The English Particle to:
A Problem for Arab University Students of English

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□ ABSTRACT □

The English "to" is a source of confusion because it can be infinitive marker or a proposition. To examine the nature of this confusion in relation to language acquisition, I have done an experimental study, the subject of which were 120 Arab students majoring in English at Yarmouk University in Jordan. The subjects were given a test measuring their ability to identify the two functions of "to" and to use an infinitive form after the infinitive marker and a gerund after the preposition. The findings manifest that Arab English majors at all the levels of the university English program have difficulty using a gerund when to is a preposition, thus failing to keep the two function of "to" distinct. The study has several distinctive features. The phenomenon reported here has never been studied in connection with Arabic. Further, the study provides experimental data showing the nature and sources of the problem Arabs doing English have with "to" which is useful both to students and instructor of Arab students as well as to the theory of second-language acquisition. Finally, based upon Arab students' weakness, the study has presented several recommendations and solutions, the goal of which is to upgrade Arabs' performance in English.

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الأداة TO مشكلة للطلبة الجامعيين العرب المتخصصين في اللغة الإنكليزية

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◻ ملخص ◻

تُعدُ الأداة الانكليزية TO مصدر إرباك لأنها تكون إما علامة المصدر وإما حرف جر. وللوقوف على طبيعة هذا الإرباك فيما يتعلق باكتساب اللغة وتعلمها، قمت بدراسة تجريبية كانت عينتها مئة وعشرون طالباً عربياً يدرسون الانكليزية كتخصص في جامعة اليرموك في الأردن. أعطي امتحان لهؤلاء الطلبة ليقيس مدى معرفته لتلك الوظائف النحوية للأداة ومدى مقدرتهم لاستعمال المصدر (Infinitive) بعد علامة المصدر أو استعمال صيغة المصدر المنتهي بـ(Gerund) ing بعد حرف الجر. دلت النتائج على أن هذه الأداة تشكل مشكلة كبيرة للطلبة العرب على كافة مستوياتهم في برنامج اللغة الانكليزية وآدابها حيث أن الطلاب لم يكونوا قادرين على التمييز بين العملين النحويين لتلك الأداة. لهذه الدراسة خصائص مميزة. أولاً، لم تدرس هذه الظاهرة من قبل بالنسبة للطلبة العرب، ثانياً، تعطي هذه الدراسة معلومات تجريبية تدل على طبيعة وأسباب هذه المشكلة التي تواجه الطلاب العرب، وهذه المعلومات مفيدة للطلاب والمدرسين ونظرية اكتساب اللغة. وأخيراً قدمت الدراسة العديد من التواصي والحلول هدفها مساعدة الطلبة العرب تحسين أدائهم في اللغة الانكليزية.

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Introduction

Several researchers have studied how Arabic-speaking students manipulate the system of the English language. For instance, Scott and Tucker (1974) found that the most difficult areas for Arab are verbs, prepositions, articles, and relative clauses. Mukattash (1984, 1986) supports Scott and Tucker's findings. Thompson-Panos and Thomas Ruzic (1983) deal with Arabic features like orthography, spelling, vocabulary, rhetoric, verbs, style and sentence grammar, and how these linguistic features contribute to Arab students' weaknesses in reading and writing English. Kharma (1983) examines the system of the verb in both English and Arabic. Finally, Khalil (1985) analyzes syntactic errors that Arabs commit in writing English. All such studies have not investigated very specific features of English like the particle to which should not be left untouched if these concerned would like to help learners perform well in English. Thus, more studies are still needed.

Thomson and Martinet (1980: 228-29) maintain that the particle to is a source of confusion in English because it can be either the marker of an infinitive as in (1), or a preposition as in (2):

1) The student wants to go home.

2) The students object to John's proposal/calling me at night.

