Investigatind the Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL University Students in Using the Semantic Roles of the Object By

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1. Introduction

An **object (**henceforth, O.) in grammar is a sentence element and part of the sentence predicate. It denotes somebody or something involved in the subject's "performance" of the verb (Daniel, 2007:2)

(1) Bobby kicked **the ball.**

(ibid)

In the above sentence, "the ball" is the object "Bobby" is the subject, the doer or performer, while "kick" is the action, and "ball" is the object involved in the action.

The main verb in the sentence determines whether there can or must be objects in the sentence, and if so how many and of what type. In many languages, however, including English, the same verb can allow multiple different structures; for example, "Bobby kicked", "Bobby kicked the ball", and "Bobby kicked me the ball" are all valid English sentences.

Most Iraqi EFL university students may face difficulties in recognizing and producing different semantic roles of the O. In this respect, the problem that may arise is represented in the students' weakness in using the appropriate semantic roles of the O. in the appropriate sentences. For example, the students may not distinguish the semantic roles of the O. in sentence (2); which is affected, from that in (3); which is a resultant:

(2) Babara painted **the wall**.

(3) Babara painted **a picture**.

(Thakur, 1999: 70)

This study aims at: 1- Identifying Iraqi EFL university students' performance in recognizing and producing different types of the semantic roles of the O., 2-Finding out the causes of the students' errors and the types of such errors.

It is hypothesized that: 1- Iraqi EFL university students do not distinguish different semantic roles of the O. 2- Students are influenced by the grammatical function of the O. more than its semantic roles. To achieve the aims of this study the following procedures will be adopted: Presenting a description of English semantic roles of the O., involving a sample of Iraqi EFL university students; fourth year in a test specifically designed to collect data about the difficulties that they encounter in using the semantic roles of the O., using statistic methods to rate the students' performance at the recognition and production levels in using these roles and analyzing the results of the test and the conclusions and pedagogical implications that will be put forward.

2. The Semantic Roles of the Object

2.1 Locative

Locative (henceforth, Loc) marks the place where the action occurs. This role may come with verbs as **walk, swim, pass, jump, turn, leave, reach, surround, cross, climb, occupy** and **inhabit.**

(Quirk et al, 1985:749; Carnie, 2002:169)

(4) She swam **the river**. ['She swam across the river. ']

(5) The horse jumped **the fence**. [' The horse jumped over the fence.']

(Quirk et al, 1985:749)

Quirk et al, (ibid) state that Loc. Os. may seem to be adverbials with an omitted preposition. The status of the Os. is clear from their ability to assume subject role in a corresponding passive clause. For example:

(6) The fence was jumped by the horse.

(ibid)

2.2 Resultant

Resultant (henceforth, Res.) is "the thing that comes into existence because of the activity indicated by the verb"

(Thakur, 1999:70)

(7) The carpenter made **a table**.

(8) She painted **a picture**.

(ibid) Whether the direct object (henceforth, O_d) in a sentence has the semantic role of a Res. or of an Affected participant depends on the meaning of the verb used in that sentence. This is evident from the following examples.

(9) a. Babara painted **the wall**.

b. Babara painted **a picture**.

(10) a. His mother is frying **an egg**.

b. His mother is frying **an omelette**.

(ibid)

In the 9a the O_d has the semantic role of an Affected participant but in the 9b it has the role of a Res. Similarly, the O_d in 10a has the semantic role of an Affected participant but the O_d in 10b has the semantic role of a Res. Other terms for the Res. are "object of result" and " effected object".

2.3 Cognate

The cognate role (henceforth, Cog.) is similar to a Res. role in that it refers to an event indicated by the verb. (Crystal, 2003:79)

Trask (1993:48) defines this role as "the direct object whose semantic content is more or less identical to that of the verb which governs it".

(11) Chris will sing **a song** for us.

(12) She lived **a good life.**

(Quirk et al, 1985:750)

In this role, the noun head is semantically and often morphologically related to the verb. The semantic function of the O is to repeat, wholly or partially the meaning of the verb.

(ibid)

2.4 Eventive

The Eventive role (henceforth, Even.) is semantically an extension of the verb and bears the major part of the meaning.

