IDENTIFICATION OF CROSS-LINGUISTIC FACTORS AFFECTING INTERLANGUAGE SYSTEM PROGRESS OF SAUDI LEARNERS OF EFL

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to identify EFL teachers' perceptions of the cross-linguistic factors affecting the interlanguage system progress of Saudi learners of EFL at Najran University. A purposive sample of twenty-six (26) English language teachers at Najran university representing the main participants in this paper. The paper revealed that the main cross-linguistic factors affecting interlanguage system progress of Saudi learners of EFL were attributed to the status of English as a foreign language in KSA which doesn't allow learners ample exposure to communicative language settings, besides the teaching practices that fail in providing authentic learning atmosphere assisting the progress of learners' interlanguage system, and the interference of learners' mother tongue that negatively affects the progress of their interlanguage system.*

KEYWORDS*:* Saudi learners**,** Cross-linguistic factors, Interlanguage system, Mother tongue interference

INTRODUCTION

Language learning and teaching in a linguistic sense is regarded as the medium of communication through which people can express their thoughts, emotions, attitudes and interact with one another in their everyday life. But certain conditions must be met to guarantee the dynamic of the language that linguistically reflect on the practices of the speech community in which the language is used. As such, language is viewed as the spine that systematizes the ideological and social orientation of that community.

English nowadays is utterly pervasive in all fields of knowledge, the fact that nobody would deny. This spread is due to its position as a global language and that a tremendous number of the world population exist inside the global English community. However, to be a global member of English is not a matter of social prestige; it rather requires a full mastery and knowledge of the English language linguistic component because such knowledge and mastery determine the identity and the state of English users in and out the galaxy of global English.

In the pursuit of establishing a platform in language universality, EFL learners experience various challenges in English language use in terms of their linguistic systems they try to create. As what they achieve in the target language, is

linguistically considered as the criterion whereby the linguistic system of a second or foreign language is measured since the mastery and the perfect use of a target language reflect the extent of their own linguistic system creation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definit Ion of Interlanguage

The notion similar to "interlanguage" was first seen in *The Significance of Learners' Errors* [1] as "transitional competence" to describe foreign language learners' linguistic ability which did not match that of native speakers. [2] introduced the word "interlanguage", which was adapted from Weinreich's term "interlingual" to refer to the language system that the foreign language learner created based on the data he had been exposed to. [3] referred to the same phenomenon in his term "approximative system", stressing the successive approximation to the target language. [4] used the term "idiosyncratic dialect" to suggest that the learner's language is unique to a particular individual and that the rules of the learner's language are peculiar to the language of that individual alone. [5] coined the term "interlanguage" to refer to the systematic knowledge of language which is independent of both the learner's native language and the target language. The term has come to be used with different but related meanings:

1.   To refer to the series of interlocking systems, [1] called the learner's "built-in syllabus".

2.   To refer to the system that is observed at a single stage of development ("an interlanguage").

3.   To refer to particular L1/L2 combinations (for example, L1 French/L2 English v. L1 Japanese/L2 English). [6] Interlanguage is neither the system of the native language nor that of the target language, but instead falls between the two. It is a system based on the best attempt of learners to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them. By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, learners slowly succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language.

4.

Thus, the concept of "interlanguage" might better be understood if it is regarded as a continuum between the native language and the target language. At any point along the continuum, the learners' language is systematic, and any difference may be explained by differences in their learning experience. [6]

The Characteristics of Interlanguage System

In his research paper *Interlanguage*, [5] presented three main characteristics of interlanguage. The first one is permeability. As he stated, the second language learners' language system is permeable, in the sense that rules that constitute the learners' knowledge at any stage are not fixed, but are open to amendment. In many aspects, this is a general feature of native languages. All language systems are

permeable. Interlanguage differs from other language systems only in the degree of permeability.