This confusion, it seems, negatively affects learners of English in the sense that they very often find it difficult to tell whether to is an infinitive marker or a preposition, and hence commit errors in their attempt to use either a verb like go in (1), or a noun phrase (NP) or a gerund following to as in (2). This phenomenon is thus worth researching since it seems to constitute a potential problem for non-native speakers of English.

The aim of this paper is to examine this phenomenon, attempting to find out whether the word to is a real problem for Arab students majoring in English at the university, hence looking at the nature of this problem and its causes. Further, this adopts the Error Analysis approach for pedagogical purposes. It will attempt to identify the sort of difficulty Arab students have and the sources

or causes of this difficulty. This endeavor is significant both to learners and language partitioners as well as to educators in the sense that learners will get to know their weaknesses, and that educators will try to devise language materials which will help learners overcome their linguistic problems, and to keep the findings of this study in mind in teaching this linguistic feature of English to Arabs.

Finally, the significance of the present paper can be much more transparent if we admit that this word to has, to the best of my knowledge, not been studied or even viewed as a problem for Arab learners of English before. I cannot deny the fact that a vast number of studies have dealt with various errors made by Arab learners of English, but no work has yet been done dealing with the two functions of English particle to. Thus, this linguistic aspect is worth studying.

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 120 students majoring in English at Yarmouk University in Jordan. They were all from the various levels of the English program: twenty-six students were freshman, thirty sophomore, twenty-eight junior, and thirty-six senior. All the subjects whom I taught English language and linguistics volunteered to participate in the study.

Instrument

The instrument utilized for the purpose of this study was a test of twelve items (see Appendix). Each item contained a verb like decide or an expression/ a verb followed by the word to like be used to and object which was in turn followed by two forms given in parentheses. One form was the base form of a given verb, and the other a gerund. The subjects were to choose the correct form completing a given sentence or item. The purpose of the test was to help me identify the errors committed in relation to the particle to, and get a clear picture as to the type and source of errors. It should be mentioned that I

excluded noun phrase from the forms given in parentheses because I did not feel that such elements could be a problem. The problem, I rather sensed, was whether to use an infinitive or a gerund.

Data Collection and Analysis

I gave the test to the subjects over several sessions. The subjects were required to read every sentence or item carefully and choose the correct form that would complete the sentence. They finished the task in about twenty minutes. Finally, I went through the elicited data, attempting to find out the type and number of errors which were then presented in terms of percentages. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Number and Percentage of errors Committed
on Each Test Item by the Subjects

	Verbs and Expressions	26 Freshman students		30 Sophomore students		28 Junior students		36 Senior students	
		No. of Errors	%	No. of Errors	%	No. of Errors	%	No. of Errors	%
1.	objection to	24	92.31	30	100	24	85.7	36	100
2.	be used to	22	84.6	28	93.3	24	85.7	36	100
3.	prefer. ing. to	20	76.9	24	80	22	78.6	32	88.9
4.	take to	26	100	30	100	26	92.9	36	100
5.	look forward to	22	84.6	26	86.7	24	85.7	28	77.8
6.	be accustomed to	22	84.6	22	73.3	22	78.6	28	77.8
7.	object to	24	92.31	28	93.3	24	85.7	36	100
8.	Arrange	4	15.4	2	6.7	0	0	0	0
9.	Know	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10.	Decide	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11.	Mean	2	7.7		0	0	0	0	0
12.	Expect	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Results and Discussion

The study, as is evident from Table 1, reveals that Arab students of English have difficulty with the particle **to** when used as a preposition, not as an infinitive marker, and thus find it difficult to supply the gerund from given in parentheses. To put differently, the particle **to** is a problem for university Arab English majors when it functions as a preposition following verbs and

expressions. The subjects seemed to have known that **to** is just an infinitive marker and they consequently did not make any errors in using the infinitive from the verb. However, they did not know that **to** could also be a preposition following verbs like **take** and **object** and expressions like **be accustomed to**, and that a gerund, on an infinitive, must follow it. In brief, **to** is eventually a source of confusion for Arab learners of English. And this confusion is the cause of errors made by freshman, sophomore, junior and senior students in the English Department of Yarmouk University in Jordan.

