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Curriculum and Instruction

**THE ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH
CAUSATIVE-INCHOATIVE ALTERNATION
BY ARABIC NATIVE SPEAKERS**

Dissertation

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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PREVIEW

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Abstract

The Acquisition of the English Causative-Inchoative Alternation by Arabic Native Speakers

*Hassan El-Nabih
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This study is an investigation of Arabic native speakers' (ANSs) acquisition of the English causative-inchoative alternation (e.g. *Tom broke the vase* vs. *The vase broke*). Emphasis is placed on the relationship between English proficiency, language transfer, and Universal Grammar mechanisms in ANSs' interlanguage representations. Four central research questions guide the study: (1) Does the English causative-inchoative alternation pose a learnability problem for ANSs? (2) Do ANSs distinguish between unaccusative and unergative verbs in English? (3) Are there L1 transfer effects on ANSs' acquisition of the English causative-inchoative alternation? (4) Are there differences across English proficiency levels with respect to the answers to questions 1-3? To address these questions, an acceptability judgment and correction task was administered to a total of 119 ANSs (from the Gaza Strip, Palestine) of different English proficiency levels. Additionally, 23 American native speakers of English served as controls.

The results obtained from data analyses indicated that the English causative-inchoative alternation posed a learnability problem for the Arab participants. They exhibited four major non-target behaviors: overpassivization (both ungrammatical and unnatural), overcausativization, underpassivization, and undercausativization. It is argued that these errors can largely be attributed to L1 transfer, since Arabic is significantly different from English in terms of how to encode the causative-inchoative alternation. The

results also revealed sensitivity to the unaccusative-unergative distinction in English, which supports the hypothesis that ANSs have access to the innate mechanisms of Universal Grammar. Moreover, while interlanguage development towards target-like behavior was observed across proficiency groups, certain test conditions revealed a strong influence of L1 transfer on even the high proficiency participants.

The findings from the study are inconsistent with the modular view of L1 transfer (Montrul, 2000), but they lend support to the hypothesis that L1 transfer operates not only on morphology, but on lexical argument structure as well (Whong-Barr, 2005).

The study is an attempt to fill a gap in the literature, since no research has specifically investigated the acquisition of the English causative-inchoative alternation by ANSs.

DEDICATION

To my dear mother

To my dear wife and children

To the soul of my dear father

May Allah shower him with abundant mercy

And admit him into Paradise

Amen

PREVIEW

Do you love me?¹

Do you love me?

Yes, I do! I sincerely love you! But why do you keep asking this question? You have asked it many times over the past seven months. Do you doubt my love, my care, my provision for you?

I don't know!

You don't know? But you know that I have sacrificed a lot for the sake of gaining you! Haven't I traveled about ten thousand miles through four continents so that I can achieve this goal? I traveled from Gaza (Asia) to Cairo (Africa). Then I flew to Boston (North America) via Frankfurt (Europe).

I know, but ...

And I stay awake and don't go to bed till dawn every day, thinking of you and working for the day when you become mine, like a lover thinking of his dearly beloved woman!

Yes, but ...

At this time, the phone rang. It was his wife's number. He canceled the call and called her back (to save her the cost). He talked with her and two of his children for about twenty minutes.

Sorry! It was my family in Gaza.

You see?

What's the matter, darling? You've known I *am* married, haven't you? I *have* a wife and children. It's not a secret that I'm ashamed of revealing. And I do love them!

So I am not your only love, aren't I?

But you are a true love of mine. Are you jealous of my wife? My wife *herself* doesn't have this feeling. She knows that I love you, and she supports this love.

Really?

Yes! Believe me! She loves you. She is a beautiful and kind woman. And when you meet her, you will love her.

Are you gonna take me to Palestine?

Of course, I will be proud when you are with me in Palestine. You will love my country and my people. They will be happy about your stay there.

Are we gonna stay there?

Yep! It will be your home, honey! There won't be a better place. 'East or west, home is the best.'

What can I do there?

