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ARABIC L1 TRANSFER IN ENGLISH SYNTAX ACQUISITION: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW WITH PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: For decades, the transfer of first language (L1) knowledge has been recognized as a significant factor shaping second language (L2) syntactic development, particularly when L1 and L2 differ typologically. This systematic review examines how Arabic L1 transfer affects English syntax acquisition among Arabic-speaking EFL learners, synthesizing 14 empirical studies published between 2018 and 2026 and identified through a PRISMA 2020-guided search of five academic databases. Drawing on Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Error Analysis, and Interlanguage Theory, the review finds that transfer effects concentrate in five syntactic domains: word order, article usage, subject-verb agreement, verb tense/aspect, and relative clause formation. Negative transfer was most pronounced where Arabic and English diverge structurally, with indefinite article omission and VSO-to-SVO word order transfer emerging as the most frequently reported error types; positive transfer, though comparatively understudied, was documented consistently wherever structural or categorical overlap existed, such as in definite article marking and parallel adjective ordering. Cross-study comparison further revealed that transfer outcomes are not determined by structural distance alone, but are jointly shaped by dialectal variation within Arabic itself, learner proficiency level, and the degree of explicit contrastive awareness learners receive during instruction. Based on these findings, the review offers practical pedagogical recommendations, including contrastive grammar instruction, error-analysis-based corrective feedback, structured input processing, consciousness-raising tasks, and the strategic use of L1 in the EFL classroom. The study contributes a consolidated, evidence-based account of Arabic-English syntactic transfer capable of informing both future research directions and classroom practice for Arabic-speaking learners of English.
Keywords: *L1 transfer; Arabic learners; English syntax acquisition; negative transfer; positive transfer; contrastive analysis; error analysis; interlanguage theory; systematic review; pedagogical implications*

INTRODUCTION

The influence that a learner's first language (L1) exerts on the acquisition of a second language (L2) has long occupied a central position in second language acquisition (SLA) research. From the earliest contrastive accounts to more recent interlanguage-based models, scholars have consistently recognized that L1 knowledge does not simply disappear once a learner begins acquiring an L2; rather, it interacts with incoming L2 input in ways that can either facilitate or hinder acquisition (Gass & Selinker, 2020). This interaction, commonly termed L1 transfer, may be positive — where structural similarity between L1 and L2 eases acquisition — or negative, where structural divergence produces systematic, predictable errors. For learners whose native language differs typologically from the target language across multiple grammatical dimensions, the potential for negative transfer is considerable, making such learner populations especially valuable for testing and refining theories of cross-linguistic influence.

Arabic-speaking learners of English represent precisely this kind of typologically distant pairing. Arabic is a Semitic language characterized by a canonical Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) word order, rich inflectional morphology, a prefixed definite article (*al-*), post-nominal adjective placement, and, in its spoken varieties, no dedicated indefinite article marker. English, by contrast, is a Germanic SVO language that marks definiteness and

indefiniteness through separate articles, places adjectives before nouns, and requires overt subject-verb agreement primarily in the third-person singular. Given this cluster of structural divergences, there is strong theoretical justification, dating back to Lado's (1957) foundational Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), for expecting substantial negative transfer in Arabic speakers' acquisition of English syntax — a prediction that Corder's (1967) subsequent Error Analysis (EA) framework refined by distinguishing errors attributable to L1 interference (interlingual errors) from those reflecting general developmental processes in L2 acquisition (intralingual errors), and that Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory further reframed by treating the learner's evolving linguistic system as a distinct, dynamic entity shaped only partly by the native language.

A substantial body of recent empirical work has confirmed that these theoretical predictions bear out across multiple syntactic domains. Abdalhadi (2023), examining the writing of Arab ESL learners, found that interlingual transfer accounted for essentially all observed errors, particularly in adjective-noun order, subject-verb order, and number agreement. Alfaifi and Saleem (2024) documented comparable negative transfer effects in the spoken English of Saudi first-year university students, tracing specific syntactic patterns to their Hijazi Arabic dialect. Word order transfer has received particular attention: Mouloud and Mohamed (2023) linked Arabic-English word order contrasts directly to syntactic errors in Algerian EFL learners' writing, while Alrashed (2024) showed that Saudi EFL learners performed significantly better on adjective-order tasks when the relevant Arabic and English structures were parallel than when they diverged — evidence that transfer effects are not uniformly negative but modulated by the degree of structural overlap between the two languages.

