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**Language transfer and foreign language learning**

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

{قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ}  
صدق الله العلي العظيم

[ الزمر : 9 ]

## **Dedication**

Dedication Every challenging work needs self efforts as well as guidance especially those who were very close to our heart.

My humble effort I dedicate to my sweet and loving

Father & Mother,

Whose affection, love, encouragement and prays of day and night make me able to get such success and honor,

And to my husband for making everything possible

Along with all hard working and respected Teachers

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In the beginning, thanks and praise be to God, Exalted be He, so to Him is attributed all the credit for completing - and perfection to God alone this work.

After all, praise be to God, I would like to address my

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with thanks and appreciation for supporting me and guiding me with advice and corrections on choosing the title and subject, and thanks and appreciation to the Deanship of the College Education for Human Sciences, and the head of the department English, and to all my professors at all levels of study on Efforts.

## **Abstract**

Native speakers of Arabic face a number of problems in their attempt to acquire the English language. The Arabic language has a structural system which, in many features, is different from that in English. Therefore, mistakes and errors occur when students refer back to their native language (Arabic) when communicating in the second/foreign language (English). The aim of this paper is to pinpoint the influence of Arabic mother-tongue interference and negative transfer from the students' first language on proper command of English. Language transfer is one of the important factors in second language acquisition. Based on the language transfer theories the article analyses the language factors which affect language transfer in the process of second language acquisition from the perspective of phonetics pragmatics and syntax in the method of comparative analysis, which can help teachers stimulate their language teaching. Linguistic transfer has been a field of many studies. This could be attributed to the strong association between linguistic transfer and both second language acquisition and linguistic errors. This paper aims at adding evidence about the effect of first language on mastering a second language and to fill a gap in linguistic studies of transfer.

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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1statement of the problem**

Learners of English as a second/ foreign language with an Arabic mother-tongue encounter shared difficulties when it comes to using English articles, adjectival possessive pronouns quantifiers, prepositions, etc. Because of the nature of the structural systems in both Arabic and English, and due to the differences between their features and rules of appliance negative transfer from the mother-tongue of native Arabic students may occur. As a result, negative transfer and mother-tongue inference strongly limit students' learning abilities and proper command of the target language (English). Learners of English as a second/foreign language come upon many problems which many of them is due to mother-tongue interference and negative transfer from the native language. Negative transfer is the negative effect of the learners' native language on second/foreign language learning. Therefore, it is found that L1 Arabic students and learners of the English language, especially when it comes to using certain English language points, such as common-used structural features, face interference and negative transfer from their first language (Arabic). This is mostly found when attempting to learn to properly use determiners, and prepositions in ESL/EFL (English as a second/foreign language). Due to the differences between the Arabic and English article system, rest of the determiners and prepositions, which are very frequently used in English, such problems arise.



## **1.2 Aim of the study**

Identifying the effect of the language transfer and foreign language learning.

## **1.3 Hypothesis**

It is hypothesized that positive effects of language transfer can be highly utilized and negative effects can be minimized to achieve better foreign language learning

## **1.4 Limits of the study**

Language transfer is one of the important factors in second language acquisition. Based on the language transfer theories the article analyses the language factors which affect language transfer in the process of second language acquisition from the perspective of phonetics pragmatics and syntax in the method of comparative analysis, which can help teachers stimulate their language teach.

## **1.5 Value of the study**

Language transfer can be used to explain the interact among factors in the process of second language learning and influence the acquisition and use of language, and help learners to learn the correct language learning strategies.

## **1.6 Procedures**

### **1.6.1 choosing and limiting the topic of the study**

### **1.6 .2 Selecting and collecting data**

### **1.6.3 Reading and Classifying the material of the study**

## **Chapter Two**

### **2.1 Definition**

language transfer, DiPietro (1964:224) had earlier stated that contrastive analysis is important "as a preliminary step to understanding the range of transfer from one linguistic structure to another."

it must be specified that the present study deals with language transfer as a psycholinguistic phenomenon, that is, focusing on the particular process encountered in the case of the participants of the study. The complexity of language transfer (LT) or cross-linguistic influence (CLI) partially explains the controversy that has sometimes surrounded the topic (Odlin, 2003) and consequently, its effects have been amply documented in SLA (Cook, 2003). We will begin by presenting how the theory of language transfer or cross-linguistic influence emerged. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) suggest that there are two possible ways of describing the term 'interference'. One is from a psychological perspective, according to which there is influence from old habits when new ones are being learned. The second is from a sociolinguistic perspective, which describes the language interactions that occur when two language communities are in contact.

