



Error Analysis of the Relative Pronoun “Who” from the English Language to the Arabic Language

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Abstract

The study examines the challenges that students face when translating the English relative pronoun "who" into Arabic. It examines the linguistic differences that impact translation accuracy and assesses the strategies required to address these challenges. A survey was intended for different non-English departments, and 45 students were chosen randomly to obtain more data about the translation of the relative pronoun (who). A statistical analysis has been used to explore the findings. The results of the study revealed that the students suffered from various grammar and vocabulary problems hindering them from suitably translating relative pronouns (who), it also appeared that students often struggle with maintaining the grammatical and contextual subtle of "who" in Arabic due to variations in sentence structure and the influence of their native language

This research contributes to the field of translation studies by offering insights into the complexities of translating relative pronouns and finding better ways to enhance translation education.

Keywords: error, relative pronoun, duality and plurality, English-Arabic translation

Introduction

Learning any language typically involves making mistakes; therefore, individuals often rely on their first language (L1) when learning a second language (L2), utilizing various learning strategies. In recent years, studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have shifted from emphasizing teaching methods to focusing more on the learner's experience and perspective. (Brown, 1994).

Translation is a complex and difficult task, even for skilled translators. However, there is not enough attention given to the errors university students make when translating relative clauses.

Studies have considered that some undergraduate students frequently struggle with relative pronouns in translation, which could probably be conveyed through different expressions. (Ibrahim, 2022).

Relative pronouns are considered an important area of the syntactic structure of both English and Arabic languages, as they enhance the structure of a sentence, and because of the necessity that English as a second language learner need to master their use. For this reason, it's important to unfold the problems as product that face the Arab learners of English when using the relative pronoun 'who'. Ellis (1997) mentions that there are three major reasons for focusing on students' errors. First, a question is being raised about why learners make errors. Second, it is a productive means for teachers to specify students' errors. Third and finally, it



aids learners to learn when they correct their errors themselves. By doing that, students can construct a new language system better when they analyze their errors.

This study aligns with SDG 4, “Quality Education,” emphasizing equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. Language education, including translation training, is fundamental to achieving these goals, as it equips students with skills to navigate a globalized world.

The study will focus on faculty students who are often expected to have the basic knowledge of language skills and translation competence. By reviewing their ability to translate the relative pronoun "who" from English to Arabic, this research aims to identify the most common translation problems, analyze the underlying causes of these errors for better translation teaching.

Literature Review

A recent study that is intended for Saudi undergraduate students was conducted by Mohsen et al. (2016) on the difficulties that Saudi students encountered in the translation of relative pronouns from Arabic into English. The study was aimed at 30 EFL Saudi students at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. The results of the research concluded that: the students encountered various problematic areas in the use of the relative pronoun 'who', viz. use of personal and possessive relative pronouns, position of relative pronouns, presence of presumptive pronouns in Arabic, absence of duality and plurality of relative pronoun “who”, use of relative pronouns with prepositional verbs. (2016:299)

Kharma and Hajjaj (1985) explored a contrastive analysis of English and Arabic, where they displayed the similarities and differences between these two languages. One of the recurrent difficulties that they discovered was the use of a correct relative pronoun in English. Specifically, they state that the first problem is that in Arabic, the relative pronoun itself (not the whole of the relative clause) functions as the modifier of the antecedent. Hence, the subject or object of the verb in the Arabic relative clause is always present, either explicitly or implied. (1985:129) They suggested that Arab students make errors when they translate relative pronouns from Arabic into English because they translate literally without considering how relative pronouns are used in English.

A study that explained the difficulty of translating relative pronouns from Arabic into English encountered by a sample of Saudi undergraduate students has been investigated by Jabak (2019:1-2). The researcher attempted to pinpoint the underlying reasons behind such a challenge and find practical solutions to it. A qualitative method was employed for the two data collections. The first one was a translation test on relative pronouns distributed to a random sample of 30 fourth-year Saudi undergraduate students at the English Department of King Saud University in the first semester of the academic year 2018. The other data collection tool was a semi-structured interview with the research population. The findings showed that 41.1% of the students could not translate relative pronouns correctly, 80% could not render the relative pronoun referring to the possessive case into English correctly, and 93.3% faced difficulty translating the relative pronoun in the accusative case into English. The students gave some reasons for this difficulty during the interview, such as the different structures of relative pronouns in Arabic and English and the lack of a match between Arabic and English pronouns.