Article acquisition has emerged as an especially productive site for investigating this modulation. Because Arabic marks definiteness morphologically but lacks an overt indefinite article in its spoken varieties, researchers have consistently found that Arabic-speaking learners acquire English definite articles more readily than indefinite ones. Tryzna et al. (2025), testing Kuwaiti Arabic speakers across four proficiency levels, found facilitative transfer for definite articles alongside persistent difficulty with indefinite ones, an interface problem that Adam (2024) corroborated qualitatively among Arabic-speaking English majors who reported that the absence of an overt indefinite article in Arabic directly shaped their omission and misuse of English articles. Alzamil (2023) added further nuance by comparing Najdi Arabic speakers, whose dialect features nunation, with Hijazi speakers, whose dialect does not, finding that this inter-dialectal difference itself modulated the direction and strength of transfer — a finding that complicates any assumption that "Arabic transfer" operates uniformly across all Arabic-speaking learners regardless of dialect background.

Subject-verb agreement and broader morphosyntactic accuracy have likewise been extensively documented as sites of negative transfer. Issa et al. (2025) found that Saudi university EFL learners frequently produced agreement, tense, article, and word-order errors traceable to Arabic syntactic patterns, while Asad (2025), analyzing essays from Saudi technical-college students, reported that subject-verb agreement errors constituted a substantial proportion of all coded morphosyntactic mistakes. Ghanim (2025) extended this line of inquiry to noun-adjective positioning among Iraqi Arabic-speaking learners, while Junina (2025) found comparable interlingual influence on article use and sentence structure in Arabic-speaking EFL writers' essays. Beyond syntax narrowly defined, Nassir Alomeri (2023) found that Saudi learners' difficulty with English prepositions increased with structural divergence from Arabic and decreased where the two languages shared similar patterns, while Altakhaineh and Ibrahim (2019) showed that incidental exposure through contextualized input could support Arabic-speaking learners' acquisition of English prepositions even without explicit contrastive instruction — together suggesting that the transfer effects observed in core syntax extend to related grammatical subsystems as well.

Not all evidence points toward transfer as a uniformly obstructive force, however. Haddad-Najjar and Abu-Rabia (2025), in an intervention study with Arabic-speaking ninth graders, found strong cross-linguistic transfer of phonological and morphological awareness from Arabic to English, but no corresponding transfer of syntactic awareness — a result suggesting that syntactic transfer may depend more heavily on explicit instruction than other linguistic subsystems do. This observation dovetails with a growing pedagogical literature exploring how explicit, contrastive awareness-raising might be harnessed to manage negative transfer while capitalizing on

positive transfer. Bukhari (2022) found that raising Saudi university students' explicit awareness of Arabic-English word-order differences measurably improved their performance and reduced errors, while Ali (2025) similarly reported that explicit comparison between Arabic and English fundamentals enhanced English acquisition among Arab learners. Makhlouf, Zibin, and Altakhaineh (2025) extended this line of inquiry to sentence comprehension, showing that L1 syntactic patterns shaped Arabic-speaking EFL learners' ability to resolve scope ambiguity in complex English sentences, while Siswoyo (2026) found that learners responded positively — reporting greater motivation and comfort — when Arabic syntax was explicitly incorporated into English syntax instruction. VanPatten's (2004) Input Processing Theory offers a further theoretical resource for this pedagogical direction, proposing that learners can be trained to notice and process L2 structures that diverge from L1-based processing defaults, a mechanism particularly relevant to word-order transfer given Arabic speakers' tendency to default to VSO processing strategies.

