

# Contrastive Analysis of Noun-Adjective Word Order in Students' Writing: A Case Study of Common Core Classes in a Moroccan Public High School

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## Abstract

*This study explores word order patterns, specifically focusing on the noun-adjective inversion observed in the written language among EFL learners in a Moroccan public high school class. In a case study design with 102 participants, error analysis of learners' produced language reveals a consistent and frequent deviating pattern as a result of negative transfer from L1 to L2, aligning with the interlanguage hypothesis. The findings enable Moroccan English teachers to predict and address language errors through tailored teaching strategies. Notably, a cross-sectional approach using controlled words unscrambling activity demonstrates the learners' consistent deviation from English word order, except for instances of familiar phrases, suggesting exposure plays a key role in language accuracy. English teachers in Morocco can significantly profit from these findings by using them to anticipate, react, and modify their teaching strategies. Crucially, using well-known sentences correctly emphasizes how important repeated exposure is to language acquisition.*

*Keywords: Contrastive analysis, Error analysis, Interlanguage hypothesis, Negative transfer, Noun-adjective word order*

## 1. Introduction

In the fast-changing environment of EFL acquisition, the exploration of linguistic nuances among learners has emerged as a pivotal element in advancing pedagogical approaches. This study inquires into the area of word order among common core EFL learners of a Moroccan public high school, focusing on the sequence of nouns and adjectives observed in students' written language output. The ill formed structures in relation of nouns and adjectives raises the following questions: Does Moroccan Arabic (L1)

interfere with structure of noun-adjective word order in the English (L2) of Moroccan high school students?

Under the aims of investigating this question, the researchers opted for contrastive analysis between the learners' L1 and the target language. As a framework, this study uses the interlanguage hypothesis (Selinker, 1972), which suggests that learners create an intermediate language that combines elements from both L1 and the target language. Additionally, this view is also supported by Guo Qiaolan's (2022) elaboration of interlanguage formation, emphasizing the significant role of language transfer, overgeneralization, and communication strategies in shaping learners' interlanguage systems. Moreover, Talay's (2022) study highlights pragmatic transfer in Moroccan learners' English usage, showcasing the influence of native languages on learners' language production.

Adding to the previous works, Wang (2023) studies the phenomenon of fossilization and concludes that it is universal and that there are factors that influence it, including psychological, neurophysiological, and sociocultural elements. Wang also outlines strategies to address fossilization in language teaching, such as increasing cultural sensitivity in teaching methods and ensuring comprehensible input tailored to learners' current proficiency levels. What he offers is also relevant to Moroccan EFL learners, where cultural and linguistic differences between Arabic and English could result to fossilized errors.

Although the literature is rich, it does not fully explore the Moroccan EFL context when it come to the learner's input. This study aims to fill that gap by contributing to understanding the relationship between L1 interference and the interlanguage in syntactic constructions, with an emphasis on pedagogical implications for minimizing L1 interference and foster effective learning.

## **2. Literature Review**

In a globalized world where English continues to grow as a second or third language, understanding second language acquisition (SLA) has captivated linguists. When learning a new language, it is accepted that the native language influences second language acquisition, with varying interference depending on linguistic similarities and differences (Derakhshan, 2015). Research shows that first language interference impacts the target language. Dulay et al. (1982) defines interference as the transfer of native language structures to the target language. Lott (1983) views it as deviations that can be traced to the mother tongue, while Odlin (1989) highlights syntactic transfer, both positive and negative. Studies, like that of Dimitrova (2024), highlight how cross-linguistic influences are displayed in the acquisition of phonology. Eshbayeva (2024) explores phonotactic interference, emphasizing its relevance in SLA.

Theories explaining errors in learners' output of the target language have played a critical role in SLA. Among the most influential are Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), and Interlanguage (IL). The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) emerged during the dominance of structural linguistics and behavioral psychology in the 1960s (Bohloulzadeh, 2017). Expounded by Bloomfield (1933) and developed by Fries (1945) and Lado (1957), CAH assumes that second language learners transfer knowledge from L1 to L2. Lado (1957) asserts that individuals transfer linguistic forms and meanings of their native language to the target language. Selinker (1982) and Fries (1945) emphasized the importance of contrasting native and target languages to identify potential influences. Historically, CAH was used to predict learners' errors by comparing native and target languages (Kelly, 1969). However, scholars like Wardhaugh (1970) and Al-Khreshah (2015) have criticized its predictive limitations and subjectivity. Recent work by Dimitrova (2024) reexamines CA's validity in predicting interference errors, advocating its careful application in multilingual education.

