strategies which in turn have led to an important shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered language instruction. Researchers and language teaching specialists recognized the importance of language learning and communication strategies in the 1970s (e.g., Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). The 1980s witnessed a flood of research on learning strategies (Skehan, 1989). Such studies continued in the 1990s through the 2000s stressing the significant role the

learner plays in the learning process (see e.g., Chamot, 2005; Cohen, 2011; Jarvis, 2016; Maleki, 2010; Odlin, 2016; Zare, 2012). Researchers define learning strategies as the steps taken by the learner to make up for the gaps in their linguistic knowledge (e.g., Bialystok, 1990; Brown, 2007; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992).

An important learning and communication strategy that foreign language learners fall back on to compensate for their incomplete learning is to rely on their first language to fill in the gaps in their second or foreign language and this process is known as "interlingual transfer", as opposed to intralingual transfer where the learners rely on what they know from the target language to communicate using strategies such as over-generalization and paraphrase (for more details on these two processes see e.g., A. Mahmoud, 2011). Unlike first language learners, foreign language learners have their first language as a source of hypothesis formation; it is a source of linguistic knowledge they draw upon to fill in the gaps in their developing interlanguage (A. Mahmoud, 2012). In the light of this view of the role of the first language, the nature and role of error analysis has changed from the traditional purely linguistic and predictive one based on contrastive analysis to a psycho-cognitive one focusing on the learner and the learning process (A. Mahmoud, 2011). Accordingly, the role of error analysis in language teaching has changed from the traditional remedial role to learner-centered teaching based on what the errors reveal about the process of learning and using the target language (see e.g., A. Mahmoud, 2012, 2013). Language teachers might adopt more effective teaching techniques as they know more about the learners and the strategies they employ to learn and use the language.

Needless to emphasize, reliance on linguistic transfer - whether it is interlingual or intralingual - has its pros and cons; it can be a help leading to correct production or a hindrance leading to error. Positive transfer is difficult to detect since the correct production of a linguistic form or structure could also be due to subconscious acquisition or even memorization (A. Mahmoud, 2012, 2014). Thus, we are left with systematic errors to inform us about the strategies that the learners use in the process of learning and using the language. Of course, plausible analysis of errors is not always possible, especially if the analyst is not familiar with the learners' first language. However, in case of interlingual transfer, cases of code mixing and foreignization are obvious and the role of the first language is evident. Instances of translation are the ones that pose explanation problems not only because the analyst may not know the leaners' first language but also because one and the same error could also be due to intralingual transfer. For example, an Arabic speaking learner of EFL produced * *I went to the home*. The grammar errors of adding the preposition and the definite article could be due to transfer from Arabic where such elements are used in the equivalent structure. Alternatively, it could be a vocabulary error since the Arabic word "*bayt*" is used for both "*home*" and "*house*" in English. However, intralingual transfer is also a possible explanation if the learner produced that structure on the basis of exposure to "*to the house*" in English. It is not easy to see the learning or communication strategy that is at play when analyzing errors. The traditional solution of consultation with the learners might help in this regard if possible.

With such difficulties in mind, this study aims to shed more light on the Arab learners' problems in

English as a foreign (EFL) language that could be attributed to their lack of competence in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The paper discusses the Arab learners' errors in EFL that are carried over from MSA. The study seeks to answer the question: What are the Arab students' errors that can be attributed to their lack of competence in MSA? To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies have investigated this double negative transfer phenomenon, especially in learning and using EFL vocabulary by the Arab students. Most researchers attribute the interlingual errors in EFL to the perceived distance between Arabic and EFL (e.g., M. Mahmoud, 2013). As A. Mahmoud (2000) noted, error analysts usually focus on one variety of Arabic (MSA or Colloquial Arabic - CA) as a source of interlingual transfer. He shows that Arab students of EFL transfer from both MSA and CA. A few studies briefly refer to MSA as the reason for EFL learners' problems in writing. Abdulaziz (1986, p.187), for example writes "poor writing in English correlates with similar deficiencies in the mother tongue". Khawaileh and Al-Shoumali (2000, p. 182) also believe that "problems in English writing can be linked to the deep-rooted problems in Arabic writing". Because lexical items constitute the basic building blocks of language, the present study focuses on the strategies that Arab students use in EFL vocabulary production. More specifically, it focuses on the problem of lack of competence in MSA and how it affects the students' use of EFL lexical items. So far, no studies have been conducted to investigate this type of lexical substitution errors in EFL made due to errors in MSA.