The second one is that interlanguage is dynamic, i.e., interlanguage is constantly changing. However, a learner's interlanguage does not jump from one stage to the next, but rather slowly revises the interim systems to adapt new hypotheses to the target language system. This takes place by the introduction of a new rule, first in one context and then in another, and so on. A new rule spreads in the sense that its coverage gradually extends over a range of linguistic contexts. The process of constant revision and extension of rules is a feature of the inherent instability of interlanguage and its built-in propensity for change.

The third one is that interlanguage is systematic. In spite of the instability of interlanguage, it is possible to detect the rule-based nature of the learner's interlanguage. The learner does not select accidentally from his store of interlanguage rules but in predictable ways.

Apart from the above-mentioned characteristics, variability is another characteristic that can't be neglected. At any one stage in his development, the learner operates according to the system of rules he has constructed up to that point. A crucial issue is why his performance is so variable. On one occasion he uses one rule, while on another he uses a different one.

It has been generally accepted that interlanguage is variable. [7] This variability is evident both synchronically and diachronically. Each learner's interlanguage contains alternative rules for performing the same function. As it has been mentioned, on some occasions, one rule is used; on others, a different rule. Also, in spite of the striking uniformity in the developmental profile of different learners, there are variations in the overall course of development that learners follow. Interlanguage constitutes an unstable system and is permeable to invasion by new linguistic forms; its dynamic quality is reflected in tremendous interlanguage variability and also in overlapping stages over development as one set of variable rules is revised in favor of another.

Objectives of the Study
The main objective of this paper is to raise awareness towards the linguistic factors affect EFL learners' interlanguage system progress to attain native-like proficiency in EFL.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods used by the researcher are the descriptive and quantitative approach in the identification of the cross-linguistic factors that affect the interlanguage system progress of Arab EFL learners

Pilot Questionnaire
Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, a pilot study was run with a small

number of teachers comprising 4 from the whole sample of the study. It is worth noting here that the piloting questionnaire was given to teachers who had long experience in teaching English at universities. Therefore, the teachers who answered the pilot questionnaire were not involved in the formal questionnaire of the study.

Hypotheses of the Study

[H1.] The status of English a foreign language in KSA doesn't allow learners enough exposure to communicative language setting.

[H2.] Teaching practices fail in providing an authentic learning atmosphere to assist in the progress of learners' interlanguage system.

[H3.] The interference of learners' mother tongue affects the progress of their interlanguage system.

Participants

The participants selected for this study are (26) teachers of English at Najran University: College of Sciences and Arts in Sharurah, College of Science and Arts and the Preparatory College in Najran. Those teachers were in a better position to identify what cross-linguistic factors that affect their learners' interlanguage system progress. The study in this paper is confined to twenty-six (26) English language teachers in Saudi Universities; Najran University as well. The results of this paper are limited to the population and also to the instruments used for data collection.

DATA ANALYSIS

This part of the paper deals with the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the results obtained from the questionnaire administered to the teachers of English who have experience in teaching and awareness of linguistics at Najran University.

Table 1: Classification of the participants in terms of gender.

Gander	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	15	58%
Female	11	42%
Total	26	100%

The above table displays the gender data where males (**58%**) outnumbered females (**42%**).

Table 2: The status of English a foreign language doesn't allow learners ample exposure to communicative interaction.

Options	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly agree	20	77%
Agree	6	23%
Neutral	-	0.0
Disagree	-	0.0
Strongly disagree	-	0.0
Total	26	100%

The teachers' responses as tabulated above show that 77% strongly agree with the statement, and 30% agree. Thus, the teachers almost unanimously agree that the status of English a foreign language is a cross-linguistic factor that can influence learners' interlanguage system progress. This absolute unanimity on the part of the teachers is in line with the first hypothesis of the paper that **"The status of English a foreign language doesn't allow learners ample exposure to communicative interaction".**

Table 3 : Teaching practices fail in providing an authentic learning atmosphere to assist in the progress of learners' interlanguage system.