The researcher concluded that more large-scale studies should be conducted on this topic at other Saudi and/or Arab universities to shed more light on this challenging difficulty and determine if similar or different findings can be arrived at.

The results of the aforementioned studies are varied in viewing the difficulty of translating the relative pronoun “who” as it differs in English and the Arabic language. For the English language, relative pronouns do not change according to the number and gender of the nouns they qualify

As for the Arabic language, relative pronouns are changed according to the number and gender of the nouns they precede. Furthermore, the current study contributes to the existing body of literature, where it showed that faculty students encounter difficulty in rendering the relative pronoun into the Arabic language, and a quantitative methodology was utilized to provide a clear description of the collected data. The study carried out a thorough insight into the process of translating the relative pronoun “who”. Additionally, the results have shown that students can’t differentiate the dual and plural numbers in translating into the Arabic language, and they mostly tend to use the personal pronoun with singular, dual, and plural translations in the Arabic language.

Methodology

The Participants

Forty-five students from different non-English departments in Iraqi colleges participated in the study. They were sorted out based on three demographic variables: gender, age, and academic level. There were 17 males and 27 females, and the age range was between 18 and 40+ to create a diverse age group, including young adults, middle-aged individuals, and possibly older participants. As for the academic level, the students involved in the study already have a bachelor's degree when they pursue another college degree thus, the researcher has to include this criterion for the sake of diversity in the education field, as shown in Table 1.

Table (1)
Profile of Participants

Demographic Variables		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	17	39%
	Female	27	61%
Age	18-20 Years old	5	11.4%
	20-30 years old	23	52.3%
	30-40 Years Old	11	25%
	40+	5	11.4%
Academic Level	Diploma	17	39%
	Bachelor	27	61%

Research Instrument

A survey has been distributed to several Iraqi university departments that teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Three sentences were selected from "English Grammar: A University Course" by Angela Downing (2006) to illustrate the number of references in English and their translation into Arabic. The participants were required to answer multiple open-ended



questions. The focus of the task was to translate relative pronouns correctly. They were selected based on the linguists' studies of the problematic areas in the use of relative pronouns for Arab learners, such as AL Oqaili (1990) and Richards (1992). The three sentences are chosen to assess students' ability to translate relative clauses across grammatical numbers: singular, dual, and plural. It will ensure a comprehensive analysis of errors that are related to the study of relative clauses.

According to the views of linguists and applied linguists on the problematic areas in the use of relative pronouns. These areas were; (a) the use of personal possessive relative pronouns, (b) the position of relative pronouns, (c) the presence of presumptive pronouns, (d) the absence of duality and plurality of the relative pronoun "who" in English, while it does exist in Arabic, and (e) the use of relative pronouns with prepositional verbs. However, the students' errors will not be identified according to these problematic areas. Instead, they will be classified according to the data itself. Additionally, some problematic areas entail more focus in terms of the complexity of their structures

Data Analysis and Discussion

Students' errors are specified by applying the frequency of error and the percentages for every category. The data has identified three types of error (omission, addition, and choice of words)

The data reveal significant trends in how participants translated the singular use of the pronoun "who" into Arabic. As shown in Table 2)

Table (2)

The Singular Translation of (Who)

Type of Error	Number of Participants	Percentage
Omission of the Pronoun	8	17.78%
Addition of a Personal Pronoun	15	33.33%
Use of the Verb "Be" (يكون)	1	2.22%

For the omission of the pronoun, 17.78% of the students omitted it, reflecting the influence of Arabic grammar, where relative pronouns are often implied rather than explicit. Adding the personal pronoun, 33.33% of the participants made use of (هو) which indicates overgeneralization or literal translation, mimicking Arabic structures like "الذي هو", and finally, the use of the verb (be), only 2.22% of the participants and that suggests confusion in understanding the functional role of "who" in English relative clauses.