Due to the numerous differences between MSA and CA at all linguistic levels, researchers (e.g., Abdulaziz, 1986; Bani-Khalid, 2014) agree with Cowan (1968) who believes that the mother tongue of the Arabs is CA, not MSA. MSA is usually learned in a formal classroom context whereas CA is the first language that an Arab child acquires. MSA is used in formal oral and written communication whereas CA is confined to everyday communication. Randall and Samimi (2010, p. 43) add "Arab children have problems mastering the formal Arabic which they learn in schools and this is very different from their spoken dialect" (see also Thomson-Ponas & Thomas-Ruzie, 1983). Thus, MSA appears to have the status of a "second" language since it is learned in a formal classroom situation after the natural acquisition of CA at home from birth.

According to A. Mahmoud (2013, p. 8) "the deterioration of the standard of MSA in the Arab world has become the concern of teachers, Arabic specialists, Arab language academies and anyone who sees its importance as an official and national language". He cited an article published in Al-Masar (January 2004) where university professors of Arabic discussed the problem of MSA and enumerated a long list of cultural, social, educational and linguistic reasons as to why "MSA is in Danger". Having gained impetus from such concerns, the present study focuses on the lexical errors of the Arab students in MSA and how they are transferred to EFL as can be seen from their translations from MSA to EFL. Translation from MSA to English appears to be the appropriate data elicitation tool since it can reduce avoidance and it is line with the natural process of metal translation from the native language to the second or foreign language. Translation in the opposite direction (from English to Arabic) does not serve the purpose of this study since the aim is to discuss the negative effects of MSA on the students'

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EFL (for the effect of English on Arabic see e.g., A. Mahmoud, 2013).

2. Methods

The data for the study were collected from the Arabic-English translation tests and examinations of 80 Arabic-speaking male and female third year university students majoring in English. Their proficiency in English ranged from post-intermediate to advanced level. Their exposure to English was confined to the language and linguistics courses they studied in the university. They had to take introductory translation courses as part of the requirements of the BA English program. These translation courses were intended to serve two main purposes: (1) to develop the students' proficiency in English and (2) to lay the foundation in translation for those who would take up translation as a profession in the future. The students were not allowed to use any kind of dictionary in translation tests and examinations on the grounds that the translation courses were mainly language courses where the students had to exhibit their proficiency level in English. In the translation courses, they translated short texts (8-10 lines) from English to Arabic and vice versa. The texts were compiled from various sources (books, magazines, newspapers, etc.) and covered different fields of knowledge (technology, business, social topics, science, etc.) and common text types and genres. For the purpose of this study, Arabic-English translations were first corrected for assessment and feedback. With the help of a bilingual translation instructor, the target English texts were scrutinized again to detect only interlingual lexical errors. No spelling or grammar errors were found because the two languages use completely different writing scripts and the grammar of MSA is more complicated than that of English due to the elaborate use of parsing and case marking. These features make also CA different from MSA (Bani-Khalid, 2014; Ghazala, 1995, Author, 2000).