The question that one might ask here is: Why do Arab students fail to supply the gerund form after the preposition **to**? There are several possible causes for this failure. The first one is the possibility that Arab university students of English have not been taught the fact that **to** is used with some verbs and expressions. Thus, the students seem to be unaware of the distinction between the preposition **to** and the infinitive marker **to**, hence always using an infinitive following **to** regardless of its syntactic category.

The second possible cause behind the subjects' errors is overgeneralization. Selinker (1974: 38-39) defines overgeneralization as the process whereby a syntactic rule or structure in the target language is extended to an environment in which, to the learner, it could logically apply, but it does not. The particle **to**, as noted earlier, can be an infinitive marker or part of the infinitive of the following verb as is exemplified in cases like (1) above. Arab students of English seem to have overgenralized this syntactic function to all the context in which it occurs, making errors like:

3) *John looks forward **to receive** a letter from the publisher.

Drawing upon cases like (1) and (3), Arab students seem to have mistakenly viewed **to** in cases like (3) as an infinitive marker rather than a preposition, thus failing to capture the dissimilarly between the **to** used in cases like (1) and the **to** used in cases like (3).

One might predict that errors made by Arab university students doing English in the use of **to** as a preposition could also ascribed to mother tongue

interference. This prediction cannot be viable since Arabic does not have an infinitive form of the verb as is the case in English. In this regard, Kharma (1983: 45) states that "when we proceed further in the study of the English infinitive we find that there is an Arabic structure, namely: the particle `an' (called: al-maSdariyyah) and the second simple form of the verb, which occurs in places where the English infinitive would occur." However, the equivalent structure in Arabic is a clause rather than a full infinitive or a prepositional phrase as in English. This fact about Arabic obviously argues against the alleged prediction simply because there is no one-to-one correspondence between the English infinitive and its equivalent structure in Arabic.

Finally, students' errors could be related to the notion of typological markedness proposed by Eckman (1977). The notion predicts that the aspects of the target language which are least marked will be the easiest to learn, but the aspect of the target language which are most marked will be the most difficult to learn. Accordingly, if we assume that the particle to is not marked when used as an infinitive marker, and that the to is marked when used as a preposition, we can readily and systemically explain the errors committed and identify their sources. This result, therefore, lends further support to Eckman's (1977) notion of markedness in the sense that the large number of errors were in that marked use of to.

To recapitulate, the foregoing presentation reveals that the problem Arab learners have with the English word to is most probably attributed to overgeralization, markedness and ignorance of the structure of to when used as a preposition. This problem could not, however, be accounted for in terms of mother tongue interference.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has offered an account of the problem Arab Students have with the English particle to. I can, therefore, conclude that to poses a serious problem which is most possibly caused by overgeneralization, the notion of

markdness and students' lack of knowledge of the two syntactic of this word. Further, the findings of this study are similar to those of other studies developed by Richards (1974), Selinker (1974), Jain (1974), etc., in the sense that students' errors are ascribed to learning strategies like overgeneralization, and that systematic errors need teaching materials, methods and techniques to help learners overcome them. Like other studies, this study also shows that markdness which reflects the degree of difficulty in learning a foreign or second language should be given due account in the teaching-learning process.

Given the findings of the present study, some more conclusions could be drawn. First, it is not always the case that the linguistic difference between learners' native language and the target language, as is claimed by the proponents of the Contrastive Analysis approach can predict the problematic areas causing difficulty in second or foreign language learning. We have seen that Arab students' difficulty with to cannot be accounted for by interference from Arabic. This finding is not novel since several other researchers have shown that Contrastive Analysis almost fails in predicting foreign language problems. (For more details against this approach, see Mukattash (1984), Schacter (1974), and Richards (1974) and the references cited therein.)