(ibid)

(13) a. They **are arguing**. [verb only]
b. They **are having an argument**. [verb + eventive O]

(ibid)

Quirk et al, (ibid:751) explain that the most frequent Even. O. can sometimes be related to a Cog. O in that it substitutes for the major lexical meaning of the verb whereas the Cog. O repeats the lexical meaning.

(14) a. They **fought for a long time**. [verb + adverbial]
b. They **fought a long fight**. [verb + Cog. O]
c. They **had a long fight**. [verb + Even. O]

(ibid)

In spite of the fact that is mentioned by Quirk et al, (i.e., this role is an extension of the verb . . .) some noun heads in Even. Os. are not derived from verbs.

(15) I'm making **an effort**.

(ibid)

In this example, **an effort** is an Even. although there is no verb effort. Also, there is no related verb for **homework** in **He did some homework**. This case cannot be taken as a general rule because **work** in **He did some work** is adverbial. Other examples: **have a game, have a haircut, make fun (of), make peace (with).** Unlike this group, sometimes the combination clearly does not have the same meaning as the verb a lone, for example: **make love (to), take trouble (over), make a difference**. In a few instances, the combination has (or may have) a passive meaning, particularly with **have**:

(16) a. The baby's having a bath. ['The baby is being bathed.']
b. I had a fright. ['I was frightened.']

(ibid: 751)

2.5 Instrumental

Most linguists such as Starosta (1987:480); Saad (1982:20) and Quirk et al, (1985:743) define the Instrumental role (henceforth, Inst.) as some O (generally inanimate) which is used as the effective cause of the action or event referred to by the verb.

(17) She hit the bug **with the magazine**.

(Yule, 1996:117)

Not all linguists insist on the inanimatness of Inst. that is why the word " generally " is used in the above definition. This means that the Inst. role does not have to be always inanimate as can be seen in the following examples:

(18) He frightened his **wife with his snake**.
(19) She was shaking **with fear**.

(Lobner, 2002:113)

2.6 Affected

The Affected participant (henceforth, Aff.) in a sentence is the animate or inanimate participant upon which the action is carried out.

(Thakur, 1999:70)

(20) We criticized **that leader** yesterday.
(21) I bought **an apartmen**t last week.
(22) John is eating **oranges**.

(ibid)

Quirk et al, (1985:753) mention that the indirect object (henceforth, O_i) normally takes the role of recipient. The O_i has the same role as the Aff. O_d in the paraphrases. Unlike the recipient O_i, the Aff. O_i is not normally paraphrasable by a prepositional phrase:

(23) a. I gave **Helen** a nudge.

* b. I gave a nudge **to Helen.**

(ibid)

3. The Test

Skehan (1999:303) states that a test is " a systematic method of eliciting performance which is intended to be the basis for some sort of decision making".

The test adopted in this study comprises three questions: the first question is designed to measure the subjects' responses at the recognition level whereas the last two questions are designed to measure the subjects' responses at the production level. The first question includes seventeen items intended to measure the subjects' ability to indicate the different roles of the given Os. The subjects are provided with a list of semantic roles of the O. and they are asked to write the letters of the suitable roles in the blanks. The second question consists of seventeen items in which, the subjects are instructed to identify the semantic roles of the given Os. Finally, the third question involves sixteen items. It is designed to test the subjects' ability in supplying the appropriate Os. showing the semantic roles required in brackets.The test aims at locating the precise areas of difficulty encountered by Iraqi EFL university students in using the semantic roles of the O. and simultaneously identifying the causes and types of their errors.

3.1 Result Analysis

This section displays the results of the subjects on each question of the test. It is the cornerstone of approving or disapproving the hypotheses i.e. they are either verified or refuted.

3.1.1 Subjects' Performance of the First Question

This question is determined to measure the subjects' responses at the recognition level to see whether they are capable of recognizing and choosing the correct roles of the appointed Os. The subjects' performance at the recognition level is not good since their incorrect responses are (26.5) whereas their correct responses are (23.5).This leads to the verification of the first hypothesis that reads: Iraqi EFL university students do not distinguish different semantic roles of the O.

3.1.2 Subjects' Performance of the Second Question

The second question of the test is built in a way to measure the subjects' responses at the production level. Also, it is formed to approve or disapprove the second hypothesis that students are influenced by the grammatical function of the O. more than its semantic roles. It has been observed that the total number of the correct responses (8.7) is lower than that of the incorrect responses (41.3). This refers to the subjects' low performance concerning the semantic roles of the O. As such, the second hypothesis is validated.