3. Analysis and Results

Table 1. Number of Interlingual and Intralingual Lexical Errors

Type	No	%
Interlingual	850	46
Intralingual	985	54
Total	1835	100

Table 1 shows that the total number of lexical errors detected was 1835 of which 850 (46%) were judged to be due to transfer from MSA (i.e., due to interlingual transfer). A larger number (985, 54%) was judged to be due to transfer from within English, (i.e., intralingual transfer). The interlingual errors were further scrutinized and grouped into three categories as follows:

Table 2. Types of Interlingual Errors

Type	No	%
Substitution	834	98.11
Insertion	10	1.18
Omission	6	0.71
Total	850	

Table 2 shows that most of the interlingual lexical errors were cases of substitution where the students used an incorrect word instead of the required one. The lexical substitution errors were grouped into the following two categories:

(1)　Normal transfer errors:

Errors due to the perceived MSA-EFL distance (615, 74%). These were cases where a ploysemous MSA word had two or more formally and semantically different EFL equivalents. An example of this type is * *The car stands near the gate*, where "stand" is one of two equivalents (*stand – stop*) of the MSA verb "*taqif*". Such errors are made whether the students are competent in MSA or not.

(2)　Double negative transfer errors

Errors due to the lack of competence in MSA (219, 26%). They were first made in MSA and carried over to EFL. For the purpose of this study, these were classified, exemplified and analyzed in the following sections.

As stated earlier, one of the hurdles of error analysis is that in most cases there is no one definite explanation of an error because of the psycho-cognitive nature of language learning and communication coupled with the individual differences between the learners. Two or more learners may commit the same error for different reasons. Hence, in the following analysis, interlingual transfer is postulated as a possible cause of error. For instance, in the sentence * *The students cannot satisfy the requests of their studies*, the Arab learner of EFL might have used "*requests*" instead of "*requirements*" because he could not distinguish in MSA between "*talabaat*" (= *requests, orders*) and "*mutatallabaat*" (= *requirements)*. The error could also be due to the lack of competence in EFL if the student did not know the word "*requirement*" or because he avoided it because he did not know how to spell it. Thus, in the former case, the error is originally intralingual (confusion within MSA) carried over to English.

In this study, most of such intralingual-interlingual errors were made due to (1) confusion of two formally or semantically similar MSA words, and (2) the absence in most of today's MSA writing of (a) the diacritics (i.e., vocalization marks above or below the consonant letters to represent the short vowels graphically) and (b) the gemination mark (i.e., doubling of the consonant sounds). Some other MSA-induced errors were also detected in cases where the students did not understand the meanings of some MSA words and metaphorical expressions. In the following sections, an analysis of a sample of the main types of errors is presented. The phrases and sentences listed are examples of the most

common and frequently committed errors.

Words derived from the same root

1* The student <u>gains</u> the standard language in the elementary school.

        yaksab (= gain) - yaktasib (= acquire)

2* They learn the <u>eloquent</u> language in the school.

        faseeh (= eloquent) – fus-ha (= standard)

3* The newspapers <u>modernize</u> new sections in order to catch up.

        yuhaddith (= modernize) – yastahdith (= create)

4* It is responsible for the social <u>growth</u>.

        numu (= growth) – tanmya (= development)

5* The users <u>ignore</u> the danger of these viruses.

        yatajaahal (= ignore) – yajhal (= not know)

6* These problems should be <u>known</u> before they become bigger.

        yudrik (= know) – yatadaarak (= solve, address)

7* The lack of <u>understanding</u> leads to divorce.

        yafham (= understand) – yatafaaham (= communicate)

8* We have to think of the road <u>security</u> first.

        amn (= security) – amaan (= safety)

9* All university <u>workers</u> use the magnetic card.

        ummal (= workers) – aamileen (= employees)

10* Cooperation with the police will <u>avoid</u> you traffic jams.

        yatajannab (= avoid) – yujannib (= keep away from)

11* Understanding of life <u>stops</u> in loving our work.

        yaqif (= stop) – yatawaqqaf (= depend on)

The lexical error in each sentence in this category was most probably due to the confusion of two related MSA words. The students did not observe the selection restrictions governing the use of two formally and semantically words sharing the same root.