Andersen's (1983) proposal of 'transfer to somewhere' is one of the studies that tried to explain the conditions under which transfer occurred. According to it, transfer occurs when the element L1 is compatible with the natural principles of acquisition and when the element of L2 leads to L1 generalizations. Kellerman (1995) sees Andersen's proposal as incomplete, since it takes into account only those elements which are similar between L1 and L2. To complete it, he proposes his theory of 'transfer to nowhere', which

stated that “there may be transfer that has nothing to do with the similarities with the L2 and where the operation of the L2 is not taken into account, that is, transfer to nowhere” (Kellerman, 1995: 137).

Weinreich (1953: 1) used interference meaning: “those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language”.

Language transfer is best thought of as an umbrella term for a whole class of behaviours,

processes, and constraints, each of which has to do with CLI, i.e., the influence and use of prior linguistic knowledge, usually but not exclusively L1 knowledge (Selinker, 1992). This knowledge or set of rules intersects with input from the TL and with universal properties of various sorts in a selective way, from which results the IL (Selinker, 1992; Vázquez, 1991).

Odlin (1989: 27) provides one of the most well-known and widely-accepted definition of language transfer as “the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired”. Additionally, we consider that the definition of CLI provided by Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008: 1) complements the previously-mentioned one and is also highly consistent with the latest lines of research in the field: “[...] the influence of a person’s knowledge of one language on that person’s knowledge or use of another language.

## **2.2 Theoretical Background**

An important issue within research on LT is how L2 learners overcome the effects of L1 influence or what explains the cases in which they do not (Gabriele, 2010). Thus, the influence of learners' L1 is one of the main factors to consider in SLA. In the beginning of the study of LT, this phenomenon was considered synonym for mother tongue interference. In the last 50 years, researchers have taken different views of the role of L1 in SLA (Butler & Hakuta, 2006). As could be seen previously, in the 1960s, employing CA, it was believed that L1 had primary influence over L2 acquisition. During the heyday of behaviorism, it was claimed that learners' errors reflected the structure of their L1.

The theory that the L2 learner does not start the learning process from scratches became positively valued. In this sense, a common-used strategy is to resort to the mother tongue (and other previously acquired linguistic knowledge), searching for similarities between their L1, other languages that they know and the language they are currently learning in order to facilitate the L2 learning process (Ringbom & Jarvis, 2009). According to the same authors, SLA research focused more on the differences between languages, than it did on the similarities. Furthermore, SLA is fundamentally different from L1 acquisition in that L2 learners bring complete knowledge of their L1 grammar to the L2 acquisition task (Montrul, 2010). Indeed, the findings of previous L2 research have clearly shown the effects of L1 transfer (Gass & Selinker, 1992; Odlin, 1989; Schwartz, 1998; Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994, 1996, among many others). Nevertheless, depending on the language being learned, some L2 constructions are easier while others seem to be more difficult to acquire. This depends partly on the structure of the L1, since it

