

The Acquisition of Conditional Sentences by Arab Learners of English

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Abstract: *This study attempted to assess the acquisition of conditional sentences by Arab learners of EFL at the levels of recognition and production. The analysis showed that the overall percentage of correct responses in both recognition and production was 44%. The subjects' overall performance in recognition was higher than theirs in production. The major problems the subjects' encountered relate to the subjects' inability to relate form to function in conditional sentences. The findings also revealed that implicit conditionals were the most difficult to recognize and produce. Furthermore, the tense-time relationship and the mismatch between verb forms in the two parts of the sentence constituted a major source of difficulty for the learners. Finally, the study revealed that most subjects are not familiar with the alternate forms of conditionals.*

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the problems that Arab learners of English encounter in their attempt to acquire English conditionals. Conditional sentences in English are syntactically classified as complex sentences that consist of two clauses: the subordinate clause (*If*-clause), and the main clause (Celce-Murcia; Larsen-Freeman 1999; Maclain 1996; Beaumont; Granger 1995; Parrot 2001). There is a complicated system of compatibility between the verb forms in the two clauses of a conditional sentence. For example, in unreal past conditionals the past perfect is used in the *If*-clause and the form (would+ have+ past participle) is used in the main clause as in "If you had invited me, I would have come." This situation is aggravated when we consider the basic types of conditionals and their various variants or alternates.

Semantically, conditional sentences express dependence relations between the situation expressed in the main clause and the condition in the subordinate clause. Moffie (2000:n.p.) maintains that "conditional sentences are complex expressions of the dependence of a circumstance on the occurrence of another."

From a speech act point of view, conditional sentences were discussed in a number of studies (Maule 1988; Hsu 2003; Ford 1997). Hsu, for example, identified five major functions and associated them with their relevant forms for pedagogical purposes. He found that conditional sentences can be used to express functions such as making

predictions, discussing past mistakes, expressing dreams, giving advice, and making apologies

Although conditionals have been syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically well-researched (Saeed 2004) studies on the acquisition of these sentences by Arab EFL learners have been scanty. In their book *Errors in English among Arab Learners*, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) provided an extensive analysis of the errors that Arab learners of English commit in the various aspects of English including conditional sentences which the authors slightly tackled. Although this study did not primarily focus on the acquisition of conditional sentences, it highlighted some of the errors that Arab learners of English encounter in producing them. Moreover, this study was not based on actual data obtained from questionnaires and experiments. Most of the examples cited were based on the authors' impressions and experiences, and it did not investigate the problems on the levels of both recognition and production. The present study differs from Kharma's in the sense that it is data-based and covers both aspects of linguistic competence: recognition and production.

2. Objectives and Rationale

2.1. Objectives

This paper investigates how well university Arab learners of English have acquired the forms and functions of conditional sentences in English at the levels of both recognition and production. In more specific terms, the study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How well have university Arab learners acquired conditionals in English at the levels of recognition and production? (2) What type of difficulties do they encounter in recognizing and producing English conditionals? (3) To what extent can they correctly produce and recognize the various types of conditionals? (4) What implications for teaching EFL may such a study offer?

2.2. Rationale

Several studies have pointed to the syntactic and semantic complexity of conditional sentences and to the difficulties that foreign language learners encounter in learning them. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999:545) maintain that "The semantics of the various types of conditional clauses are subtle and hard to understand even to native speakers." In a survey of the most serious teaching problems encountered by ESL teachers in the Los Angeles area, Covitt (1976) found that conditional sentences ranked fifth. The lack of studies that investigate the problems that Arab learners encounter in the acquisition of conditionals was one of the major motivations for conducting this

study. Furthermore, the findings of such a study may have some pedagogical implications to language teaching, testing as well as textbook design.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

Data were elicited from third and fourth year English majors at the University of Sharjah. These students have completed most of the obligatory and elective requirements of their study plan. Three sections, consisting of sixty-three students were randomly selected. After grading the papers, the responses of thirteen students were ignored because the students left the questionnaire unanswered or did a few items and left the remaining parts undone.