Semantically or formally related but different roots

1* Teachers use local <u>accents</u> in the other subjects.

        lakna (= accent) – lahja (= dialect)

2* some teachers use <u>national</u> dialects in their classes.

        watani (= national) – mahalli (= local)

3* The <u>customers</u> do not care about the quality of the goods.

        zaboon (= customer) – mustahlik (= consumer)

4* <u>Ignorance</u> in the Arab World

        jahl (= ignorance) – ummiyya (= illiteracy)

5* … people who have practical <u>talents</u>.

mawhiba (= talent) – mahaara (= skill)

6* Companies produce <u>newer</u> mobile phones.

jadeed (= new) – hadeeth (= modern)

7* The mobile phone is a great <u>discovery</u>.

iktishaaf (= discovery) – ikhtiraa (= invention)

8* The <u>robber</u> of the phone uses the data.

yanhab (= rob) – yasriq (= steal)

9* The technology of the past <u>century</u> is not used now.

qarn (= century) – aqd (= decade)

10* The viruses <u>climb</u> to the computers.

yatasallaq (= climb) – yatasallal (= sneak)

In these examples, the words that were used and the ones that should have been used are partially semantically related. Again, among other possible reasons, the error could be due to failure to differentiate between the two MSA words listed under each error.

There were a few cases where the confused words were neither formally nor semantically related as in the following examples:

1* … unless there is a <u>comprehensive</u> change in the school policy

2* … the decline of Arabic is due to many <u>elements</u>

The errors in these two examples are ambiguous. Among other reasons, they could also be attributed to the fact that the students did not know the difference between "*shaamil*" (= *comprehensive*) and "*jazri*" (= *complete, radical*) both of which are used with "*taghyeer*" (= *change*) in MSA in the first example and between "*anaasir*" (= *elements*) and "*awaamil*" (= *factors*) in the second example.

3.1 Misreading Similar Words

Like the vowel sounds in English, diacritics in MSA play an important semantic role. However, unlike English, the short vowels are not represented graphically as letters but as pronunciation marks above or below the consonant letters. Apart from three long vowel sounds, the diacritics are usually not used in most of today's MSA writing. Hence, MSA readers depend on various contextual linguistic and extra-linguistic clues for comprehension. Unlike English, gemination (doubling of consonant sounds) in MSA is essential in comprehension and it is represented graphically by a gemination mark over the consonant letter. Like the diacritics, the gemination mark is not used in most MSA written discourse. The data collected for this study revealed that in spite of the clarity of the context, the nonuse of the diacritics and the gemination mark in MSA led to comprehension problems which were, in turn, reflected in lexical substitution errors in English. Another type of substitution error was made when the students did not observe the number or order of the letters in partially similar MSA words. Accordingly, misreading errors could be grouped into the following categories:

3.2 Diacritics

1* This kind of marriage affects the children's <u>honesty</u>.

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2* The family <u>join</u> their children in foreign schools.

3* Theresa May <u>has been appointed</u> a minister for fighting suicide.

In the first example, "honesty" was used instead of "health" most probably because the word "*sihha*" (= *correctness, truthfulness*) was confused with "*sahha*" (= *health*) since the vowel sounds are not represented graphically. In the second example, "*yulhiq*" (= *enroll, send*) and "*yalhaq*" (= *join*) were confused most probably due to the nonuse of the vowel sound in writing. It is clear that the difference between each of the two words lies in the vowel sounds without which the root words "*shha*" and "*ylhq*" can be misread or mispronounced. The use of "*join*" instead of "*enroll*" could also be due to the fact that the student did not know "*enroll*" and used "*join*" the word they know assuming that it would express the intended meaning. The fact that Arab EFL learners commit such lexical errors in spite of the clarity of the context might indicate that their comprehension process proceeds at the word level. In the third example, the active verb "*ayyanat*" (= *appointed*) was read as passive "*uyyinat*" (= *has been appointed*); a change which runs counter to expectations since the passive construction is usually deemed more complex than its active counterpart. The change of the first diactritic of the verb from the /a/ sound to /u/ turned the subject noun into object which in turn changed the meaning demoting the "prime minister" to the position of a "minister".

3.3 Number of Letters

1* Private lessons <u>disseminate</u> everywhere these days.

2* The experts <u>solve </u>the problem first.

3* It is due to the policy which the government <u>produces</u>.