seems that transfer from the L1 can help in L2 acquisition in some cases. An example of an L2 phenomenon that is particularly difficult to learn is grammatical gender (also called noun class), which is a lexical property of nouns (Sabourin, Stowe, & de Haan, 2004). In this regard, knowledge of the L1 can often have a positive impact on the rate of L2 learning (Ortega, 2009). For many years now, Ringbom (1987, 1992, 2007) has been a strong advocate of the idea that relevant knowledge in the L1 can accelerate the rate of L2 learning. Furthermore, the rate advantages afforded by knowledge of the L1 have been documented across diverse areas of L2 learning (Ortega, 2009). A good example is the study by Jarvis (2002), where he investigated the use of the English article system, study conducted in Finland, with Finnish-dominant and Swedish-dominant students learning English at school. He found that L1 influences from Swedish provided the Finland Swedes with an overall advantage in accuracy of use of the and zero article over the Finnish-speaking learners, and that the advantage narrowed, but still was noticeable at higher proficiency levels after two, four, and six years of L2 instruction. In this sense, various studies have shown real effects of the L1, and researchers increasingly realise that good predictions require close study of what learners understand and produce (Odlin, 1989). Regarding evidence of L1 effect, it must be pointed out that, while some studies produced evidence of L1 transfer in the construction of L2 grammar (Bennett & Progovac, 1998; Cook, 1990; Hirakawa, 1990; Lakshmanan & Teranishi, 1994), other studies (or the same study with different learners) produced evidence of little L1 transfer (Cook, 1990; Finer & Broselow, 1986; Thomas, 1993). The reason for the conflicting results may be that not all L2 learners transfer L1 information (Ying, 1999). For example, Cook (1990) produced evidence of LT from Japanese learners, but she did not find much evidence of language transfer from Norwegian

learners. Another possible reason for the inconclusive results is that LT occurs mostly with less proficient learners. Likewise, Hirakawa (1990) found evidence of LT with less proficient Japanese learners, but Finer and Broselow (1986) did not find evidence of LT because their subjects were more advanced than Hirakawa's. In the same vein, studies focusing on competence concluded that students with low competence tended to transfer more elements of their L1 than more advanced students (Celaya, 2007; Celaya & Torras, 2001; Navés, Miralpeix, & Celaya, 2005; Woodall, 2002). However, studies also showed that the influence of the L1 increased throughout the development of the IL, that is, the more competent were the students, more they transferred, especially regarding the number of used borrowings (Sanz, 2000). Likewise, studies indicated that transfer neither increases nor decreases over the development of the IL (Poulisse, 1990), while others claim that this process fluctuates towards a specific direction (Engber, 1995; Jarvis, 1998). Based on these contradictory results, Jarvis (2000) questions whether all these studies are assessing the same phenomenon and claims that specific methodological approaches for the study of lexical transfer need to be established. Additionally, studies have shown that learners from certain L1 backgrounds have difficulties with using particular target-like forms consistently, even at high levels of L2 proficiency. For example, L1 speakers of Chinese show persistent optionality in their use of L2 English past simple (e.g., Hawkins & Liszka, 2003; Lardiere, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). Such selective differences help to inform debates on whether UG is fully available to older L2 learners (e.g., Lardiere, 2000; Prévost & White, 2000; Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996; Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1996) or whether it is only partially available (e.g., Hawkins & Chan, 1997; Hawkins et al., 2008; Hawkins & Liszka, 2003; Tsimpli, 2003; Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007). Accordingly, Ortega

(2008) presents a study of the influence that the L1 (Spanish) has on L2 (English) and L3 (Catalan) oral production. Lexical and syntactic transfer were analysed in the production of Catalan and English of two multilingual speakers with similar knowledge of non-native languages. The results showed that the L1 is the main source of transfer, both in L2 and L3 production, but its influence decreases as proficiency in the target language increases. Language distance also plays an important role in CLI, especially if proficiency in the source language is high and if there has been recent exposure to it. The findings also suggest that while syntactic transfer is exclusively L1-based, lexical transfer can occur from a non-native language. Due to the importance of language distance for the present study, this aspect will be dealt with in more depth further on in this chapter. Likewise, in the area of verb morphology, the study by Navarro and Nicoladis (2005) investigates to what extent L1 transfer occurs in oral narrations of learners of Spanish with English as L1. The analysis focused on the types of verbs the participants use and the results showed that the students followed the pattern of their L1 in several aspects of verbal usage. Likewise, the study by Phillips (2007) had similar results regarding the use of manner verbs. For the purpose of the present study it is highly important to emphasize that currently, various studies highlight the importance of L1 as a relevant factor in SLA (Alemán Bañón, Fiorentino, & Gabriele, 2014; Corder, 1983; Cuza et al., 2012; Ellis, 1994; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Larrañaga et al., 2011; Luk & Shirai, 2009; Montrul, Dias, & Santos, 2010; Rothman, 2011), and its influence, which can occur at all levels: phonological (Leather, 1997; Levis, 1999), semantic (Ringbom, 2001; Whitley, 2004), and morphosyntactic (Gràcia, Crous, & Garganta, 2008; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Odlin, 2005). All the above mentioned is highly relevant data in the context where the present study was conducted, Catalonia,



