Challenges in the learnability of English Personal Pronouns and Possessives
A case of Arabic speaking Undergraduate students

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Abstract: Every language has its unique morphological and syntactic rules which we call grammar. These rules need to be mastered for using appropriate lexical or grammatical items like the pronouns or the different forms of the possessives in English. Learning a language involves learning not just the vocabulary, but it includes learning to use the vocabulary appropriately in different contexts. Inappropriate use of possessives can result in miscommunication and mis-interpretation of the messages transmitted. The study is based on authentic data and observation of specific grammatical items like Personal Pronouns and Possessives employed by ten Arabic speaking undergraduate students of Dhofar region. The results of the investigation show that the students have difficulty in selecting the suitable pronouns with appropriate forms for the gender and number. They also have a tendency to use the second person forms of personal pronouns and possessives in every context in English.

Key words: Acquisition, appropriate, context, personal pronouns, usage.

Introduction
In the acquisition of L2, the lexical and grammatical rules of the target language need to be learned from the level of familiarizing oneself to mastering the selection of the appropriate lexical and grammatical categories like the adjectives, pronouns or the form of the possessives. It is equally important to ensure that the intent of the message perceived is the same as the message produced. Hence a need is felt to learn the use of correct pronouns in learning ESL in order to prevent miscommunication.

Pronouns and possessives are areas of special focus for the learners of English as a Second language by Arabic undergraduate students. With the increasing emphasis on developing competence in communicating in English, learners are facing challenges in the acquisition of pronouns and their corresponding possessives. The problem is more pronounced, both with second and third person singular and plural forms. Using the right vocabulary of a language effectively is as important as using it appropriately. The common causes of choice of an incorrect form of the pronoun can be: (i) Mother Tongue influence (ii) incorrect learning (iii) false analogy (iv) overgeneralization or (v) wrong learning habits. Any or all these factors can contribute individually or collectively to effective use of language.

Class room is a place in which the teacher can constantly monitor, guide, evaluate and reinforce the grammar and vocabulary, particularly concentrating on problematic areas like verb tenses, prepositions, pronouns and possessives. In ESL, knowing the rules of grammar is being able to produce correct sentences and knowing the rules that enable one to use these sentences appropriately, to perform different speech acts in particular social situations. As these rules of use are culture-bound and language specific, they need to be learnt carefully (Munby, 1978).

The overall proficiency attained in a language depends on the learner's judgment of selection and appropriate use of different elements of a language. It includes both one's grammatical competence and the sociolinguistic competence. Thus, developing both the grammatical and sociolinguistic skills in language learning is equally important, along with the rules of grammar.

Nunan (1997) found that opportunities to reflect on the learning led students to a greater sensitivity to the learning process over time. Students are able to make greater connections and analogies between their English classes and content courses taught in English. Evidence to this effect was observed in the students' writing samples from journals and portfolios, which helped develop their productive skills at large and the use of pronouns in particular.
i. Pronouns

a. Natural gender Vs Grammatical gender

The present study supports Hymes' (1971) contention that knowledge of a language is not limited to the knowledge of the rules of grammar alone. Hymes is of the view that if an adequate theory of language user and language use is to develop, it has to consider the possibility, feasibility, appropriateness of the learning elements to the context, and above all, what the knowledge use will entail.

Pronouns are a category of lexical items to be acquired by learners in the early stages of language learning. Initially, the learner is taught to distinguish between the masculine and feminine forms of pronouns, which is a common feature in most languages. But this also depends on the fact whether there exists a neuter form for inanimate nouns, to refer to forms which do not fall under either of the two categories. Where there does not exist a neuter form, as in the case of French or Hindi, the noun, whether animate or inanimate has to follow one of the two natural genders. In such a case, the learner is faced with the problem of learning a noun along with its grammatical gender, rather than trying to associate the noun with its natural gender. In Arabic, as in the case of English, the nouns follow the natural gender and there is also a neuter gender to refer to inanimate objects, equivalent to 'it' in English. Despite the clear distinction in natural gender, the choice of the appropriate pronoun depending on masculine/feminine distinction poses difficulties to some of the learners. Furthermore, Arabic has a singular/plural distinction for the second person you, unlike in English. But there exists a distinction between masculine/feminine, and singular/plural in the case of first person and third person pronouns.

Arabic language has 12 different personal pronouns for singular, dual and plural, and first, second and third person distinction, as opposed to the 7 forms of subject pronouns in English. This difference is both advantageous at the same time disadvantageous to Arabic speakers of ESL learners. Let us look at the following examples drawn from actual speech samples.

Ex: *(1a) After the class, you shall go home and rest. (Actual)
   (1b) After the class, I shall go home and rest. (intended)
   *(2a) If I not study, you exam will be difficult. (Actual)
   (2b) If I do not study, my exam will be difficult. (intended)

Similar is the case with 'we' and 'us'. The distinction between the subject pronoun and object pronoun is obscure in the speech some of the subjects, like in the sentences (3) and (4):

Ex: *(3a) He gave my the notebook. (Actual)
   (3b) He gave me the notebook. (intended)
   *(4a) I gave he the mobile phone. (Actual)
   (4b) I gave him the mobile phone. (intended)

With the third person, both subject/object pronouns and masculine/feminine distinctions are very unclear. Some of the common difficulties observed in the use of pronouns are:

(a) Among the subject pronouns I, you, he, she, it, we and they, the most common confusion occurs with he, she, it and they. 'You' is often confused with 'they'.