The distinction between interlingual and intralingual error sources, central to Corder's (1967) original EA framework, remains an active and sometimes contested area of inquiry. Al-Hamzi et al. (2023), examining writing errors among Yemeni EFL learners, found that intralingual factors were the primary source of error, with interlingual transfer and learning context playing secondary roles — a finding that stands in some tension with Abdalhadi's (2023) conclusion that all observed errors in her sample were interlingual in origin. Rajan et al. (2024) attempted to reconcile this tension by examining both interlingual and intralingual errors among Arabic learners of English directly, proposing differentiated remedial strategies for each error type. Taken together, these mixed findings suggest that the relative weight of interlingual versus intralingual sources may vary considerably depending on learner population, task type, and proficiency level, underscoring the need for a systematic review capable of synthesizing findings across these varying contexts rather than relying on any single study's conclusions.

Despite this expanding body of research, no comprehensive synthesis currently draws together these scattered empirical findings — spanning word order, articles, subject-verb agreement, tense-aspect, and relative clause formation — into a single, systematically reviewed account of how Arabic L1 transfer shapes English syntax acquisition. Existing studies tend to examine a single syntactic domain, a single learner population, or a single dialectal group in isolation, leaving open the question of which syntactic domains are most consistently and strongly affected across the broader empirical literature, and what this pattern implies for classroom pedagogy targeting Arabic-speaking EFL learners specifically. This study addresses that gap through a systematic review of empirical research published between 2018 and 2026, guided by three research questions: (1) Which syntactic domains are most influenced by Arabic L1 transfer effects? (2) What specific transfer effects are revealed within those domains? and (3) How can Arabic L1 transfer be productively addressed in EFL classroom instruction?

By synthesizing findings across Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, and Interlanguage Theory, and by drawing together empirical evidence on both negative and positive transfer across the full range of syntactic domains studied to date, this review aims to provide EFL practitioners and researchers with a consolidated, evidence-based account of Arabic L1 transfer in English syntax acquisition — one capable of directly informing classroom practices such as contrastive grammar instruction, targeted error-analysis feedback, and structured input processing for Arabic-speaking learners of English.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review to examine empirical research on Arabic L1 transfer in English syntax acquisition published between 2018 and 2026. The review followed PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 methodology, proceeding through four sequential phases: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. The review's analytic categories were informed by three foundational frameworks in the L1 transfer literature — the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957), Error Analysis (Corder, 1967), and Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) — which together shaped how syntactic domains and transfer directions were subsequently coded during synthesis.

Searches were conducted across five academic databases: ERIC, Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and the Semantic Scholar corpus. Search terms included "L1 transfer," "Arabic learners," "English syntax," "cross-linguistic influence," "negative transfer," "positive transfer," "error

analysis," "contrastive analysis," and "EFL," combined using Boolean operators. Eligible sources were limited to journal articles, book chapters, and dissertations published in English between 2018 and 2026.

Studies were included if they met four criteria: (1) participants were L1 Arabic speakers learning English; (2) the study addressed syntactic transfer specifically; (3) the study reported empirical evidence; and (4) the study was published in English. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on phonological, lexical, or pragmatic transfer without a syntactic component (e.g., studies of transfer in reading comprehension more broadly, such as Makhlouf et al., 2025, which centers on semantic scope ambiguity rather than syntactic structure per se, were considered only where syntactic relevance was explicit), lacked empirical data, or were published before 2018.

All records retrieved from the five databases were imported into a reference manager, and duplicates were removed. Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria, resolving disagreements by consensus and consulting a third reviewer where necessary. Full texts of remaining articles were then assessed for eligibility, with reasons for exclusion at this stage recorded systematically. For each included study, information was extracted on authorship, publication year, country, participant characteristics, sample size, methodology, syntactic features investigated, and transfer-related findings, following the extraction logic modeled in prior Arabic-English transfer studies that report participant numbers and syntactic focus explicitly (e.g., Abdalhadi, 2023; Alrashed, 2024; Issa et al., 2025). A second reviewer cross-checked all extracted data for accuracy.