even more in the case of Romanian immigrant students, due to the common linguistic elements between Romanian and the two official languages of the region (Spanish and Catalan). In this regard, the literature provides information concerning the influence of Romanian (L1) in the learning of Spanish and/or Catalan (L2s) at morphosyntactic level (Chireac, 2010; Chireac, Serrat, & Huguet, 2011), and specifically in the case of attributive, existential, locative, and possessive constructions (Gràcia, Crous, & Garganta, 2008) and verb morphology (Gràcia, 2007). The latter research presents interesting data about the errors produced by Romanian students in verb inflection matters, as a consequence of using the syntax, tenses, and moods of their L1.

To sum up, research on bilingualism and LT suggests that the L2 can encroach into the structure of the L1 in systematic ways (see contributions in Cook, 2003; Pavlenko & Jarvis, 2002; among others). Also, Ellis (1985: 40) described the importance that L1 has in acquiring a foreign language and mentioned that “the learner’s L1 is an important determinant of SLA. It is not the only determinant, however, and may not be the most important. But it is theoretically unsound to attempt a precise specification of its contribution or even try to compare its contribution with that of other factors”. Accordingly, Slabakova (2002: 186) stated that “much more precise research questions can be formulated if L1 transfer is taken into account and properties that differ in the L1 and the L2 are investigated”.

## 2.3 Process

processability theory is a well-known L2 grammatical development model based on a cognitive processing approach (Pienemann 1998, 2005; Pienemann and Håkansson 1999; Pienemann and Keßler 2011; Keßler 2008; Baten et al. 2015). Processability theory (PT) stipulates that speech production is by nature constrained since working memory is a “limited capacity” processor of information. Therefore, additional “memory buffers” are posited in which “processing procedures” deposit grammatical information for temporary storage (Pienemann 1998, 60). The processing procedures, following Levelt (1989) and Kempen and Hoenkamp (1987), are further claimed to operate hierarchically in an implicational set sequence. From an L2 perspective, these procedures are considered to be language-specific. Accordingly, the L2 learner would have to create language-specific prerequisites necessary for L2 grammatical development. In L2 grammar terms, the L2 learner cannot initially process L2 grammatical structures since the learner cannot yet code conceptual information into L2 syntactic structures for two reasons. First, the lexicon is not fully annotated. Second, even if the lexical annotation were transferred into L2, the syntactic procedures “have not specialized to hold the specific L2 syntactic information” in the proposed memory buffers (Pienemann 1998, 76). The extent of this specialization is claimed to be the principle or “core” mechanism of L2 processability (Pienemann and Håkansson 1999, 384). Accordingly, three morpheme types are identified to be held in temporary memory buffers: lexical morphemes, phrasal (i.e., “phrasal” as in phrase structure à la lexical functional grammar, or LFG) morphemes, and interphrasal morphemes.<sup>27</sup> The three types of morphemes are assumed to be processable by the L2 learner along five distinct stages in an implicational order, as follows (Pienemann 1998, 83–85):

**Stage 1** Absence of any language-specific procedures where words are entered into the lexicon and conceptual structures are simply mapped into individual words and fixed phrases

**Stage 2** Development of “category procedures” where grammatical categories (that is, S, V, N, etc.) are assigned and “lexical morphemes” (for example, the {-ed} tense marker in English) are produced; these morphemes can be activated and realized in the same location once grammatical categories are assigned

**Stage 3** Development of “phrasal procedures” where development from word level to phrase level becomes possible and “phrasal morphemes” are produced (that is, lexical morphemes, such as tense, number, gender, and case markers when unified between a head of a phrase and its modifier/s)

