Iraqi EFL University Learners' Use of Adjective Modifiers Order in English

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1. Introduction

Modifiers in English are words or group of words which give future information about ("modify") other words or group of words (the head) (Richards et al.,1992:234).

The problem arises from the state that most Iraqi EFL university students often face difficulty in using the order of adjective modifiers in English because there is no grammatical limit to the number of adjective modifiers in English and students do not have the mastery of the rules which govern the order of modifiers. In addition, the order of adjectives in Arabic is just the reverse of that used in English in that the head noun comes before the adjective in Arabic, for example the black cat (القطة السوداء).

The study aims basically at:

1. Identifying the Iraqi EFL university students performance in using adjective modifiers order in English.
2. Finding out the causes of the students' error and types of such errors so that some solutions can be posited to help them overcome the problems they encounter in using adjective modifiers.
3. Introducing some suggestions which can help the student deal with the topic.

It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL university students do not have the mastery of the rules which govern the use of the order of adjective modifiers in English and they encounter difficulty in their performance.

In the course of fulfilling the aims of this study, the following procedures will be followed:

1. Presenting, as far as possible, a comprehensive study of adjective modifiers in English and their sequences and order.
2. Selecting a sample of Iraqi EFL university students as subjects for administrating a test to point out the difficulties they may face in using the topic under investigation.
3. Analyzing the results of the test on the basis of which conclusions and recommendations will be introduced.

The present study limits itself to the order of adjective modifiers in English and the sample of the test is confined to Iraqi EFL university students at their third stage in the Department of English/College of Education (Safiyiddeen Al-Hilli)/ University of Babylon during the academic year 2009-2010.

2. Modification

Fries (1952: 204) defines modification as a structure which must be described in terms of the formal units of which it is composed. Generally, modification in English, can be described as the process of increasing the amount of information in a sentence or a phrase for the purpose of limiting the meaning to specific persons, times, places or ways of doing something.

Hejal (1982: 8) states that modification is a function and the word or word group which accomplishes this function is a modifier. Therefore, the structure of modification encompasses a word being modified (head word) and one or more words that modify the head word called (modifiers).

Trask (1993: 173) defines modifiers as any category which adds semantic information that is provided by the head of the category within which it is contained.

Stageberg (1971: 233) defines a modifier as a word or word group which affects the meaning of a head word because it describes, limits, intensifies and adds to the meaning of the head.

Leech (2001: 289) mentions that there is usually one main word in the phrase (head-word) to which one or more modifiers can be added to specify its meaning. Generally, modifiers which come before the head word are sometimes called premodifiers and those which come after the head word are called postmodifiers.

3. Kinds of Adjectives

Thomson and Martinet (1960: 12) mention six kinds of adjectives:
a. Qualitative:
   1 good, clever, strong……
b. Quantitative:
   2   some, no, few, any……….
c. Demonstrative:
   3   this, that, these, those….
d. Distributive:
   4   every, each, either, neither……
e. Interrogative:
   5   what, whose, which……….
f. Possessive:
   6 my, his, your……….

Adjectives which modify the nouns and pronouns are either descriptive which describe the quality of the noun, for example:

7   long street

Or limiting which limit the noun they modify, for example:

8   Her cat

Descriptive adjectives are of two types:
a. Attributive adjectives which come directly before the noun to attribute a quality to the noun they modify. The same noun can be modified by more than one adjective:

9   She drives the beautiful car.

10 She drives the small beautiful car.

b. Predicative adjective which forms a part of the predicate and appears after the verb to modify the subject of the sentence, for example:

11   The building is colourful.

4. Position of Adjectives as modifiers

Conlin (1961: 113) states that the usual pattern of the adjective modifying a noun is (determiner-adjective-noun), for example:

12 The long way

13 The lovely house

Palmer (1969: 94) mentions three positions for the adjectives as modifiers:

1. Front position in which adjectives generally precede the noun they modify:

14   An interesting story

15   Some small buildings

The noun may be preceded by two or more adjectives:

16   A nice small boat

17   A dear young girl

2. Rear position- attributive

The adjective follows the semi-pronouns of some and any:

18   It is something bizarre.

19   Is there anything wrong?

In a few special cases, literary style in particular, the adjective may follow the word modified:

20   Things Chinese

In a certain number of religious, historical or official character, the adjective follows the noun it modifies:

21   Body politic

22   Prince regent   (Ibid.)

3. Rear position-predicative

As subject-complements, the adjective follows the verb of the sentence:

 23   It is blue.

As object-complement, the adjective follows the direct object:

24   They painted the building white.

The adjective follows the word it modifies when accompanied by preposition:

25   A book difficult to read

4. Sequences and Order of Modifiers

Quirk et al. (1974: 916) account for the multiple premodification in which more than one modifier can be related to a single head:

26   His modern car is sold.

27   His last book is published.

28   His last new(……..) book is published.

There is no grammatical limit to the number of modifiers and modification may apply to more than one head (modification with multiple head), for example:

29   The large window

30   The large door

31   The large window and door are painted.

Al-Hamash (1980:62) mentions that the order of modifiers which appear between the determiner and the head can be determined according to the following:

1. An adjective of size precedes an adjective of colour:

 32   A small blue car

2. An adjective of dimension and adjective of colour might do equally, for instance, the big white house

3.An adjective of age precedes an adjective of colour:

33   A modern white car

4.An adjective of size precedes an adjective of age:

34   A tall old chimney

5.All the above precede an adjective of nationality:

35   A tall English convict

Other adjectives can be randomly arranged:

36   The expensive comfortable car

37   The comfortable expensive car

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 125) state that semantic sets have been proposed to explain the usual order of adjectives and their co-occurance:

1.   Intensifying adjectives:

38   The perfect idiot

2.   Postdeterminers and limiter adjectives:

39   The fourth students, the only occasion

3.   General adjectives susceptible to subjective measure:

40   Careful, lovely

4.   General adjectives susceptible to objective measure including size or shape:

41   Large, square
5.   Adjectives of age:
42   New, old
6.   Adjectives of colour
43   Blue, white
7.   Adjectives denoting material
44   A woolen scart
8.   Adjective of province or style:
45   A Parisian dress

6.The Test

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

    The diagnostic test aims at locating the precise area of difficulty faced by Iraqi EFL university students in using adjective modifiers and identifying the causes and the types of their errors.

    The random sample of the test encompasses (60) learners taken from the third stage in the department of English/College of Education (Saffiyiddeen Al-Hilli)/University of Babylon during the academic year 2009-2010.

    The whole test consists of twenty four items implied in one question and each item has a head word and determiner with a sequence of adjective modifiers which are put randomly and the students' task is to rearrange them according to the correct order.

6.1 Item Analysis

    Geaton (1988: 178) shows the two most widely used of the types of item analysis which are the "discrimination index" which shows to what extent the high-scores on the test as a whole do better on the item than the low-score and the 'facility value' which indicates which proportion of the students responds correctly to the item.

6.1   Item Discrimination Index (DI)

        According to the main testing concept, the correct responses to the most difficult items are of those students with highest scores and the incorrect responses to the same items are related to the students with lower scores.

Discrimination index (DI) can be calculated by subtracting the number of correct answers in the low group from that of the high group and dividing the difference by half the number of students.

The following table shows the (DI) of the test items:

Items	DI	Items	DI	Items	DI	Items	DI
1	0.26	7	0.13	13	0.40	19	0.16
2	0.30	8	0.23	14	0.13	20	0.16
3	0.20	9	0.10	15	0.30	21	0.60
4	0.16	10	0.53	16	0.16	22	0.43
5	0.60	11	0.46	17	0.23	23	0.23
6	0.23	12	0.13	18	0.70	24	0.06
Mean	0.51						

This table indicates that all test items in the whole sample have positively valued discrimination indices since no negative discrimination index is mentioned for any test item. Each item has a certain discrimination index which ranges from the lowest rate of (0.06) to the highest rate of (0.70) which indicates that there are individual differences among the students and the mean of (DI) for the whole test stands at (0.51) which is quite acceptable because the acceptable range for (DI) is between(

o.20 and 0.90) according to Mousavi (1997: 69) and this indicates that the test items discriminate well.

6.1.2 Item Facility Value(FV)

Richards et al. (1992: 192) mentions that the facility value (FV) of a test item is the percentage of students who answer the item correctly and it shows how easy or difficult the item is. The facility value of an item can be calculated by dividing the number of correct answers by the number of students.

The following table shows the (FV) of the test items:

Item	F.V	Item	F.V	Item	F.V	Item	F.V
1	0.53	7	0.10	13	0.80	19	0.15
2	0.45	8	0.18	14	0.20	20	0.11
3	0.30	9	0.28	15	0.35	21	0.60
4	0.35	10	0.53	16	0.11	22	0.38
5	0.70	11	0.60	17	0.18	23	0.18
6	0.21	12	0.36	18	0.55	24	0.03
Mean	0.34						

The facility values of the test items presented in the table above range between (0.03) and (0.80) which are very apart because some items are not so familiar and easy to the students. The mean of (FV) for the whole test is (0.34) which is acceptable.