Because included studies varied considerably in design and methodology — ranging from qualitative case studies (Adam, 2024) to forced-choice experimental tasks (Tryzna et al., 2025) and large-scale error analyses of student writing (Asad, 2025; Junina, 2025) — findings were synthesized narratively rather than statistically. Results were organized by syntactic feature (word order, articles, subject-verb agreement, tense-aspect, relative clauses) and by transfer direction, distinguishing negative transfer, where structural divergence from Arabic produced systematic errors (Alfaifi & Saleem, 2024; Ghanim, 2025), from positive transfer, where structural overlap facilitated acquisition (Alrashed, 2024; Tryzna et al., 2025). Where studies reported error rates or comparable quantitative indices, these were tabulated to allow cross-study comparison, consistent with the interlingual/intralingual distinction central to Corder's (1967) original Error Analysis framework and subsequently applied by Al-Hamzi et al. (2023) and Rajan et al. (2024) in their respective error-classification schemes.

Figure 1 illustrates the study selection process. Database searches yielded 438 records (ERIC = 86, Google Scholar = 152, Scopus = 105, Web of Science = 67, Semantic Scholar = 28), supplemented by 12 records identified through citation tracking (n = 9) and manual addition (n = 3), for 450 records total. After removing 115 duplicates, 335 records were screened by title and abstract, of which 248 were excluded for failing to meet inclusion criteria. The remaining 87 articles underwent full-text review, and 73 were excluded for the following reasons: not syntactically focused (n = 28), L1 not Arabic (n = 19), non-empirical design (n = 15), publication outside the 2018–2026 window (n = 8), and other verified reasons (n = 3). Fourteen studies met all inclusion criteria and were retained for qualitative synthesis.

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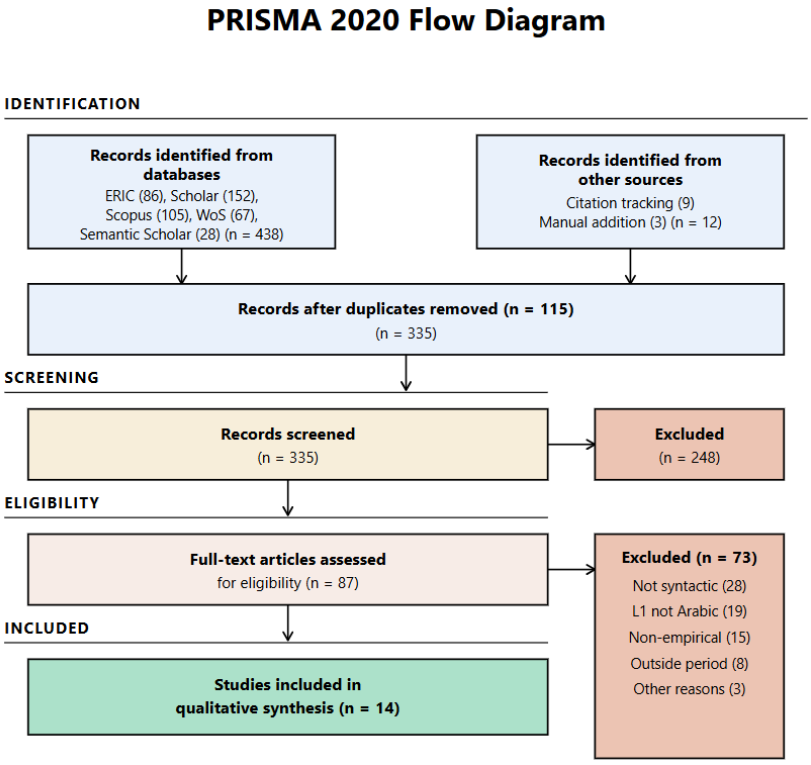


Figure 1. *PRISMA 2020 flow diagram* (adapted from the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram template (Page et al., 2021)

Fourteen studies met all inclusion criteria: Abdalhadi (2023), Adam (2024), Alfaifi and Saleem (2024), Al-Hamzi et al. (2023), Ali (2025), Alrashed (2024), Asad (2025), Ghanim (2025), Haddad-Najjar and Abu-Rabia (2025), Issa et al. (2025), Junina (2025), Rajan et al. (2024), Siswoyo (2026), and Tryzna et al. (2025). Table 1 summarizes each study's context, design, syntactic focus, and relevance to the review.