Options	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly agree	08	31%
Agree	12	46%
Neutral	02	08%
Disagree	04	15%
Strongly disagree	-	0.0
Total	26	100%

The teachers' attitudes as presented in table (3) above mirror that 31% of the teachers strongly agree with the statement, 46% agree, 8% are neutral, and 15% disagree. However, high rates of the responses presented by the teachers in this statement support the claim that "**teaching practices are of significance in providing an authentic learning atmosphere that could assist in the progress of learners' interlanguage system".**

Table 4: The interference of learners' mother tongue affect negatively the progress of learners' interlanguage system.

Options	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly agree	14	54%
Agree	12	46%
Neutral	-	0.0
Disagree	-	0.0
Strongly disagree	-	0.0
Total	26	100.0

The teachers ' replies as displayed in table (4) above show that 54% of the teachers strongly agree with the statement, and 46% agree. Thus, these total agreement of the teachers entirely advocate the third hypothesis of this paper that **"The interference of learners' mother tongue affect negatively the progress of learners' interlanguage system***".*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research dealt with the identification and analysis of the cross-linguistic factors that affect the progress of the interlanguage system of Saudi learners of EFL. The main reason for choosing such a topic is the crucial need to identify what factors beyond learners' inability to acquiring the interlanguage system. Since the constitution of learners' own linguistic system requires lots of language practices and further linguistic components such as semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology pragmatics beside, receiving effective teaching methods and techniques, authentic teaching materials provided by experienced and well-trained teachers having linguistic competence and teaching proficiency. Thus, to achieve the aim of having learners with progressed interlanguage systems, serious actions and procedures must be taken into consideration to find solutions to the cross-linguistic challenges this paper has highlighted as the main linguistic factors that affect the progress of learners interlanguage system. These factors are considered obstacles and barriers obstructing Arab learners of EFL from achieving their ultimate goal of attaining native-like competence and having a complete mastery of the English language. These cross-linguistic factors are outlined as explored by the researcher as follows:

The first cross-linguistic factor hindering Saudi learners of English is the status of English as a foreign language in their country. That is, English is spoken and used only in very limited situations such as universities, colleges and few schools where English is taught as a minor subject so that the role of English is only for specialty, academic purposes and for slight communicative roles when speakers had to use it only for the purpose in question.

Furthermore, this state of English as EFL had also an effect on restricting the presence of authentic spoken and written English to be spread over the government institutes which entails very little amount of exposure to real English specially learners of English who lack an authentic platform so that they can test their hypotheses about the target language. Therefore, most Saudi learners of EFL experience communicative setting only inside academic environments as there is hardly little English in use outside their academic community. Though there are various electronic and technological alternatives such as academic websites, social network available for learners, they are accustomed to practice English in their academic environments. These facts were verified by the EFL teachers who responded to the questionnaire statistically that the teachers' responses showed that 77% strongly agreed with the hypothesis, and 30% agreed with it. Thus, the teachers almost unanimously agreed that the status of English a foreign language which doesn't allow learners ample exposure to communicative setting is a cross-linguistic factor that can influence learners' interlanguage system progress. These facts conform to a part of the literature review called for that the exposure to correct forms of a target language provides the students with a bridge to get to the target language and consolidate the correct forms, abandoning the incorrect forms.

Another issue related to the learners' inability of interlanguage system progress is the teaching strategies and techniques, where most EFL teachers do not look at the errors of their learners as a process of testing hypotheses about learning the target language, instead, they consider errors indicative of failure and these errors should not appear and they must be eliminated immediately. These negative attitudes of teachers towards learners' errors and mistakes reflect the poor quality of teaching practices and habits that failed in providing an authentic learning environment for Arab learners of EFL. The teachers should be tolerable when dealing with learners' failure of correcting errors and they have to bear mind that making errors is a positive indication that learners internalize the rules of the interlanguage system and inputs.