6.2 The Results of the Test

The following table shows the performance of the students in the test items:

No. of Item	No.of Correct Responses	Percentage %	No.of incorrect Responses	Percentage %
1	32	0.53	28	0.47
2	27	0.45	33	0.55
3	18	0.30	42	0.70
4	21	0.35	3 9	0.65
5	42	0.70	18	0.30
6	13	0.21	47	0.79
7	6	0.10	54	0.90
8	11	0.18	49	0.82
9	17	0.28	43	0.72
10	32	0.53	28	0.47
11	36	0.60	24	0.40
12	22	0.36	38	0.64
13	48	0.80	12	0.20
14	12	0.20	48	0.80
15	21	0.35	39	0.65
16	7	0.11	53	0.89
17	11	0.18	49	0.82
18	33	0.55	27	0.45
19	9	0.15	51	0.85
20	7	0.11	53	0.89
21	36	0.60	24	0.40
22	23	0.38	37	0.62
23	11	0.18	49	0.82
24	2	0.03	58	0.97
Total	497	0.34	943	0.66

According to the results of the test, the number and percentage of the incorrect responses in the whole test are (943, 0.66%) which are more than that of correct responses (497, 0.34%). These results indicate that the students encounter difficulty in using adjective modifiers order in English and this in turn verifies the hypothesis of the study.

6.3 Error Analysis

6.3.1 Sources of Errors

Brown (1987: 177) mentions four factors to which students' errors can be attributed :interlingual transfer, interalingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies:

6.3.1.1 Interlingual Transfer

Ellis (1994: 48) states that many errors result from the influence of the mother tongue . In an attempt to make up the deficiencies of his knowledge of the target language, the learner may recourse to the appropriate parts of the native language. Some of the students' responses to Item (1) and (5) can reflect this influence.

Item (1) the three small red French cars

*the three cars small red French

Item (5) the attractive young English Lady

*the lady English young attractive

Interlingual transfer has been found to explain (1.91%) of all students' error.

6.3.1.2 Intralingual Transfer

Richards (1974:6) states that intralingual errors are items produced by the student which do not reflect the structure of the mother tongue. These are due to the generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. Such errors may be attributed to certain factors:

   a. Overgeneralization: which refers to the incorrect application of the previously learned material to a present foreign language context.
   b. Ignorance of rule restrictions: which leads the students to apply some rule to a category to which it is not applicable.
   c. Incomplete application of rules: which involves a failure to learn more complex types of structure rules.
   d. False concepts hypothesized: that may derive from faulty comprehension of a distinction in the target language.

The items (3), (7), and (9) are examples of the students' strategy of overgeneralization:

Item (3) that pretty round antique golden mirror

*that antique round pretty golden mirror

Item (7) the two big square old yellow wooden chariot

*the two square big yellow wooden old chariot

Item (9) a shiny large black leather handbag

*a brown leather large shiny handbag

The items (12) and(16) and (22) are example of the subjects' ignorance of rules restrictions:

Item (12) his expensive two old brown Italian chairs

*his two brown Italian expensive old chairs

Item (16) these two big new blue Spanish wooden chairs

*these two blue new big wooden Spanish chairs

Item (22) the beautiful big white wooden house

*the white wooden big beautiful house

The items (20), and (24) can illustrate the learners' strategy of incomplete applications of rules:

Item (20) a lovely large rectangular old brown English oak table

　　　*a large oak lovely English brown old rectangular table

Item (24) the two big round old white investigating Russian social leather

　　　*the two white social round investigating old big Russian leather bags

The items (14), (17) and (23) are examples of the false concepts hypothesized:

Item (14) these four small new red Chinese cars

　　　*these small four new red Chinese cars

Item (17) those first two tall old black African leaders

　　　*those two first old tall black African leaders

Item (23) the ugly new yellow wooden building

　　　*the yellow new wooden ugly building

Intralingual transfer constitutes the highest frequent error source in the data. It accounts for (88.75%) of all errors.

6.3.1.3 Context of Learning

Buck et al. (1989:3) define context as "the circumstances or settings in which a person uses language". Richards (1974: 178) mentions that some learners' errors may results from the influence of the situation of learning (the classroom), the misleading explanation by the leaders or the textbook writers who focus on some aspects of the target language neglecting others. The impact of the context of learning can be found in items (6) and (8) of the test:

Item (6) the two small square old yellow wooden chariot

　　　*the small two old yellow wooden square chariot

Item (8) the useful four interesting English stories

　　　*the English interesting four useful stories

The negative effect of context of learning accounts four (6.79%) of all errors in the learners' responses.