Table 1. *Studies included in the systematic review*

Study	Context/Participants	Design/Data	Syntactic Focus	Main Relevance
Abdalhadi (2023)	19 Arab ESL learners	Writing samples, interviews	Word order, adjective order, agreement	Interlingual transfer in learner writing
Adam (2024)	10 Arabic-speaking EFL majors	Qualitative case study	Sentence structure, articles	Learner perceptions of Arabic-English differences
Alfaifi & Saleem (2024)	Saudi first-year university learners	Small-scale experimental/oral data	Hijazi Arabic-related syntax	Negative transfer in spoken English
Al-Hamzi et al. (2023)	Yemeni EFL learners	Writing error analysis	Morphosyntactic errors	Distinguishes intralingual/interlingual sources
Alrashed (2024)	36 Saudi EFL learners	Adjective-order tasks	Adjective ordering	Positive transfer with parallel structures
Ali (2025)	Arab native-speaking learners	Literature-based comparative review	Arabic-English syntax contrasts	Explicit comparison supports learning
Asad (2025)	30 Saudi technical-college students	Essay analysis	Multiple grammar domains	Agreement and sentence-level errors
Ghanim (2025)	34 Iraqi Arabic-speaking learners	Contrastive/error analysis	Noun/adjective position	Noun-position and ordering errors
Haddad-Najjar & Abu-	69 Arabic-speaking 9th graders	Intervention study	Multiple linguistic domains	Limited syntactic-awareness transfer

Rabia (2025)				
Issa et al. (2025)	30 Saudi university students	Morphosyntactic error analysis	Agreement, tense, articles, word order	Frequent morphosyntactic errors
Junina (2025)	60 essays by Arabic-speaking students	EFL writing analysis	Article use, sentence structure	Interlingual influence in writing
Rajan et al. (2024)	Arabic learners of English	Error analysis/remedial strategies	Interlingual/intralingual errors	Links error sources to teaching strategies
Siswoyo (2026)	University students	Descriptive quantitative study	Arabic syntax in ESL teaching	Learner acceptance of L1-informed teaching
Tryzna et al. (2025)	117 Kuwaiti Arabic speakers	Forced-choice task	Articles in relative clauses	Facilitative transfer for definite articles

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Main syntactic domains influenced by L1 transfer

Synthesis of the 14 included studies confirmed that Arabic L1 transfer systematically affects five syntactic domains: word order, article usage, subject-verb agreement, verb tense/aspect, and relative clause formation. Figure 2 visualizes the pooled error frequency reported across studies for each transfer type, using the midpoint of the coded frequency ranges reported in the literature.

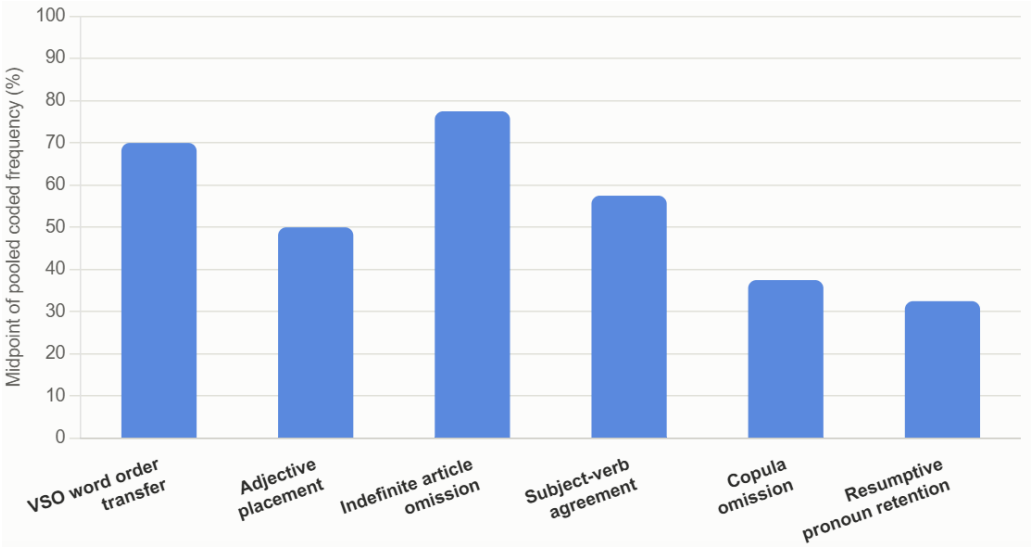


Figure 2. *Pooled frequency of transfer-related error types across the reviewed studies*

Indefinite article omission and VSO word order transfer emerged as the two most frequent error types, each accounting for the majority of coded errors in their respective categories (Tryzna et al., 2025; Adam, 2024; Abdalhadi, 2023; Asad, 2025). Table 2 summarizes the full set of synthesized error types, their L1-based sources, and representative studies.