The errors in these examples could be attributed to failure to observe the number of letters in formally similar MSA words. Like other errors in the data, they could also be performance mistakes resulting from translating under time pressure in tests and examination. In the first example, "*tantashir*" (= *spread*) was read as "*tanshur*" (= *disseminate*) and in the second example, the verb "*yuhallil*" (= *analyze*) was read as "*yahil''* (= *solve*). The verb "*tantij*" (= *produce*) in the third example was confused with "*tantahij*" (= *follow, adopt*). It is worth mentioning here that the problem was exacerbated by the nonuse of the diacritics in MSA.

3.4 Order of Letters

1* It is important to see the interest of the <u>meeting</u>.

2* People must have <u>scientific</u> skills.

3* This is the case in most <u>determined</u> institutions.

In addition to the problem of nonuse of diacritics, the lexical selection errors in these examples can be attributed to failure to observe the order of the letters in the MSA words in the source text. The word "*mutalaqqi*" (= *audience*) was read as "*multaqa*" (= *meeting*), "*amali*" (= *practical*) as "*ilmi*" (= *scientific*), and "*idaara*" (= *administration*) as "*iraada*" (= *determination*).

3.5 Different Letters

Some lexical substitution errors were made because of some similarity in the spelling of formally or

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semantically related words.

1* The school must help in <u>technical</u> Arabic.

2* Students want to study English <u>pay no attention</u> to their abilities.

In the first example, the two MSA words confused were somewhat formally similar but semantically completely different. The noun *"itqaan" (= mastering, perfecting*) was read and understood as "*tiqaana*" (= *technology*); it was changed into an adjective in English to describe the noun "*Arabic*" in keeping with the "adjective + noun" structure. In the second example, the student did not notice the number of dots under the first letter of the MSA word. The word "*bighad*" (= *irrespective of, despite*) was read as "*yaghud*" (= *ignore, pay no attention*) thus changing the logical connector into a verb. The student read two dots as one dot, hence changing the letter "*b*" into "*y*" which, in turn, changed the diacritics and, accordingly, the meaning.

3.6 Gemination

A large number of lexical substitution errors were made as a result of misreading and, hence, misunderstanding MSA words due to the nonuse of the gemination mark. The errors in this category could be grouped into two types because the students either doubled the consonants which should not have been doubled or vice versa.

1* They do not check the quality of the goods that are <u>issued</u> to these countries.

2* The authorities <u>weaken</u> spending more.

3* … the goods that are <u>returned</u> to these countries.

4* Having a job helps in getting our <u>power</u>.

In the first two examples, the MSA words in the source text were read without gemination; the verbs "*tusaddar*" (= *exported*) and "*tudaaif*" (= *to double*) were read as "*tasdur*" (= *issued*) and "*tudaif*" (= *to weaken*) respectively. The consonants in the MSA words in the other two examples, on the other hand, were doubled, hence "*taridu*" (= *imported*) became "*turaddu*" (= *returned*) and "*qootana*" (= *our sustenance*) became "*quwwatana*" (= *our power*).

3.7 Other Types of Errors

3.7.1 Unfamiliar Words

In addition to the two main types of errors discussed above - confusion and misreading of MSA words - other EFL lexical substitution errors were detected which were most probably due to comprehension problems in MSA. Due to the lack of competence in MSA the students could not understand the meanings of some words in the source texts. Here are some examples:

1* The departments <u>aim</u> to produce competent students.

2* The number of students in increasing <u>gradually</u>.

3* The graduates cannot do their <u>dependent</u> work.

4* They cannot understand a single sentence <u>despite</u> writing an essay in English.

The errors in the first two examples are covert. The words "aim" and "gradually" were linguistically correct but contextually incorrect. The errors in these four examples were made most probably because

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the students did not know the meanings of the MSA words "*tukhfiq*" (= *fail*), "*muttarid*" (= *rapidly*), "*manoot*" (= *entrusted*) and "*naaheek*" (= *let alone*) respectively. In three of the examples, they gave the opposite meanings (*aim-fail*, *rapidly-gradually*, *despite-let alone*).