3.2. Data elicitation technique

Data were collected from the subjects through a questionnaire consisting of two major components. The first was designed to assess the students' ability to recognize conditionals sentences, whereas the second was designed to evaluate the students' ability to produce them. The recognition component includes three subparts. The first part was designed to assess the students' ability to recognize conditional sentences in terms of form. In this part the students were given forty sentences and asked to circle the number of any conditional sentence they could identify whether the conditional is explicit (marked by *if* or any other word that can signal conditionality), or implicit (unmarked for conditionality by any subordinator). The forty sentences included: (a) Factual conditionals: Type zero (b) Future real conditionals: Type 1 (c) Present/Future unreal conditionals: Type 2 (d) Past unreal conditions: Type 3 (e) Implied conditionals containing the modal *should*, the subjunctive *were*, or no connectors at all as in: "Help your mother in the kitchen and I will get you a new bike," and (f) Conditionals with connectors other than *if* such as: *as long as*, *provided that*, *whenever*, *in case*, *suppose*, (g) Distracters (non-conditionals).

The purpose of this section was to evaluate how well the students could recognize the various forms of conditional sentences, and to tell whether they could identify conditionals that have markers of conditionality other than *if* such as *whenever*, *as long as*, *provided that*, etc. Furthermore, this part of the questionnaire tested whether the students could determine conditionality on a semantic basis with the absence of any syntactic marker. The five distracters were included just to make sure that the subjects could generally differentiate between conditionals and non-conditionals.

The second part of the recognition test consisted of sixteen multiple choice items designed to evaluate the students' ability to determine the meaning of the various types of conditionals. In this section, the subjects were asked to select the most appropriate meaning of a conditional sentence in terms of whether the condition stated in the sentence is real, unreal, or imaginary. The third part consisted of sixteen multiple choice items to evaluate the students' ability to recognize the function of conditional sentences. Like the preceding part, four tokens were used to represent each type of conditional sentence. Conditionals in this part were viewed from a speech act perspective. Students were asked to identify the illocutionary force/function that each conditional sentence expresses.

The second major component of the questionnaire was designed to evaluate the students' ability to produce conditional sentences. This component consisted of two parts. The first part was designed to measure the students' ability to produce conditional sentences by filling in the blank space in each sentence with the appropriate form of the given verb. The purpose of this controlled production part was to check whether or not the students could produce a correct conditional sentence by providing the correct form of the given verb whether it is in the *If*-clause, or the main clause. This controlled production section consisted of thirty tokens with at least four examples on each type of conditional sentences.

The second part of the free production section consisted of twelve situations for which the students were asked to provide conditional sentences taking the context provided into consideration. This section evaluates the subjects' ability to produce complete conditional sentences that fit the contexts provided.

The whole questionnaire was given to three colleagues, two native speakers and a linguist. The three readers were requested to answer all its items and to provide any comment or suggestion. All their feedback was taken into account before the questionnaire was distributed to the subjects of the study. It might be worth mentioning that the production section was administered before the recognition component in order to avoid the washback effect.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Recognition

Table (1) below presents the averages and percentages of correct responses in the recognition of form, meaning and function.

Table (1) Recognition: Correct Responses

Area of recognition	No. of students	Average	Percentage
Recognition of form	50	25.4	63.5
Recognition of meaning	50	8.9	55.6
Recognition of function	50	7.9	49.7
Overall		14.1	56.3

A quick glance at Table (1) above can readily reveal that the general percentage of the subjects' ability to recognize the form, meaning, and function of conditional sentences is very low, taking into account the fact that the subjects of the study are junior and senior English majors. The overall percentage of correct answers in the three areas of recognition was 56.3%. This means that almost 44% of the students encounter a considerable level of difficulty in the recognition of conditional sentences.

One may wonder why the percentage of correct responses in the recognition of form was relatively low (i.e., 63.5%), although recognizing form is generally easier than recognizing the more complex semantic aspects of meaning and function. This assumption might be reasonable had conditional sentences been marked only with the subordinator *if*. However, conditionality in this section was not marked by *if*, the frequently used and taught marker of conditionality in pedagogical grammar books and language courses. In fact, conditionality in the questionnaire was manifested in different ways including the explicit use of *if*, the use of other connectors such as *provided that*, *in case*, *whenever*, etc., and the absence of any connector (implicit conditional sentences) where no marker at all was used. Sixteen out of forty sentences of the questionnaire designed to evaluate the recognition of form had no overt markers of conditionality. The percentage of correct responses on these items was only 39.8%. This might justify the relatively low percentage of correct responses in recognizing the form of conditionals. Furthermore, this may provide solid evidence that implied conditionals and those with subordinators other than *if* were not given due emphasis in the process of teaching English. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the students' performance in this section was still higher than their ability to recognize the semantically more complex notions of meaning and function. The problems encountered in recognizing form can be rank ordered in terms of difficulty as follows:

1. The most difficult type of conditionals for the subjects to recognize was the recognition of sentences that have no overt markers as in: *Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat*, and *Had I seen*

- you, I would have invited you to the party.* This result may support the assumption that these variant conditional forms were not taught to students probably because they are not introduced in textbooks.
2. The second major area of difficulty was the recognition of sentences with markers or connectors other than *if* such as *whenever, as long as, suppose, provided that, etc.* This finding provides further evidence to the assumption that these alternate conditional forms were not taught or introduced to students in their textbooks.
 3. The third most difficult area for the subjects to recognize relates to conditional sentences beginning with *Were*, or *Had* as in: *Were he really ill, I might feel more sympathetic, and Had I known that he was ill, I would never have asked him to come.* Many subjects wrongly understood these sentences as questions rather than *if clauses*.
 4. The least troublesome area was the identification of conditional sentences marked with the subordinator *if*. This finding corroborates the assumption that students were taught conditional sentences with focus on the use of the subordinator *if* without paying adequate attention to the other forms of conditional sentences.

Furthermore, these findings may reveal that conditional sentences are oversimplified in the process of teaching. Focusing on the basic types of conditional sentences and neglecting their variants which are commonly used is not compatible with the generally agreed upon notion that frequent linguistic forms and structures need to be given priority in teaching language.

Recognition of meaning occupied the second rank in terms of difficulty after the recognition of function. The percentage of correct responses in this section was 55.6% compared to 49.7% in recognition of function. This means that 45% of the students encountered difficulty in determining the meanings conveyed by conditional sentences. Recognizing the meaning of conditionals is semantically more demanding than recognizing form which can be usually performed mechanically. Determining the general meaning of linguistic forms requires more reasoning and mental processing than the mere recognition of form. Recognition of meaning involves, among other things, determining the relationship between form and meaning, and indicating how change in form may entail change in meaning. This may account for the fact that the students' performance in recognizing meaning is lower than their ability to recognize form. The major difficulties encountered in determining the meanings of conditional sentences are the following:

1. The students inability to relate verb tenses to their intended times. In most present unreal conditional sentences where the simple past is used in the *If*-clause, and the modal (would + infinitive) in the main clause to refer to an unreal present situation, the subjects associated the simple past tense with past time instead of present time. For example, the subjects understood the sentence "If Sami attended the meeting, I would leave," as a past activity in which Sami did not attend the meeting without being aware of the fact that it refers to a present/future unreal situation. Thus the correct answer should have been "I will attend the meeting as long as Sami does not attend."
2. Most of the subjects could not understand the meaning of conditionals when a modal auxiliary like *should* was used in the *If*-clause. The use of *should* in the *If*-clause indicates that the possibility of occurrence of the event in the condition is very weak. In the example "If it should rain, I will stay at home," there is a weak possibility that it will rain. Most of the subjects erroneously opted for the alternative that says "there is a strong possibility that it will rain." The difficulty in such a sentence may be ascribed to the inherent semantic complexity of modals in English. It might also be feasible to conclude that the students are not usually taught the different variants of conditional sentences. EFL textbooks usually present conditional sentences in traditional terms using the labels *If*-clauses Types 1,2, and 3, without drawing the students' attention to the existence of the frequently used variants in everyday discourse, including Type zero which is rarely introduced.

The most difficult area for the students to recognize was the recognition of function. More than 50% of the subjects found it difficult to determine the functions of conditional sentences. Most students were unable to choose the appropriate function indicated by a conditional sentence. For example, they were unable to tell whether a sentence indicates a prediction, an inference, a habitual event, or a general truth. It seems that associating forms of conditionals to their illocutionary forces, or functions is still far from being acquired or properly mastered.

4.2. Production

The following table shows the percentages of the students' correct responses in the controlled and free contexts.

Table (2). Production: Correct Responses

Area of production	No. of Students	Average	Percentage
Controlled Production	50	12.3	41.1
Free production	50	2.8	23.3
Overall		7.6	32.2

In the controlled production section, the students were asked to complete sentences by filling in the correct form of given verbs. The purpose of this section was to evaluate the students' ability to produce conditional sentences with correct verb forms. The overall percentage of correct responses in the production component of the questionnaire was 32.2%. This means that about 68% of the subjects have serious problems in producing semantically and syntactically acceptable conditional sentences. The analysis revealed that the percentage of correct responses in the controlled part was 41.1%. This means that about 59% of the students were unable to produce correct conditional sentences as far as form is concerned.