3.1.3 Subjects' Performance of the Third Question

As far as the third question is concerned, it is planned to measure the subjects' ability to supply the suitable roles in the brackets. The results give an explicit idea about the subjects' responses of each item in this question. The total number of the incorrect ones (37) is higher than that of the correct responses (13). This proves that the subjects have failed to add the appropriate roles and this may be ascribable to their incompetence in this aspect. In turn, the high rate of the subjects' incorrect responses concerning questions (2) and (3), proves that they face difficulty in using the semantic roles of the O. at the production level and this verifies the first hypothesis.

3.1.4 Subjects' Performance of the Semantic Roles of the Object in the Whole Test

It has been concluded that the total number of subjects' incorrect responses (78.3) at the production level is higher than that at the recognition level which is (26.5). The total number of subjects' correct responses (23.5) at the recognition level is higher than that at the production level which is (21.7).

The mean for the production level (6.03) is lower than that for the recognition one (10.5) and the coefficient variation for the production level (40.3) is higher than that for the recognition one (34.4). This happens because the students' performance at the recognition level is better than their performance at the production one.

Table (1)
The Frequency and Rate of Subjects' Performance at the Recognition and Production Levels in the Whole Test

Level	No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%
Recognition	Q.1	400	23.5	450	26.5
Production	Q.2	148	8.7	702	41.3
	Q.3	221	13	629	37

3.2 Error Analysis

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors that the learners make. It involves a comparison between the errors made in the target language and that target language itself.(Taylor, 1975:74)

3.2.1 Possible Sources of Errors

It is seen that " Systematically analyzing errors made by language learners make it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching". These errors can be of great help to the learners' in order to specify the points of weaknesses since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. (Corder, 1974:120)

3.2.1.1 Interlingual Transfer

This kind of errors is attributed to the native language (henceforth, L1). Lado (1964:86) mentions that this source of error is the result of the native influence of the mother language on the performance of the target language learner (henceforth, L2). The interlingual effect is clear through the subjects' errors in their responses at the production level to items (3) and (4) in question (2):

Item (3) She made **a fire**. Res.

* She made **a fire**. **Even.**

Item (4) She lived in **a class life.** Loc.

* She lived in **a class life.** **Cog.**

It seems from the subjects' responses that they have depended upon translation. Although the subjects know that the semantic roles of the O., in particular items (3 and 4) i.e., Res. and Loc. roles. The subjects rely upon what they can understand from the given Os. ignoring its meaning in relation to the whole sentence. The subjects may translate the above items as follows:

هي صنعت نار(item 3) هي عاشت حياة ارستقراطية (item 4). The total number of errors of this kind is (2.01).

3.2.1.2 Intralingual Transfer

According to Richards (1974:6), intralingual errors are due to the language being learned target language, independent of the native language. They are " items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language ".

(ibid)

As for sources of errors, there are many that have been reported by different authors:

1- Overgeneralization: It is associated with reduction. It covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language.

2- Ignoring of rule restrictions: It refers to the applying of the rules to contexts to which they do not apply.

3- Incomplete application of rules: It is the learners' effective communication through using simple rules which does not help the learner to acquire the complex types of structure.

4- Semantic errors such as building false concepts/systems: The learners of L2 are seen to adopt wrong hypothesis or build wrong rule about L2 i.e., faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language. (Corder, 1974:120)

The subjects' strategy of overgeneralization, as mentioned earlier, is one of the factors that can lead to errors' generation. Error type 4 which is using Aff. in more than one place in items (4), and (5) is seen in question (1). The items below can illustrate this aspect:

Item (4) She fried **an omelette** for me. Res.

* he fried **an omelette** for me. **Aff.**

Item (5) She is playing **the piano**. Inst.

* She is playing **the piano**. **Aff.**

Apparently, it seems that error type 7 in question (2) which is failure to give the correct semantic role of the O. may be attributed to ignorance of rule restrictions. The following examples in question (2) give an apparent idea about such type of errors.

Item (5) We occupy **a specious apartment**. Loc.

* We occupy **a specious apartment**. **Res.**

Item (7) Everyone admired **her style**. Even.

* Everyone admired **her style**. **Aff.**

The effect of ignorance of rule restrictions is obvious in error type 1 which is failure to choose the correct semantic role of the O. in question (1) in items (14), and (15).