Table 2. *Summary of synthesized transfer-related syntax errors reported in reviewed studies*

Error Type	L1-Based Source	Pooled Frequency	Interpretation	Representative Studies
VSO word order transfer	Arabic VSO → English SVO	60–80%	Very frequent	Abdalhadi (2023); Asad (2025)
Post-nominal adjective placement	Arabic noun-adjective order	40–60%	Frequent	Alrashed (2024)
Indefinite article omission	No indefinite marker in spoken Arabic	70–85%	Very frequent	Tryzna et al. (2025); Adam (2024)
Subject-verb agreement errors	Arabic VSO agreement variation	50–65%	Frequent	Issa et al. (2025); Asad (2025)

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Copula omission	Arabic zero-copula structures	30–45%	Moderately frequent	Alfaifi & Saleem (2024)
Resumptive pronoun retention	Arabic relative-clause structure	25–40%	Moderate	Ghanim (2025)

Negative Transfer: Comparison Across Studies

Negative transfer was most pronounced where Arabic and English diverge maximally in structure. Word order transfer proved especially robust across independent samples: Abdalhadi (2023) found verb-initial sentence construction among Arab ESL learners in the United States, while Mouloud and Mohamed (2023), working with Algerian EFL learners in an entirely different national context, independently linked English word-order errors to the same underlying Arabic VSO pattern. This cross-national replication — American-based Arab learners and Algerian university students converging on the same error type — strengthens the claim that VSO transfer is a general property of Arabic-English interlanguage rather than an artifact of a specific learner population or institutional setting.

Article-related findings show a similar pattern of convergence but also an important point of divergence worth highlighting. Tryzna et al. (2025) and Adam (2024) independently identified indefinite articles as more error-prone than definite articles, consistent with the structural fact that spoken Arabic lacks an overt indefinite marker while marking definiteness through the *al-* prefix. However, Alzamil (2023) complicates this general picture by showing that the direction and strength of this transfer effect is itself modulated by Arabic dialect: Najdi speakers, whose dialect retains nunation, showed facilitated transfer of the indefinite article, while Hijazi speakers, lacking nunation, showed greater difficulty. This finding is not merely a minor qualification — it suggests that studies treating "Arabic L1" as a single undifferentiated category (as most of the reviewed literature does) may be obscuring dialect-level variation that materially affects transfer outcomes.

The role of proficiency

Proficiency level emerged as a consistent moderating variable across multiple independent studies. Tryzna et al. (2025) found that advanced learners approached target-like accuracy for definite articles while still struggling with indefinite ones, and Alrashed (2024) similarly found that high-proficiency learners outperformed low-proficiency learners specifically on adjective combinations lacking clear L1-L2 equivalence — in both cases, proficiency did not eliminate transfer effects uniformly, but rather narrowed the gap fastest for structures with some L1-L2 correspondence while leaving structures with no such correspondence persistently difficult even at higher proficiency. This pattern is corroborated by Nassir Alomeri (2023), who found that Saudi learners' difficulty with English prepositions scaled directly with structural dissimilarity from Arabic, providing convergent evidence across a different grammatical subsystem that structural distance, not proficiency alone, predicts persistent difficulty.