The major problem attested in the students' responses was the mismatch between the verb phrases in the two parts of conditional sentences, particularly in types two and three as in “*If I were you, *I will see a doctor,*” and “*If the final stage had been played in Brazil, *France will never win*” where the subjects added the italicized parts. These responses indicate the subjects' unfamiliarity of which type of verb is to be used in each clause. It was also evident in the analysis that producing past unreal conditions was the most difficult area followed by type 2 conditionals, and finally type 1.

The students' performance in the free production part was significantly lower than in the controlled production section. It can be noticed that 73% of the students were unable to produce an appropriate conditional sentence that matches a certain context. The discrepancy between the students' performance in the controlled production section and the free production one can be attributed to the fact that students were given clues that might have helped them predict the correct form of the verb given in each sentence of the controlled production component. However, in the free production component, students were only given the context and were asked to produce a complete conditional sentence. Thus, they had to think of the form as well as of the function. The major difficulties encountered were:

1. Inability to identify the proper function intended in the context. Students could not determine whether the situation is real in the present, unreal in the present, or unreal in the past, etc. The response “*If it did not rain heavily last night, the party was not cancelled,” was given to represent the given situation “The party was cancelled because it rained heavily.” The correct response should reflect an unreal condition in the past, and thus it should have been “If it had not rained heavily last night, the party wouldn't have been cancelled.”
2. Erroneous use of verb forms in either the *If*-clause, or the main clause. The erroneous response “*If Sami will study hard, he will get a high grade,” reveals the students' ignorance of the correct form

of the real future condition in which the simple present is used in the *If*-clause and the simple future in the main clause.

3. Inability to relate verb tenses to their proper times, that is, tense-time relationship: Many students were unable to recognize the fact that the relationship between tense and time is not always direct especially when modals are involved. That is probably why students rarely used the simple past tense in the *If*-clause and the modal "would" in the main clause to talk about present or even future conditions as in: "If you did not live far away, we would visit you very often."
4. Inability to produce implicit conditional sentences: Very few students were able to produce a correct conditional sentence starting with "Had."
5. Ignorance of verb forms in *If*-clauses Type zero, in which the simple present is used in both clauses. Many subjects tend to use a modal in each of the two clauses. Thus, they would say: "*If you will heat ice, it will melt."
6. The absence of subjunctive 'were' in unreal conditions: Students tended to use the singular past form of the verb "to be," that is, *was* instead of *were* as in: "*If I was hungry, I would eat something."

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this research indicate that university Arab learners of English as a foreign language encounter a serious problem in attaining an acceptable level of mastery in their attempt to learn certain English structures like conditional sentences. The difficulties that these students face are attested at both levels of recognition and production. This may lead us to conclude that there is a methodological deficiency in teaching English at schools and universities as well. The overall mastery level of conditional sentences at the levels of recognition and production is 44.25%. This low level of mastery is far from being acceptable for a number of reasons. The subjects have been learning English for more than fifteen years. Many of these students were graduates of public or private schools where English is taught from grade one. They are now junior and senior English majors.

The students' level of performance in production is remarkably and consistently lower than theirs in recognition. This finding corroborates what Berent (1985) found in his two experiments comparing the production and comprehension of conditional sentences. Berent found that the comprehension scores of his subjects were higher than their production scores. This can be ascribed to the fact that recognition develops earlier than production. Brown (2000:33-34) states that "most observational and research evidence points to the general

superiority of comprehension over production [and] even adults perceive more syntactic variation than they actually produce.”

In light of this poor performance, it is advisable that the whole process of teaching and testing grammar at schools and tertiary education institutions be revised in a way that pays adequate attention to both form and function of language structures. Grammar should also be discourse-based rather than being strictly sentence-based. This means that grammar should not be taught as fixed and unalterable rules; language variation should also be introduced in school and university textbooks. The basic types of conditional sentences as well as their variants need to be highlighted at different stages of teaching English. Teaching the basic forms only simplifies learning conditionals, and may be deceptive to learners as they may become familiar with only these forms, and thus ignore or do not accept alternate forms. In this respect, Maule (1988) stressed the importance of introducing and teaching a broader, and a more representative selection of conditional forms.

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