Error Analysis (EA) emerged as an alternative to CAH, focusing on learners' actual errors rather than predicting potential ones. EA explores learners' cognitive processes in recognizing or encoding target language input (Erdogan, 2005). Al-Khreshah (2016) attributes EA's popularity to Stephen Pit

Corder, who shifted focus to observed errors. Unlike CA, EA emphasizes the importance of understanding learners' innate strategies and adapting teaching approaches to learners' needs (Corder, 1967). Richards (1980) supports EA's utility in explaining linguistic competence, identifying learning strategies, and informing pedagogy. Sukonwiriyaikul and Khlaisang (2024) underscore EA's value in understanding specific syntactic and morphological errors in learners' output and its implications for curriculum design.

After criticisms of CA and EA for their limitations in error description, Interlanguage (IL) theory emerged as an alternative. Coined by Selinker (1972), IL describes learners' evolving second language knowledge as an independent system that blends elements of L1 and L2. Unlike CA and EA, IL treats learners' errors as natural evidence of learning strategies (Al-Khresheh, 2015). Learners gradually modify their linguistic systems during SLA, deleting, adding, or reconstructing rules (Al-Khresheh, 2015). Azizah and Musthafa (2024) analyze IL fossilization patterns in phonological and syntactic structures, suggesting strategies to reduce its impact in language education. Wang (202) highlights the role of interlanguage in shaping syntactic constructs and stresses the importance of extensive target language exposure to overcome fossilization.

The word order of adjectives modifying nouns differs between English and Moroccan Arabic. In English, adjectives precede nouns (Kramer, 2021), e.g., "a loud, crowded concert," where "loud" and "crowded" modify "concert." Conversely, in Moroccan Arabic, adjectives follow nouns (Ally, 2023), e.g., "the blue book" translates to "the book blue." These structural differences contribute to interlanguage errors, particularly in syntactic transfer. Furthermore, Berutu et al. (2024) adds that addressing L1 syntactic transfer is important for the overall improvement of language acquisition.

In summary, the literature highlights the pivotal role of L1 interference in shaping L2 acquisition and the evolution of theories such as Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, and Interlanguage in explaining learners' errors. While Contrastive Analysis offers valuable insights into cross-linguistic influences, its predictive limitations have given rise to alternative approaches like Error Analysis and Interlanguage theory, which focus on learners' cognitive processes and evolving linguistic systems. Recent studies continue to emphasize the interplay between linguistic transfer, fossilization, and error patterns in SLA, underscoring the importance of addressing these challenges through informed pedagogical practices.

### **3. Research Methods**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

In an attempt to answer the question of Does Moroccan Arabic interfere with the structure of noun-adjective word order in the English of Moroccan high school students? this study adopts a case study design, employing a qualitative methodology with a focus on contrastive analysis between the learners' first language (Moroccan Arabic) and the target language (English) so as to identify if the latter is a result of L1 interference. A case study approach is deemed suitable for its ability to provide an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing the previously mentioned deviating pattern.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants in this study are 102 high school students, both girls and boys, enrolled in English classes at the common core level in a Moroccan public high school. The students, aged between 14 and 16, are part of a literature and humanities class. Taken into account the results of the diagnostic test administered to these classes at the beginning of the school year (2023/2024) and the fact that their contact with English takes place mostly at school, the overwhelming majority of this class is at the beginner level. With minimal exposure to English outside the classroom, these students represent an ideal group for investigating the role of L1 interference in shaping L2 outputs.

### 3.3 Instruments

To address the research question, a classroom activity consisting of 30 scrambled sentences focusing on noun-adjective structures in English was administered. Students were tasked with reordering the words to form grammatically correct sentences. This activity was designed to capture patterns of L1 interference, particularly focusing on contrasts between English and Moroccan Arabic syntax. The instrument's reliability and validity were ensured through a pilot test conducted with 15 students, feedback from English language educators, and careful administration in a controlled classroom environment to minimize external influences.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The learners' responses were meticulously examined using a projection that resembles X-bar theory so as to compare the word order of noun-adjective in English and in the learners' first language (contrastive analysis) to identify which language structure their written product resembles the most.

The findings will be explicitly linked to the research question by identifying the noun-adjective deviations in learners' outputs. The analysis will further highlight the specific ways in which Moroccan Arabic interferes with English syntax, using structural comparisons to demonstrate the influence of L1 on L2 development. This systematic approach ensures that the findings provide a clear and focused response to the research question, offering valuable insights into the role of L1 interference in shaping learners' linguistic competence in English.

