The Role of Native Language in Foreign Language Learning: An Investigation of University Students' Errors in English Relative Clauses.

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ABSTRACT

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This study aimed at investigating the errors made by first and second year students males and females in the English Department at Yarmouk University in their learning of the English relative clauses. These errors were identified and classified under six categories:

1- Relative pronoun omission.

2- Repetition of the object of the relative clause.

3- Relative pronoun selection.

4- Repetition of the subject of the relative clause.

5- Preposition omission.

6- Misuse of possessive relative pronoun.

The sample of this study consisted of (100) first year students (50 males and 50 females) and (100) second year students (50 males and 50 females) from the English Department at Yarmouk University for the academic year 1996/1997.
It was hypothesized that the difficulty the students encountered in the formation of the English relative clauses was ascribed to the effect of their mother language on their interlanguage and to other developmental factors.

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1- What are the plausible causes that may be postulated for the occurrences of the errors committed by first and second year students regarding the English relative clauses?

2- What are the main error types that first and second year students commit while learning the English relative clauses?

3- Are there any significant differences in the occurrences of the errors due to the level of the students (first year or second year)?

4- Are there any significant differences in the occurrences of the errors due to the sex of the students (male or female)?

5- Are there any significant differences in the occurrences of the errors due to the skill of usage (production or perception)?

Two tests were developed: a written translation test and a grammaticality judgement test. A t-test was used to answer the questions of the study and to determine any statistically significant differences between the variables of the study.

The results of the study were as follows:

1- There were statistically significant differences between males and females. Male students committed more errors than females in the formation of the English relative clauses.

2- There were statistically significant differences between first year students and second year students. First year students committed more
errors than second year students in the formation of the English relative clauses.

3- There were statistically significant differences between production errors and perception errors. Students committed more errors in the production than in the perception of the relative clauses.

4- The majority of all types of errors committed by the students in the formation of the English relative clauses could be accounted for in terms of negative transfer from Arabic.

5- The most predominant types of errors were:
   1- Repetition of the object of the relative clause.
   2- Misuse of possessive relative pronoun.

   While the least predominant types of errors were:
   1- Preposition omission.
   2- Repetition of the subject of the relative clause.

Recommendations for further research were made and the pedagogical implications of the results of the study were discussed.