   Ex: *(5a) The children are young. You are playing in the garden. (Actual)
   (5b) The children are young. They are playing in the garden. (intended)

(b) The object pronouns me, you, him, her, it, us and them are often mistaken for the subject pronouns and they are used interchangeably.

   Ex: *(6a) Him cannot speak English very well. (Actual)
   (6b) He cannot speak English very well. (intended)

(c) Reflexive pronouns like myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, oneself, ourselves, yourselves, and themselves are rarely used and when they are used, they are used as a compounded form of subject pronoun + self(ves).
Ex: *(7a) He painted the picture *herself. (Actual)
(7b) He painted the picture *himself. (intended)

b. Singular Vs Plural
With the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, a learner's communicative abilities are further enriched in second language acquisition, with activity-based teaching techniques and serve more pragmatic purposes. With all the pronouns, where there is a singular/plural form, the learners are quite unsure of the exact number form of the pronoun to be used in a given context. For example,
*(8a) Ali and Ahmed are my friends. I like *him very much. (Actual)
(8b) Ali and Ahmed are my friends. I like *them very much. (intended)

ii. Possessives
Language performs different functions in society. Each function involves a different set of vocabulary appropriate in use in the given context and suitable for the situation. For clarity of thought and unambiguity of expression, it is essential to focus on the what, why and how of the grammatical and lexical items in use.
According to Halliday (1970), there are three basic functions of language:
1. The interactional function, which enables one to establish, maintain and specify relations between the members of society.
2. The ideational function, which helps to transmit information between members of society.
3. The textual function, which addresses the organization of discourse as relevant to the situation.
A sound knowledge of the basic grammar enhances the communicative competence of a learner as an effective user of language.

1. Possessive Adjectives
Possessive Adjectives are often replaced by their corresponding subject or the object pronouns, i.e., *my/me, your/you, his/him, her/she*, and *them/they* or vice versa, as in the following sentences:
*(9a) My sister is a teacher, but *me* brother is a student. (Actual)
(9b) My sister is a teacher, but *my* brother is a student. (intended)

*(10a) We told *they* the truth.(Actual)
(10b) We told *them* the truth. (intended)

a. Natural Vs Grammatical gender

In Arabic there is a gender distinction even in the plural form of the possessive adjectives. Therefore, the subjects are not sure if the same form can be used in English for both masculine and feminine nouns, unlike with the singular subjects. Hence the sentences of the type below occur very commonly in their speech.

Among the possessive adjective forms which are frequently found to create confusion among the leaners, are the third person singular/plural without gender distinction. In other words, they are used inappropriately with both genders irrespective of the subject in question, as in sentence 8(a).

Interestingly, there is a spelling problem which occurs with both possessive adjectives and possessive pronoun forms. *Their* and *there's* is spelt as *there* and *there's* respectively by many of the subjects.

b. Singular Vs Plural
As in the case of singular, plural form 'their' is often substituted by the singular forms, sometimes even with inanimate neutral 'its' for masculine or feminine subjects.

Ex: *(11a) The President is very intelligent. Its plans are very successful. (Actual)

(11b) The President is very intelligent. His plans are very successful. (intended)

2. Possessive Pronouns
With possessive pronouns, the learners tend to use the lexical item which is morphologically/orthographically or phonetically similar to the intended form. As in the case of first person singular, which is often found in their speech, like me/mine, myself and so on, other than 'mine', which is the appropriate form to be used in the context. While, the third person singular masculine/feminine forms are relatively simpler and easier to use in sentences.

Conclusion
The kind of learning problems discussed above with grammatical items arise largely due to the morphological structure of the items learnt in English on an analogy with (dis)similar forms in Arabic language, which is the L1 of the subjects.

A second possible cause is the improper learning of the basic grammar of English with its rules and structures, specific to the language. Although comparison with the frame of L1 can help understand the structure of an L2, it is best to learn the grammatical rules and structures independently of the L1 of the learner.

Another important cause is the relative importance given to the rules of grammar and the attitude towards learning and applying the rules appropriately.

The observations of the study lead to the conclusion that learning pronouns in English is a complicated area for the learners of Arabic due to the gender and number differences which is distinct from those which exist in English language, while Arabic has dual form for the number features, English has only singular and plural forms, which needs to be understood clearly as a basic difference. The confusions which arise in the personal pronouns and the possessive forms of adjectives and pronouns with respect to third person, both singular and plural forms need to be acquired through practice of each of these categories in its usage in context appropriately. An effective method of overcoming this problem in the use of English pronouns and possessives is exposing the learners to more and more of oral and written texts with pronouns used differently in different contexts, preferably using audiovisual techniques. This also helps to improve the receptivity and retention of the patterns of phrases and sentences, akin to learning L1.
References