**Stage 4** Development of “S-procedures” where “Inter-phrasal morphemes,” involving exchange of information across phrases, are developed (for example, subject–verb agreement features); here, functional destinations are determined and sentences assembled

**Stage 5** Development of “S-procedures” where subordinate/embedded clauses are developed.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The effect of language transfer**

According to (Nida,1964, 126-140) , transfer means the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the first language and any other learned or acquired language . Point out that "a learner's previous linguistic knowledge influences the acquisition of a new language in a principled, if not straightforward, contrastive way." This influence could be positive or negative. It is considered positive when the learner's knowledge of L1 enhances his ability to understand L2. Negative transfer, on the other hand, means that the learner's knowledge of L1 deteriorates his ability to understand L2.

Teaching English as a second/foreign language, as with any language learning attempts is met with problems of mother-tongue interference which could lead to either positive transfer or negative transfer. Positive transfer is when the mother-tongue helps in understanding and learning the target language due to similarities in both languages which assists in positively transferring or translating from the learners' first language into the target language. Negative transfer, on the other hand, is when the mother-tongue becomes a source of mistakes and errors due to the negative influence of the native language. In such circumstances, translating or transferring has a negative effect or influence. Usually, due to differences in both the Arabic and the English language, problems arise in the target language and in students' abilities to use good English in classrooms and environments.

Certain problems, due to L1 interference and negative transfer from the Arabic language, is found in learning English determiners, such as definite and indefinite articles, as well as correctly using prepositions in the English language. This is applicable in Contrastive analysis studies, which are concerned with the study of a pair of languages with the aim of discovering their structural similarities and differences. (Mozlan, 2015, p7)

### **3.1 Positive Transfer**

When the influence of the native language leads to immediate or rapid acquisition or use of the target language, we speak of positive transfer or facilitation. Applied linguists tend to focus much more on negative transfer than on positive transfer, because it is generally believed that only negative transfer presents teaching and learning challenges. Negative transfer manifests itself in different linguistic domains. In the area of phonetics and phonology, negative transfer effects account for much (although perhaps not all) of typical foreign accents. Target language sounds or sound combinations that do not occur in the native language typically cause special problems for learners. Likewise, negative transfer is generally held to be responsible for a host of learner errors in morphosyntax (inflection and word order).

positive transfer may account for the immediate recognition and acquisition of words with similar or identical pronunciation in both the native language and the target language; however, words that look or sound alike (or both) in the native and in the target languages but have different meanings It is the transfer of a skill X which facilitates the learning or has a positive influence on the command of a skill Y because of similarities between both skills(García G, Beltrán D. , 2003, 197-226.) .Maintain that

“positive transfer helps new learning, for instance, it is easy to learn to pronounce aspirated voiceless stops in a second language if the language also has aspirated voiceless stops”. Hence, prior language knowledge can be very helpful in learning a new language.

Not all effects of language transfer are negative - indeed, we may consider that without some language transfer, there would be no second language learning. According to Odlin (1989,2003) positive transfer facilitates language learning, it may occur when the native language and the target language have the same form. For example, both Arabic and English have the definite article “al” and “the” respectively. Therefore, the Arabic learners are expected to use the English article “the” correctly in expressions such as “the boy”, “the girl” and so forth.

positive transfer was predicted to occur when patterns were similar in the L1 and the L2, which would result in a correct utterance, while negative transfer would occur when patterns are different, causing errors in language production. Selinker (1972) already included transfer among the five central psycholinguistic processes characteristic of interlanguage in his seminal paper, but it was the work by Kellerman (1979, 1983, 1986) that ultimately initiated a re-evaluation of transfer as a cognitive process in which learners are seen as active decision-makers on what linguistic structures may be transferable into the L2., conceive of transfer as cross-linguistic influence, defined as “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired” (Odlin 1989: 27).