Item (14) She is cooking **some carrots**. Aff.

* She is cooking **some carrots**. **Even.**

Item (15) She acted **the part of Ophelia**. Res.

* She acted **the part of Ophelia**. **Cog.**

Errors attributed to incomplete application of rules are mostly found in errors type 2 and 3 which are putting Res. instead of Cog. and putting Loc. instead of Cog. in question (1) as shown in items (6), (10), and (13).

Item (6) He breahed **his last breath**. Cog.

* He breathed **his last breath**. **Res.**

Item (10) He died **a miserable death**. Cog.

* He died **a miserable death**. **Res.**

Item (13) Tom lived **a bad life**. Cog.

* Tom lived **a bad life**. **Loc.**

A large number of the subjects' errors might be ascribed to false concepts hypothesized as shown in error type 8 which is failure to supply the correct O. in question (3) in items (1), and (15).

Item (1) I bought her <u>a gift</u>. (Affected)

* I bought her <u>car</u>. (noun phrase)

Item (15) She swam <u>the river</u>. (Locative)

* She swam <u>in the river</u>. (prepositional phrase)

The total number of this kind of errors is (26.3).

3.2.1.3 Context of Learning

The third major source of errors, though it overlaps with both types of transfer, is the " Context ". It refers to the influence of the situation of learning, i.e., classroom. Buck, Byrnes, and Thompson (1989:3) define context as " the circumstances or settings in which a person uses language". The context of learning's influence can be noticed obviously in the second question in item (10).

Item (10) They had **an argument**. Even.The total number of this kind of errors is (4.06).

3.2.1.4 Communication Strategies

There are strategies employed by a learner to convey a message to a hearer. The learner may simply use his native language whether he knows that language or not. There are many communicative strategies but some of them have been observed in the subjects' responses such as **guessing** which refers to clues that either language or not language based, including knowledge of a context, world, or text structure. The following examples are from question (3), items (8 and 12):

Item (8) They fought <u>a long fight</u>. (Cognate)

Item (12) We walked <u>the streets</u>. (Locative)

The deployment of such a strategy results in error type 6 in question (2). This type of error produces responses that do not yield any type of answer i.e., **giving no answer**. The total number of error is (17.63).

4. Conclusions

1- It is not sufficient to depend on the semantic features of the O. for determining the semantic roles of the O.

2- Iraqi EFL university students at the fourth stage fail to use the semantic roles of the O. on both of the two levels i.e. recognition and production. This is proved by the high rate of errors (104.8, 1781) committed by the sample students. This validates the first hypothesis of the study which states that Iraqi EFL university students do not distinguish different semantic roles of the O.

3- The analysis concerning questions (2) and (3) state that most of the subjects fail to identify the semantic roles of the O. This is evident from the rate of their incorrect responses to these questions which is (78.3,1331)whereas the rate of their correct ones is (21.7,369). Such rate confirms the second hypothesis.

4- Eight types of errors are made by the subjects in the field of semantic roles. The errors types pinpointed by this study can be summed up as follows:

1- Failure to choose the correct semantic roles of the O.
2- Putting Res. instead of Cog.
3- Putting Loc. instead of Cog.
4- Using Aff. in more than one place.
5- Failure to recognize the correct semantic roles of the O.
6- Giving no answer.
7- Failure to give the correct semantic roles of the O.
8- Failure to supply the correct O.

5- The reasonable causes underlying the subjects' low performance can be attributed to the following factors that are organized hierarchically relying on the rate of the committed errors in the whole test:

I- Intralingual transfer which forms most of the subjects' errors and it accounts for (26.3) of their total errors. The inadequate understanding of the semantic roles of the O. contributes towards making the subjects depend on overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, false concepts, hypothesized, and failure to learn conditions for rule application.

II- The communication strategies in using L2 knowledge are deployed when learners do not have the adequate linguistic means for the concept they wish to express. Such strategies form (17.63) of their total errors.

III- Interlingual transfer which refers to the subjects' use of their native language's rules instead of using second language's rules in the production of the semantic roles of theOThis kind of errors forms (2.01) of their errors.

IV- Context of Learning constitutes (4.06) of the subjects' total errors. The insufficient focus given to the semantic roles of the O. especially in their textbooks may be the major cause behind the rate of this kind of errors.

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