Among the above-mentioned factors, the interference of learners' mother tongue that counts much in affecting the progress of learners' interlanguage system. As the learners have no way out of code-switching other than their native language. This mother-tongue affects negatively the progress of learners' interlanguage system owing to the entire differences lie between the learners' mother tongue and the target language; these differences create challenges and obstacles for them to acquire further grammatical rules and utterances from the target language. Besides the presence of the mother in the scene of learning, Grammar Translation Method of teaching used by teachers encourages learners to rely greatly on their mother tongue as GTM appeals more for the learners to be taught through.

Statistically, the issue of learners' mother tongue interference as hindrance obstructing learners' interlanguage system progress was verified by the teachers' replies to the questionnaire in which 54% of the teachers strongly agreed with the statement, and 46% agreed. Thus, this total agreement of the teachers entirely

advocated the fact that interference of learners' mother tongue affects negatively the progress of their interlanguage system.

What also affects learners' interlanguage system progress, is the sociolinguistic background of their English teachers; those teachers speak different verities of Arabic language as they represent different Arab nationalities where different non-standard Arabic language or varieties are linguistically spoken in each Arab country. As a result, Saudi learners experience challenges of getting a standardized lingua franca of teaching to receiving authentic and native-like habits of teaching inside classrooms and therefore GMT is their preferred channel of instruction. This point was also advocated by most of the teachers responded to the questionnaire in which 77% (31% strongly agreed, 46% agreed) supporting the view expressed by the statement that different non-standard varieties of Arabic language are related to the sociolinguistic background of EFL teachers that hinders the progress of learners' interlanguage system.

A last linguistic issue that is interconnected with learners' interlanguage system progress, is the psycholinguistic factor which is considered the cornerstone of acquiring interlanguage system. Commonly, learners in their early stages of learning a target language have fears and some reluctances of testing the target language linguistic system producing the same hypotheses they produced when learning their native language, they may also share nearly the same habits and characteristics of learning an extra language besides their native ones; and they may share the same learning strategies but also they may commit identical kinds of errors. Therefore, criticizing learners' mistakes may result in learners' losing interests, low motivation, and repulsion, etc, reducing their chances of achievement. Teachers should realize that learners employ hypothesis testing to gain the recognition of the target language, but passive learners are more likely to refrain from learning, but by giving more time, learners are likely to perform better.

The psycholinguistic factor as related to the learners struggle with the progress of their interlanguage system was also verifies by the teachers responses to the questionnaire in which 88% (38% strongly agreed, 50% agreed) are in favor of the statement that supported the verification of the fact that the different linguistic systems of both languages creates a sense of psycholinguistic discomfort and weakness among learners which in its turn affects negatively the progress of learners' interlanguage system as teachers fail to provide the cream of their teaching proficiency.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Foreign or Second language learning involves learners' capability of formulating their own linguistic system that lies between their first language and the target language so that they can spontaneously go forward and achieve the progress of having native-like language system and competence akin to that possessed by the speakers of the target

language. But to get the property of having a native-like language system, EFL Arab learners must be well prepared to surmount and overcome approximate shared cross-linguistic factors affecting Arab learners' progress of their own linguistic systems towards native-like proficiency. These cross-linguistic factors were claimed by the researcher and were confirmed by the teachers of EFL consequently the researcher recommends that language planners and language policy should review and reconsider the state of English as a foreign language of academic specialty so that EFL learners receive sufficient target language input inside and outside classrooms, teaching strategies should get rid of the negative attitudes of teachers towards learners' errors and mistakes, teachers should also encourage learners to use English inside classrooms instead of relying on their mother tongue to reduce the interference of learners' mother tongue with their learning of English, the teachers of English should disguise their sociolinguistic background of Arab English teachers and try to use authentic English language as a lingua franca of language teaching classroom so that learners may get used to a standardized form English language classroom, and finally teacher should bear in mind that criticizing learners' mistakes may result in learners' losing interests, low motivation, and repulsion, etc, reducing their chances of achievement, as a result, they have to pay attention to the psycholinguistic side of their learners.

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