3.8 Metaphorical Expressions

Most of the errors in the translation of metaphorical expressions could be attributed to the lack of competence in EFL. However, some of those errors might have been committed as a result of fragmented word-for-word comprehension of such expressions. As stated earlier, this indicates that the students depend on the word as a unit of comprehension.

1* The students' problems are <u>personified</u> in psychological and social problems.

2* The authorities can <u>incubate</u> big projects.

The use of the words "*personified*" and "*incubate*" reveals word-for-word rendering of the MSA metaphorical words "*tatajassad*" (*represented, reflected*) and "*tahtadin*" (*embrace*). Since the incorrect EFL words used in these examples seem to reflect a fairly high level of vocabulary, the lack of comprehension in MSA appears to be the reason behind the errors.

To sum up, the types of lexical substitution errors in EFL that could most probably be due to the lack of competence in MSA were lexical substitution due to (1) confusion of related words, (2) misreading similar words (diacritics, number of letters, order of letters, different letters, gemination), and (3) unfamiliar words and metaphorical expressions.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This study focused on linguistic transfer which constitutes one of the important cognitive compensatory strategies of language learning and communication. More specifically it was intended to shed more light on the negative effects of interlingual transfer in situations where EFL learners have a diglossic situation as in the Arab world. The data collected for the study revealed that a portion of the interlingual lexical substitution errors made by the Arab learners of EFL could originally be due to intraligunal problems within MSA. In addition to their usual interlingual problems in EFL, the errors reflected the students' lack of competence in MSA, the variety of Arabic learned in a formal classroom situation. Thus, this study took the traditional analysis of the interlingual errors a step further to include another category, namely, the errors made due to the interlingual transfer of intralingual problems. A sample of these errors was classified and analyzed with illustrative examples. In the light of the fact that error analysis is fraught with ambiguities, problems within MSA were postulated as one of the possible reasons of some of the interlingual errors made by the Arab learners of EFL. The study draws attention to the need for a deeper analysis of the interlingual errors especially in contexts where the second or foreign language learners come from a diglossic background.

Since some of the Arab learners errors in EFL could be due to the lack of competence in MSA as the findings of this study show, more attention needs to be given to the teaching and learning of this variety of Arabic at all stages of education. The methods of teaching MSA, the teaching materials and the

training of teachers have to be reconsidered. In this regard, the teaching of MSA might benefit from more classroom-oriented action research as well as from the modern approaches, methods and techniques of teaching foreign languages. Improvement of standards of MSA is necessary not only for the learners of this variety in general and higher education but also for the English-Arabic translators. It can also help the learners of EFL who rely on interlingual transfer as a learning and communication strategy.

This study shows that the Arab EFL learners' competence in MSA cannot be taken for granted. The problem is compounded by the nonuse of the diacritics and the gemination mark in most of the contemporary writing in MSA. These vocalization marks can be used at least in MSA words that can be misunderstood. Words that are formally and/or semantically related can be presented and explained in teaching MSA and translation. For instance, when the students come across words such as "*sahha*" (health), "*amn*" (security), "*ummaal*" (workers) and "*yatajannab*" (avoid) in an MSA text, the instructor can refer to and compare the related words "*sihha*" (correctness), "*amaan*" (safety), "*aamileen*" (employees) and "*yujannib*" (safegaurd) respectively.

The students also need to be weaned off comprehending MSA texts at the word level. They need to be trained to process texts at higher linguistic levels and make use of the context. They can be encouraged to work in groups especially in translation due to the inter-learner and intra-learner variability in the level of competence in MSA. Needless to say, further studies are needed to reveal more about the magnitude of the interlingual transfer of intralingual problems and to use more than one instrument. Due to the difficulty of determining the source of errors, some of the explanations may be mere speculations. However, with native-speaker competence in MSA, over 40 years of experience in teaching EFL and translation to Arab students, and extensive research in the field of error analysis, the present researcher was able to come up with plausible explanations of most of the errors. Additional procedures such as the use of a think-aloud protocol and consultation with the students were not possible in this study not only because of the large number of students but also because the translations were done for tests and examination purposes.

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