You'll be with me wherever I go. My country is in bad need of your qualification. We'll work together and contribute to the progress of Palestine and making it a safe and peaceful place. You'll be part of my name, *Dr. El-Nabih!* You see how much I love you, my dear future Ph.D. degree? So please don't doubt it anymore!

¹ I wrote this short story for a Teaching Writing course in 2008.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Acc	accusative case
AJC	Acceptability Judgment and Correction
ANSs	Arabic native speakers
CA	Classical Arabic
C-C Scenario	Context encourages use of causative and structure is causative
CESL	Center for English as a Second Language
CoA	Colloquial Arabic
<i>df</i>	degree of freedom
D-structure	deep structure
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
FT/FA	Full Transfer/Full Access
Gen	genitive case
I-I Scenario	Context encourages use of intransitive and structure is intransitive
IP	Inflectional Phrase (or Sentence)
I-P Scenario	Context encourages use of intransitive but structure is passive
IUG	Islamic University of Gaza
L1	first language, native language, mother tongue
L2	second language
<i>M</i>	mean
MSA	Modern Standard Arabic
<i>n</i>	number of participants
Nom	nominative case
NP	noun phrase
P-I Scenario	Context encourages use of passive but structure is intransitive
P-P Scenario	Context encourages use of passive and structure is passive
RQ	Research Question

<i>SD</i>	standard deviation
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SOV	Subject-Verb-Object
S-structure	surface structure
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UG	Universal Grammar
UH	Unaccusative Hypothesis
UTAH	Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis
<i>V-en</i>	past participle
VP	verb phrase
VSO	Verb-Subject-Object

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

As English has become the center of many globalization mechanisms, it is not surprising that more and more people are engaged in learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL²), in addition to acquiring it as a first language (Canagarajah, 2007; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Meierkord, 2004; Wardhaugh, 2006). In his report, commissioned by the British Council, David Graddol argues:

Within a few years, there could be around 2 billion people [i.e. nearly a third of the world's population] simultaneously learning English in the world's schools and colleges and as independent adults.

(Graddol, 2006, p. 100)

There is no doubt that English has increasingly been viewed as a sign of upward mobility, especially in developing countries, including those within the Arab world. Therefore, improving proficiency in this global language has become a critical goal in education (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006).

Policy makers and educators in the Arab countries have recognized the extreme importance of the English language (Zughoul, 2003), and Palestine, the site of the present study, is no exception. The Palestinian Ministry of Education has assigned English as a

² ESL (English as a second language) refers to learning English (by non-native speakers of English) in an English speaking country like the USA and UK, whereas EFL (English as a foreign language) refers to learning English in a non-English speaking country such as Palestine, the site of this dissertation project.

compulsory subject for all school students beginning from the first grade³. A new curriculum, *English for Palestine*, has been designed for students in all grades (1-12). Similarly, at the level of higher education, students (even non-English majors) must take certain EFL courses. Moreover, private language institutes have been established in many areas of the country to offer English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, such as business, medicine, and engineering.

Palestinian students, however, have little to no exposure to the English language outside the classroom; very few English native speakers visit the country, and Palestinian students very rarely travel outside the country, particularly to English-speaking countries. Nevertheless, advancements in technology and the more frequent use of the Internet and satellite-based media may provide Palestinian students, especially at the university level, with opportunities to improve their English outside EFL classrooms.

In the classroom, English is mainly taught by Palestinian teachers who have degrees in teaching English (generally BA at school level and MA/Ph.D. at university level). Of critical import is that these teachers have experienced the process of learning English as an additional language and also share the same language and cultural background as their students. Sharing such attributes is an advantage as it enables teachers to anticipate their students' linguistic problems (Phillipson, 1996). However, one argument advanced in this study is that, despite their considerable degree of proficiency,

³ Prior to the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994, English was taught at Palestinian public schools from the seventh grade in the Gaza Strip and from the fifth grade in the West Bank. However, in 1996, English began to be taught from the fifth grade in the Gaza Strip before its introduction to all Palestinian school grades in 2000.