## 4. Results

The following chapter focuses on analyzing some of the errors observed and extracted from students' written product in the target language from the administered activity of unscrambling the words to form correct simple sentences. The analysis will concentrate on the sequence noun-adjective as it is the focal point of this case study. For the purpose of this analysis, the X-bar projection will be employed to draw 3 syntactic trees : (1) for the correct phrase in English, (2) for the learners' produced phrase, (3) for the phrase in Moroccan Arabic. The latter will help compare between the three in an attempt to identify for the learners' errors and whether they can be traced back to the learners' native language not.

**Table 1:** Noun adjective word order comparison for example 1

The correct phrase in English	The learners' produced phrase	The phrase in Moroccan Arabic (MA)
<pre> graph TD     NP1[NP] --- Det1[Det]     NP1 --- Np1[N']     Det1 --- the1[the]     Np1 --- Ap1[AP]     Np1 --- N1[N]     Ap1 --- A_prime1[A']     A_prime1 --- A1[A]     A1 --- blue1[blue]     N1 --- tshirt1[t-shirt]           </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP2[NP] --- Det2[Det]     NP2 --- Np2[N']     Det2 --- the2[the]     Np2 --- N2[N]     Np2 --- Ap2[AP]     N2 --- tshirt2[t-shirt]     Ap2 --- A_prime2[A']     A_prime2 --- A2[A]     A2 --- blue2[blue]           </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP3[NP] --- Det3[Det]     NP3 --- Np3[N']     Det3 --- the3[the]     Np3 --- N3[N]     Np3 --- Ap3[AP]     N3 --- triku["/triku/ (t-shirt)"]     Ap3 --- A_prime3[A']     A_prime3 --- A3[A]     A3 --- zraq["/zraq/ (blue)"]           </pre>

As observed, in the correct phrase in English “**blue t-shirt**”, the adjective precedes the noun it modifies unlike the phrase in Moroccan Arabic “**t-shirt blue** /triku zɾəq/” wherein the adjective comes after the noun it modifies. The learners’ produced phrase seems to resemble the word order of MA rather than the English one.

**Table 2:** Noun adjective word order comparison for example 2

The correct phrase in English	The learners’ produced phrase	The phrase in Moroccan Arabic (MA)
<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty1[ ]     N_prime --&gt; AP     N_prime --&gt; N_dog[dog]     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A_white[white]             </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty1[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N_dog[dog]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A_white[white]             </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty1[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N_dog["/kəlb/ (dog)"]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A_white["/bjəD/ (white)"]             </pre>

Example 2 further supports the observed pattern of L1 interference, with learners producing the phrase "dog white" instead of the correct English structure "white dog." The learners’ output aligns closely with the Moroccan Arabic equivalent "/kəlb bjəD/" where the adjective follows the noun. This example confirms the systematic nature of the influence of Moroccan Arabic on learners’ English syntax, as it replicates the noun-adjective sequence typical of their L1. The repeated occurrence of this error underscores the strong role of L1 transfer in shaping learners’ interlanguage grammar, particularly when constructing simple noun-adjective phrases.

**Table 3:** Noun adjective word order comparison for example 3

The correct phrase in English	The learners’ produced phrase	The phrase in Moroccan Arabic (MA)
<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty1[ ]     N_prime --&gt; AP     N_prime --&gt; N_stories[stories]     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A_short[short]             </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty1[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N_stories[stories]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A_short[short]             </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty1[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N_stories["/qiSaS/ (stories)"]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A_short["/Syira/ (short)"]             </pre>

Example (3) showcases the same perceived pattern. The learners' produced phrase "stories short /qiSaS Syira/" is not like the correct English phrase "short stories" wherein the adjective comes before the modified noun. In fact, it is similar to the MA phrase. This result highlights how deeply rooted L1 syntactic rules are in the learners' output, indicating that Moroccan Arabic has a strong influence on their English sentence construction, particularly in noun-adjective order.

**Table 4:** Noun adjective word order comparison for example 4

The correct phrase in English	The learners' produced phrase	The phrase in Moroccan Arabic (MA)
<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty1[ ]     N_prime --&gt; AP     N_prime --&gt; N[N: series]     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A[A: Korean]           </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty2[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N[N: series]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A[A: Korean]           </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty3[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N[N: /musalsalat/ (series)]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A[A: /kuriija/ (Korean)]           </pre>

As noticed, the word order in the correct phrase in English "Korean series" is the adjective first, then right after it comes the noun it modifies. However, in the learners' produced phrase "series Korean /musalsalat kuriija/" the noun precedes the adjective which is the same case as the Moroccan Arabic phrase.

