Chapter 3
Second Language Acquisition and the Impact of First Language Writing Orientation

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ABSTRACT

Arabic has a right to left writing orientation, whereas English, which Arab students learn as a foreign language, uses a left to right orientation. This reverse directionality leads to such issues as the jumbling and mixing of letters within words among adult learners. Hence, this chapter identifies, describes, and diagnoses Omani Arabic speakers’ errors when writing English and also attempts to find the sources of these errors and possible remedies. It further seeks to determine whether these phenomena are transient in nature and thus subject to correction. Comparable populations of foundation-level students are studied and also the potential effects on adult learners of content delivery methods in English that mimic the writing orientation of their L1. In addition, EFL teachers with diverse multicultural backgrounds are surveyed to find the extent of the problem, the level of teacher awareness, and whether ongoing limited classroom intervention could tackle the problem.

INTRODUCTION

‘To use two languages familiarly and without contaminating one by the other is very difficult’, said Samuel Johnson, in 1761.

This contamination is termed Negative First Language (L1) Transfer or Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) in the ESL field. The role of students’ mother tongue has been a debatable issue in second language acquisition, to the extent that Gabrielatos (2001) calls it a ‘bone of contention’. Ellis (2008) agrees, saying that there is a conflict, a ‘constant warfare’, between two language systems in a learner.

Because English and Arabic have a different writing orientation, this causes such problems as jumbling and mixing letters within words among adult Arab learners. Hence the focus of this re-
search. There are three main systems of writing orientation, running from left to right, right to left, and top to bottom. Griffin (2004) linked eye movements to the manner in which learners organise and perceive information. Hence these differences in perception and organisation of information cause confusion in reading and writing among SL learners of English. It must be kept in mind here that this confusion is not only observed in Arab learners but also in Japanese and Chinese learners and others. Chan and Bergen (2005) mention this when they argue that “The way we gaze at locations is associated with how we process information. If we are used to collecting information from left to right, we may tend to look at things on the left side of our visual field first.” (p. 2)

However, the intensity of the problem might vary from one situation to another. In an EFL context, however, it is particularly severe. The cohort chosen for this study comprises learners of English as a foreign language with a very limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Prior to entering their tertiary-level institution, i.e. the Middle East College, cohort members had studied all their core subjects in Arabic. Hence, Arabic orthographic features are deep-rooted and have been practiced for so long that they have an automatic life in learners’ brains, as in a computer. Hence, word recognition and writing in students’ L1 is faster and faultless in most cases. But this may severely hinder L2 acquisition. It has been observed that there is difficulty in structural modification in order to fulfill the demands of English when cognitive processing mechanisms for a particular orthography have been established (Hung & Tzeng, 1981).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Mother Tongue Influence and Transfer**

Extensive research has been conducted in the area of L1 interference in L2 acquisition. It is natural to expect a high frequency of errors in L2 when the structures of two languages are noticeably different (Dechert, 1983). Dulay et al. (1982) describe interference as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. Lott (1983) also defines interference as “errors in the learner’s use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue” (p.256). Kuhl et al. (2005) argue that early exposure to a particular language produces a ‘neural commitment’ to the acoustic properties of that language and that this interferes with foreign language processing. Stenton (2009) further argues that acquiring L1 reading skills can be described as the most miraculous learning achievement of a lifetime. But acquiring similar skills in a second language is perhaps even more miraculous since students have to resist a deeply ingrained neural programming which spontaneously leads to mother tongue sound / symbol associations rather than to those of the less known target language.

Transfer in the learning process means ‘the carry-over or generalization of learned responses from one type of situation to another’, especially ‘the application in one field of study or effort of knowledge, skill, power, or ability acquired in another’ ([Webster's Third New World International Dictionary](https://www.webster'sdictionary.org), 1986). Transfer here can be termed ‘linguistic transfer’, implying that learners carry over their native language knowledge (NL) to help them learn to use a target language (TL). Ellis (1997) refers to interference as ‘transfer’, which he says is “the influence that the learner’s L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2” (p.51). According to him, transfer is governed by learners’ perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in L2 learning. Olshtain’s (1987) and Odlin’s (1989) studies provide evidence of NL-based transfer that occurs in learning a second language. Hence learners need to struggle to accommodate the demands of L2. Perfetti (2007) rightly states that “Learners must acquire the writing conventions of their second language, which can differ in its deep mapping principles (writing