## 3.2 Negative Transfer

In the context of non-native language acquisition or use, transfer broadly refers to the influence of the learner's native language. Any two languages diverge in some respects but converge in others. When the influence of the native language leads to errors in the acquisition or use of a target language, we say that negative transfer or interference occurs. Negative transfer amounted to bad habits inherited from the native language, which needed to be overcome for mastery of the new language. It is the transfer of a skill X which impedes the learning or has a negative influence on the command of a skill Y because of differences between both skills. For some linguists such as (Harper C. 2004), negative transfer is referred to as interference. He also explains the occurrence of this phenomenon by contrasting it to positive transfer. He states that "When a process of second language learning takes place, those linguistic phenomena which are similar in form, meaning and distribution are regarded as facilitating the process, and the transfer is seen as positive, if they are dissimilar, the transfer is considered negative and acquisition is viewed as distorted because the two structures differ. The phenomenon involved in these difficulties was called interference" Thus, this phenomenon is equated with difficulty in learning a L2 as an outcome of differences of the two languages structures.

The second type is negative transfer which refers to a rule pattern in the native language that leads to an error in the target language. Corder points out, "one explanation of L2 errors is that the learner is carrying over the habits of his mother tongue into the second language" for example, an Arab learner may produce the inappropriate utterance "she not work" instead of

the correct one “she does not work “ due to the Arabic sentence “hia la ta“mal” literally means “she not works” (Al-Tammi,2006)

Until the morpheme studies of Dulay and Burt, it was often assumed that most errors were derived from transfer of the L1 to the L2 - this was referred to as interference.

It is now no longer clear where errors derive from. As we have seen, Dulay and Burt believe that the majority of errors are not based on transfer.

However, it is not always a simple matter to decide whether an error is L1 based or not. Another definition for Interference or (negative transfer): is, as Lado said, the negative influence of the mother language (L1) on the performance of the target language learner (L2), (1974). Marton (1988) differentiates between negative transfer and interference errors. According to him negative transfer errors are due to the formation of incorrect hypotheses on the basis of the perceived distance between the native and the target language. Interference errors, on the other hand, are the result of forcing the learner to produce the target language forms which have not yet been automatized.

However, when the negative influence of the native language is observed in the learner's language, it may be difficult to say whether it is due to negative transfer or interference.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Conclusions**

Interference errors among Arab ESL students are quite possibly one of the biggest problems they face in their endeavour to achieve a satisfactory proficiency level in English. However, as the literature well documents real-life examples of Arabic interference in the fields of grammar, syntax, phonology, grapheme-phoneme and idiomatic use of language, it is just becomes logical to expect teachers to become more aware of these errors and explain them to students in the hope they also become aware of this issue and take necessary steps to avoid committing such mistakes later on

Therefore, teachers of English as a second/foreign become aware of these language issues, consider the influence of mother-tongue interference and the effects of negative transfer from Arabic on learning English as a second/foreign language. Teachers should become aware of such matters and clarify them to their students, all in hope of better language proficiency, better English language teaching, English language learning and better success and achievement for both teachers and students. By knowledge of the most common problems, English language learners face due to mother-tongue interference and negative transfer from the learners' first language, ESL/EFL students and learners of English may overcome many repeated mistakes and errors. This will certainly lead to better English language teaching and learning, especially for those of an Arabic mother- tongue.

As a result from the recent studies, Inter-lingual transfer either was positive or negative seems to be the most readily available strategy in foreign language situations where learners may not use the intralingual strategies

due to their low proficiency in the language. The lower the students' proficiency level in the target language, the more inter-lingual errors they tend to make, and the evidence of the existence of inter-lingual transfer is indisputable particularly in foreign language learning contexts where the learners' exposure to the target language is confined to the limited input provided through formal classroom instruction. In such situations, interlingual transfer is used as a learning strategy to form hypotheses and as a communication strategy to test those hypotheses. Learners transfer from their native language to fill in linguistic gaps in their communication and confirm or modify their hypotheses based on the feed back they receive. This study indicates that Arabic -speaking students' negative grammatical, syntactic, semantic and lexical rules transfer from both modern standard Arabic (MSA) and Colloquial Arabic (NSA) English language system in order to solve their learning and communication problems which face them while learning English.

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