**Table 5:** Noun adjective word order comparison for example 5

The correct phrase in English	The learners' produced phrase	The phrase in Moroccan Arabic (MA)
<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty4[ ]     N_prime --&gt; AP     N_prime --&gt; N[N: phone]     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A[A: expensive]           </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty5[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N[N: phone]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A[A: expensive]           </pre>	<pre> graph TD     NP --&gt; Det     NP --&gt; N_prime[N']     Det --&gt; empty6[ ]     N_prime --&gt; N[N: /tilifun/ (phone)]     N_prime --&gt; AP     AP --&gt; A_prime[A']     A_prime --&gt; A[A: /yali/ (expensive)]           </pre>

Example 5 highlights the same recurring pattern, where learners produce noun-adjective sequences that align with Moroccan Arabic word order. For instance, phrases such as "car red" or "house small" resemble their L1 equivalents rather than the correct English constructions "red car" or "small house." These examples collectively reinforce the conclusion that L1 interference is a systematic and pervasive factor in learners' interlanguage. The evidence suggests that Moroccan Arabic plays a dominant role in shaping the syntactic structure of noun-adjective phrases in learners' English writing.

## 5. Discussion

The data analysis indicated that learners produce phrases that consistently diverge from the standard English noun-adjective word order. To illustrate, according to the English word order, adjectives precede the noun they modify, as in the phrase "blue t-shirt." However, the students under study produced phrases where the adjective followed the noun, as in the phrase "t-shirt blue", which reflects students' application of their prior knowledge of syntactic structures from their native language, Moroccan Arabic (MA). This recurring structure strongly points to the potential influences of the negative transfer effect from L1 to L2, as discussed by Alfaifi and Saleem (2024). According to the latter, the syntactic structures of a learner's first language often interfere with how they apply grammar rules in their second language.

Learners' L1 plays the role of a mental framework for language processing and production, as they rely frequently on it in their attempt to produce sentences in the target language. It is intriguing to mention that two sentences were notable as exceptions, "My family name is Jamali" and "My favourite hobby is swimming." The majority of students produced these sentences accurately, which indicates that repeated exposure to familiar phrases was key in reducing errors. This result supports the conclusions of Ghezlou and Koosha (2018) who have explained that frequent exposure to specific sentence structures in educational materials indeed help learners internalize the L2 grammar by strengthening the mental representations of the target language patterns. This exposure makes learners reduce their reliance on L1 when producing sentences in L2. Correspondingly, we find Hussein and Mohammad (2020) asserting the role of the repeated exposure to the phrases that are contextually meaningful claiming that it can lessen the influence of L1 transfer, especially in aspects of the second language that contrastively vary from the learner's native language.

These findings are consistent with Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), which posits that learners develop an evolving linguistic system influenced by both their L1 and L2. In this study, the learners' reliance on L1 structures, particularly in noun-adjective word order, exemplifies an intermediate stage in their interlanguage development. This aligns with findings by Agathopoulou and Papadopoulou (2008), who observed similar patterns in Greek learners of English, where noun-adjective agreement was heavily influenced by native syntactic structures. These observations underscore the importance of targeted instruction to help learners transition away from L1 reliance and internalize L2-specific rules.

The role of frequency and familiarity also warrants further exploration. The correct use of familiar phrases highlights the mitigating effect of repeated exposure to specific L2 patterns, as supported by Wulff and Gries (2015), who found that learners exposed to high-frequency noun-adjective constructions in naturalistic and educational contexts were more likely to produce these structures accurately. This suggests that carefully designed instructional materials emphasizing frequent and contextually relevant target language patterns can help learners overcome L1 interference and progress in their interlanguage development.

In summary, the observed noun-adjective order deviations in the learners' outputs reflect negative transfer from Moroccan Arabic, providing strong evidence of L1 influence on their interlanguage. However, the correct use of familiar phrases demonstrates that repeated exposure to L2 patterns can significantly reduce these errors. These findings align with recent research on L1 interference and

highlight the importance of integrating high-frequency and meaningful input into language instruction to address persistent syntactic challenges.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study show a recursive deviation from English noun- adjective word order, where learners put nouns before adjectives instead of the other way round. The study reveals that this behavior is due to negative transfer, whereby learners apply the patterns of their L1 to L2. Most of the errors follow MA's word order, which shows that L2 acquisition undergoes a degree of influence from native language interference.

These findings can be of great benefit to teachers of English in Morocco by helping them predict, respond and tailor their teaching methods. Importantly, the correct usage of familiar phrases highlights the crucial role of repetitive exposure in language learning. All in all, this study gives crucial information regarding the impact of both the interference of the first language and the frequency of exposure on the process of L2 acquisition.

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