6.3.1.4 Communication Strategies

Ellis (2003: 340) mentions that this kind of strategies is used by the students to overcome a problem in communication because of their inability to find an easy access to second language knowledge and to cope with difficulties they encounter in communication. There are many strategies but some of them have been found in the learners' responses such as "guessing" which is the use of clues that are language or not language based, such as knowledge of the context or text structure. The items (4) and (15) are examples of these strategies:

Item (4) the round new blue American houses

　　　*the blue new American round houses

Item (15) the ugly old white wooden statues

　　　*the old white ugly wooden statues

These strategies account for (2.55%) of all errors.

7.Conclusions

Adjective modifiers in English have no grammatical limit in number and Iraqi EFL university learners face difficulty in the order of these modifiers.

According to the findings of the test which has been applied to a random sample of Iraqi EFL university learners (60 students) from the department of English/ College of Education (Saffiyiddeen Al- Hilli)/ University of Babylon, the total number and percentage of the incorrect responses are(943, 0.66%)　　　　which are more than that of correct responses (497, 0.34%). These results indicate that the students face

difficulty in using adjective modifiers order in English and these results confirm the hypothesis of the study.

The poor performance of the learners can be attributed to the following strategies according to the errors ascribed to each:

a. Intraligual transfer has the majority of students' errors because it accounts for (88.76%) of the total errors. These errors are related to different grammatical errors committed by the students.

b. The effect of context of learning constitutes (6.79%) which is the second rate of errors.

c. The students' use of communicative strategies in the third rate of errors (2.55%) when the students attempt to structure what they mean.

d. Interlingual interference constitutes (1.91%) which is the fourth rate. These errors are related to the use of the rules of the native language and the use of literal translation by the students.

The following points can be suggested as remedies to overcome the difficulties faced by the students in using adjective modifiers order in English.

a. More attention should be given to teaching adjective modifiers order in English.

b. More practice and exercises should be conducted among students in this topic to eliminate the students' errors in this area.

c. More syllabus activities should be given to shed the light on this topic.

d. For the teachers of English, it is of importance to teach adjective modifiers in context which provide meaning.

e. At the university level, students should be provided with some additional books about this problematic area of adjectives.

f. More emphasis should be given to the topic under investigation at all levels of education.

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Appendix 1

The Test

Rearrange the following according to the right order:
1. small, cars, the , red, three, French
2. beautiful, leather, red, belt, a, Spanish
3.pretty, that, round, golden, mirror, antique
4. new, the, blue, American, round, houses
5.English, the, lady, attractive, young
6. red, small, two, beautiful, wax, old, round, Thai, the
7. chariot, two, the, big, wooden, old, square, yellow
8.four, useful, interesting, stories, the, English
9. large, brown, leather, shiny, a, handbag
10.table, round, small, some, plastic
11.chinese, historic, a, temple, beautiful
12.chairs, brown, two, his, old, expensive, Italian
13.Textbook, Old, Grammar, English, The
14.these, new, small, four, red, cars, Chinese
15.old, wooden, white, the, statues, ugly
16.wooden, big, Spanish, chairs, new, two, these, blue
17.leaders, tall, black, two, African, first, old, those
18.dress, silk, wedding, a, French
19.brown, new, nice, a, round, table, large, wooden, Iraqi
20.old, a, lovely, English, brown, rectangular, oak, table, large
21.new, blue, expensive, three, books, her
22.White, the, big, beautiful, house, wooden
23.building, ugly, new, the, wooden, yellow
24.leather, big, the, Russian, two, round, investigating, bags, white, old

Appendix 2

The Answers of the Test

1. the three small red French cars
2. a beautiful red leather Spanish belt
3. that pretty round antique golden mirror
4. the round new blue American houses
5. the attractive young English lady
6. the two beautiful small round old red Thai wax
7. the two big square old yellow wooden chariot
8. the four useful interesting English stories
9. a shiny large brown leather handbag
10. some small round plastic tables

11. a beautiful historic Chinese temple
12. his two expensive old brown Italian chairs
13. the old English grammar textbook
14. these four small new red Chinese cars
15. the ugly old white wooden statues
16. these two big new blue wooden Spanish chairs
17. those first two tall old black African leaders
18. a wedding silk French dress
19. a nice large round new brown Iraqi table
20. a lovely large rectangular old brown oak English table
21. her three expensive new blue books
22. the beautiful big white wooden house
23. the ugly new yellow wooden building
24. the two big round old white investigating leather Russian bags