

# Challenges in English Sentence Structure for Arabic-Speaking EFL Students in Qatar: A Qualitative Exploration of Learner Perceptions and Error Patterns

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## Abstract

*Arabic-speaking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face unique challenges in mastering English sentence structure, particularly due to syntactic differences between Arabic and English. This qualitative study examines the perceptions of EFL learners in Qatar regarding these challenges, focusing on common syntactic errors and instances of language interference. Semi-structured interviews with 10 Arabic-speaking EFL learners from a Qatari university provided data that were analyzed using Corder's (1981) error analysis and Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory. Findings revealed frequent verb tense and word order errors due to direct translation from Arabic, often resulting in learner anxiety. These insights underscore the need for EFL instructional strategies that address Arabic-speaking learners' specific linguistic challenges. The study contributes to EFL pedagogy by highlighting tailored approaches that foster syntactic accuracy and learner confidence.*

**Keywords:** Arabic-speaking EFL learners, Syntactic errors, Language interference, Error analysis, EFL instructional strategies.

## 1. Introduction

### Background

Mastering English sentence structure is critical for academic success in English-speaking contexts but presents significant challenges for Arabic-speaking learners. Differences in syntactic structures, such as Arabic's flexible verb-subject-object (VSO) order versus English's fixed subject-verb-object (SVO) order, often lead to confusion (Al-Jawad & Mansour, 2021; Shaalan et al., 2019). Arabic learners may omit verbs in nominal sentences, a feature incompatible with English syntax (Adila, 2019; Shaalan et al., 2019). These distinctions cause frequent English writing and speaking errors, impacting student confidence and academic performance (Yaseen et al., 2018; Souadkia, 2017).

### Problem Statement

This study addresses the syntactic challenges that Qatari Arabic-speaking EFL learners experience when attempting to master English sentence structures for their academic work, an issue that impacts their overall language proficiency (Farooq, 2019). Research indicates that Arabic-speaking postsecondary EFL learners must develop advanced English language skills to succeed academically and professionally (Erdocia & Laka, 2018; Hashim et al., 2021).

### Purpose of Study

This study aimed to explore Arabic-speaking EFL learners' perceptions of the syntactic challenges in learning English sentence structure. Using Corder's (1981) error analysis and Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory, this research seeks to identify common structural errors and examine how these learners perceive and address them.

## 2. Literature Review

### **Syntactic Challenges in Arabic and English**

Arabic and English differ in many syntactic aspects, including subject-verb agreement, verb forms, and word order. Arabic has flexible word order structures, while English typically requires SVO order (Alhussain, 2018; Yaseen et al., 2018). Studies show that these differences lead to frequent syntactic errors for Arabic-speaking EFL learners, including issues with verb tense usage, adjective placement, and sentence structure (Alhussain, 2018; Ghomri & Souadkia, 2020).

### **Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory**

Error analysis provides insights into the recurring errors in a learner's language acquisition process, helping educators tailor instructional methods to address specific errors (Corder, 1981). Corder's framework identifies and categorizes these errors, making it possible to correct issues that persist due to interference from a learner's native language (Selinker, 1972). This approach is particularly relevant for Arabic-speaking EFL learners in Qatar, where both syntactic errors and negative transfer of native language syntax are frequent (Abi Samra, 2003; Al-Khresheh, 2010).

## **3. Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions of Arabic-speaking EFL learners at a Qatari university. This design was chosen to gather in-depth insights into learners' personal experiences and syntactic challenges.

### **Participants**

Participants were 10 Arabic-speaking EFL students majoring in English. All had studied English for at least two years at the university level, offering a range of perspectives on the syntactic challenges encountered in EFL contexts.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and subsequently transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVivo software. Thematic coding based on Corder's error analysis method enabled the categorization of errors by type, identifying themes related to learners' syntactic struggles and their perception of errors (Corder, 1981).

## **4. Results**

### **Learner Perceptions of Challenges**

Participants reported specific challenges in mastering English syntax, particularly in word order, tense consistency, and punctuation. Many students expressed frustration at the differences between Arabic and English sentence structures, citing direct translation as a common source of error. Learners also described feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence when faced with these syntactic issues in academic writing (Farooq, 2019; Hussain & Abdullah, 2019).

### **Common Syntactic Errors**

The study identified two primary types of errors:

1. **Verb Tense and Agreement Errors:** Due to the lack of progressive and perfect tenses in Arabic, learners frequently misuse these forms in English, often omitting auxiliary verbs like "is" or "are" (Alzahrani, 2020; Akan et al., 2019).
2. **Word Order and Adjective Placement:** Errors in adjective placement were common, as Arabic places adjectives after the noun, contrasting with English (Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020). Learners often directly translated from Arabic to English, leading to word order errors that affected clarity (El Shaban, 2017; Shaalan et al., 2019).

## **5. Discussion**

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings confirm that syntactic differences between Arabic and English contribute to recurring errors in EFL learners' writing. These errors, which include verb tense and word order issues, are

reflective of language interference and often result in learners experiencing frustration and decreased self-confidence (Al-Muhtaseb & Mellish, 1998; Lamri & Cherifi, 2020). Corder's error analysis and Selinker's interlanguage theory provided a framework for understanding how these learners process and correct these errors over time.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The study suggests that instructors should provide targeted exercises to address these syntactic errors, especially in verb tense and word order. Corrective feedback and encouraging self-reflection may improve learners' confidence and syntactic accuracy (Xie, 2019; Al-Seghayer, 2019). Additionally, offering comparison exercises between Arabic and English syntax can aid in reducing negative transfer effects.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **Summary of Findings**

Arabic-speaking EFL learners in Qatar encounter frequent syntactic issues in English sentence structure, primarily due to verb tense usage and word order differences. Allowing learners to analyze and correct their errors can improve accuracy and language competence (Bukit, 2020; Atmowardoyo, 2018).

### **Future Research**

Future studies should expand on these findings by including other regions with Arabic-speaking EFL learners or examining how teacher-led corrective strategies influence learner perceptions and syntactic accuracy over time (Mahmood & Murad, 2018).

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