Further, this conclusion contradicts Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic's (1983) claim that ESL instructors should have knowledge of some salient contrasting features of both Arabic and English which would be valuable in addressing the weaknesses of Arab students' English. In this regard, what I would like to maintain is that such knowledge may prove fruitful in dealing with structures or linguistic aspects which are available and somehow similar in students' native language and the target language. Otherwise, it is not crucially significant for ESL instructors to know the linguistic features of the two languages. In a word, some specific features like the particle to cannot be interpreted with reference to Arabic which does not have an equivalent structure to the English infinitive or gerund.

Second, given the pattern of errors committed by the subjects, one could identify the sequence of Arabs' acquisition of the syntactic functions of **to** in English. The data indicate that those learners have first acquired the use of **to** as an infinitive marker, but they have not acquired it as a preposition which has to be followed by a gerund or a noun phrase. This means that their acquisition of this function will take place at a later stage.

Finally, Arab students' errors in the English system cannot always be ascribed to interference from Arabic. This paper has supplied a problematic area which is apparently caused by interference from the target language.

On the basis of these conclusions, the following recommendations could be made.

1- There is a bad need for devising or designing teaching materials the ultimate goal of which is to provide students with exposure to the different uses or functions of the English word **to**. These materials should now given to students at all levels of their university education since all the subjects irrespective of their levels have erred in this linguistic aspect. Further, the materials could be both oral and written so that students could hopefully internalize the difference between **to** as an infinitive marker and **to** as a preposition which should thus be followed by a gerund.

2- Various educational activities are strongly recommended. The activities are meant to supply learners with situations in which **to** is used, with passages to read illustrating how **to** is used and manipulated, and with writing exercises geared, if possible, toward the use of **to**.

3- Students' errors should be identified, discussed and corrected at a very early stage. Otherwise, the errors, as is the case with the subjects of this study, would fossilize, thus becoming more difficult to eradicate.

4- Teaching materials and activities could be sequenced so that the first few sessions could be devoted to the particle **to** as an infinitive marker, and then exercises could be presented dealing with **to** as a preposition. Later, the two syntactic functions of **to** should be compared and contrasted. If the teacher

feels that this sort of sequence does not work well for this students, then he, following Eckman et al's (1988) suggestion, can reverse the order since "maximal generalization of learning takes place from structures which are typologically more marked, and not the reverse". (Eckman et al. 1988: 1).

5- Since there is no syntactic rule showing students when to use a gerund (or a noun phrase) following to, what, I think, should be done is to have the teacher prepare a list of those verbs and expressions which are followed by the preposition to, and ask the students to learn them via rote memorization. Further, exercises which help learners implement or practice these verbs plus the preposition to should be provided so that learners could make the distinction between the various functions of to.

Finally, it goes without saying that it is the task of the teacher to familiarize themselves with students' errors so that they could pay greater attention to errors and problems in order to graduate or train competent, proficient and well-qualified English specialist who would play an active part in meeting society needs. This study has, I hope, diagnosed one further problem encountering Arabic-speaking students majoring in English at the university.

APPENDIX
TEST

Instructions: Choose the correct word from the ones given in parentheses that completes each of the following sentences. Write your answers on the answer sheet.

1- He had no objection to (lend, lending) you some money.

2- Those students are used to (get, getting) high grades.

3- She prefers being silent to (say, saying) something silly.

4- She took to (call, calling) me up.

5- I am looking forward to (hear, hearing) from you.

6- She is accustomed to (visit, visiting) her friend every year.

7- The teacher objected to (repeat, repeating) the question.

8- John arranged (to meet, meeting) the scholars.

9- I do not know how (to solve, solving) the problem.

10- I cannot decide whether (to visit, visiting) my brother.

11- Mary meant (to buy, buying) some gifts for her parents.

12- The poor expect (to be, being) helped by the rich.

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