On the other hand, the data reveal significant trends in how participants translated the dual use of the pronoun "who" into Arabic. As explained in Table 3) below

Table (3)

The Dual Translation of (Who)

Type of Error	Number of Participants	Percentage
Omission of the Pronoun	29	64.44%
Addition of a Personal Pronoun	28	62.22%
Use of the Verb "Be" ((يكون)	1	2.22%



In the dual translation of the pronoun, 64,44 % have omitted the pronoun, which reflects reliance on Arabic grammar, where dual pronouns are often implied rather than explicit. As for adding the personal pronoun, 62,22% did make use of (هو), which indicates an overgeneralization of Arabic relative clause structures. Finally, the use of the verb (be) was the least at 2,22% only which suggests confusion in understanding the functional role of "who" in dual forms.

As for the translation of the plural use of the pronoun "who" into Arabic, the data reveal significant trends as shown in Table 4.

Table (4)
The Plural Translation of (Who)

Type of Error	Number of Participants	Percentage
Omission of the Pronoun	3	6.67%
Addition of a Personal Pronoun	29	64.44%
Use of the Verb "Be" ((يكون)	1	2.22%

The analysis of plural translation showed better results concerning the omission of the relative pronoun, as only 6.67% did not translate it; this low occurrence reflects better awareness of the need for explicit pronouns in plural relative clauses. The error has been repeated for adding the personal pronoun (هو), which indicates a strong tendency to follow Arabic grammar rules, where personal pronouns are often used in relative clauses (e.g., "الذين هم". The minimal error happened for the use of the verb (be) at 2.22%, which suggests minimal confusion regarding the functional role of "who" but occasional reliance on literal translations.

Discussion

Translating the relative pronoun (who) is considered a challenging task for students who can't differentiate the number form in the Arabic language. The analysis revealed significant insights into using the plural and dual translation of the relative pronoun (who). The most frequent error was the addition of a personal pronoun (64.44%), indicating a strong influence of Arabic grammar, where relative clauses often include explicit pronouns such as "الذين هم". This suggests a need for learners to understand that in English, "who" functions independently without requiring additional clarification. The omission of the pronoun occurred in 6.67% of plural translations, reflecting occasional reliance on Arabic sentence structures, where pronouns may be implied rather than explicit. While rare (2.22%), the use of the verb "be" (يكون) highlights occasional confusion in constructing relative clauses, possibly due to overthinking or literal translation. Overall, these findings point to significant cross-linguistic interference from Arabic, particularly in overgeneralizing grammatical rules. Pedagogically, educators should emphasize the self-contained nature of "who" in English, provide exercises contrasting singular, dual, and plural forms, and focus on teaching grammatical agreement and the independence of relative pronouns in English relative clauses. One of the goals of sustainable development is reinforcing **Quality Education (SDG 4)**. Translation skills are essential for promoting quality education. Imprecise translations can hinder knowledge transfer, particularly in academic and professional fields. By improving students' linguistic proficiency, educators



can contribute to more inclusive and equitable learning environments. For example, accurate translations of academic resources can bridge language barriers, enabling access to quality educational materials for Arabic-speaking communities.

Conclusion

The results and discussions that have been analyzed above are concluded essential challenges that Arabic learners face in rendering the relative pronoun “who” from the English language to the Arabic one, especially in utilizing grammatical differences among singular, dual, and plural forms.

The errors, such as the omission of the pronoun, the addition of personal pronouns, and the occasional misuse of the verb “be,” demonstrate a heavy influence of Arabic syntactic norms on learners’ translations. The most frequent problem across all forms was the addition of personal pronouns, a direct reflection of Arabic grammar, where explicit pronouns are often used in relative clauses. This suggests that learners rely on their native language structures when navigating English grammar, leading to systematic errors that hinder accurate translation. Addressing these persistent challenges requires a combination of explicit grammar instruction, contextual translation practice, and error-focused feedback. By helping learners develop a stronger understanding of the structural differences between English and Arabic, educators can mitigate cross-linguistic interference and support the development of more accurate and acceptable translations.

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