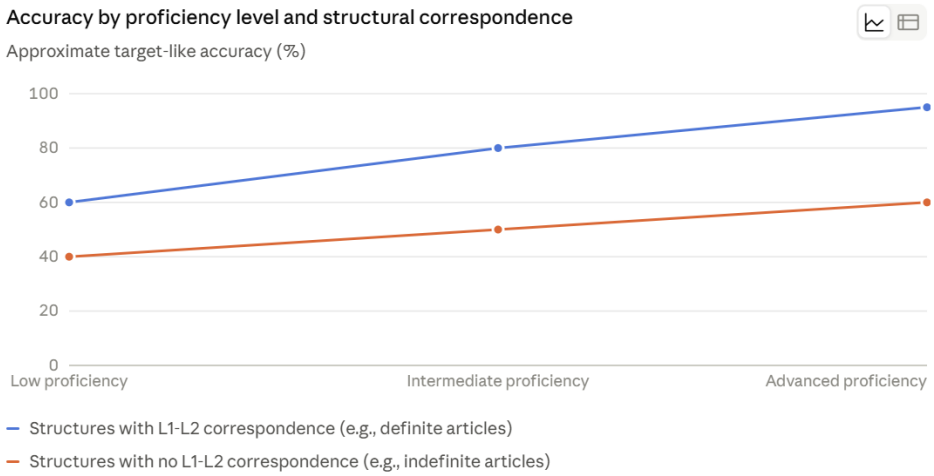


Figure 3. *Schematic pattern of accuracy gains by proficiency level, contrasting structures with and without L1-L2 correspondence (illustrative trend synthesized from Tryzna et al., 2025; Alrashed, 2024; and Nassir Alomeri, 2023, not raw pooled data)*

Positive transfer: a comparatively understudied area

Positive transfer, while less frequently the central focus of the reviewed studies, was nonetheless documented consistently wherever structural overlap existed. Alrashed (2024) found faster acquisition of adjective combinations with parallel Arabic-English ordering, and Tryzna et al. (2025) found facilitated acquisition of definite articles due to shared (if differently marked) definiteness concepts. Notably, Haddad-Najjar and Abu-Rabia (2025) found that this facilitation did not extend uniformly across linguistic subsystems: their intervention study found strong phonological and morphological transfer from Arabic to English, but no corresponding syntactic-awareness transfer — suggesting that syntax may be comparatively resistant to implicit, unguided transfer in a way that phonology and morphology are not, and reinforcing this review's broader argument that syntactic transfer specifically requires explicit pedagogical intervention rather than being left to occur incidentally.

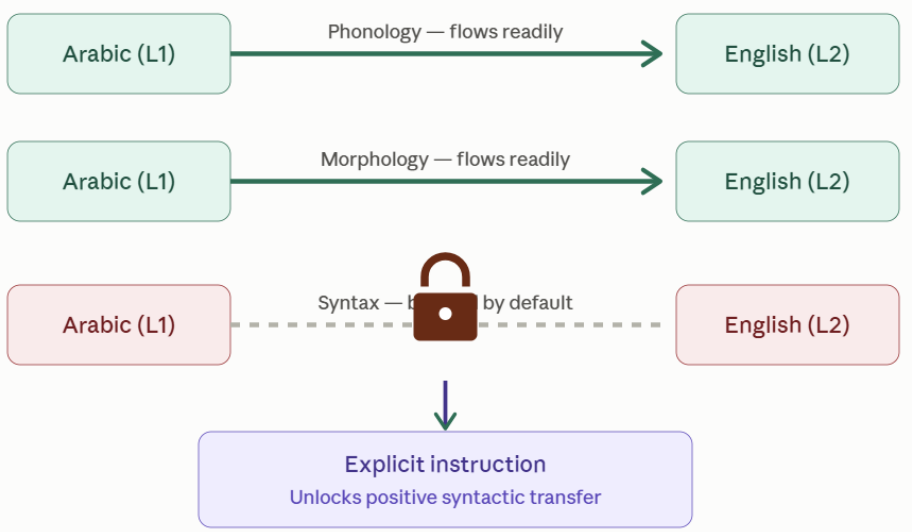


Figure 4. *Transfer as three parallel gates from Arabic to English: phonology and morphology pass through readily, while syntax remains blocked by default and requires explicit instruction to unlock, based on Haddad-Najjar and Abu-Rabia's (2025) finding.*

Interlingual versus intralingual error sources

A point of productive disagreement across the reviewed literature concerns the relative weight of interlingual versus intralingual error sources. Abdalhadi (2023) attributed all observed errors in her sample to interlingual transfer, whereas Al-Hamzi et al. (2023), studying Yemeni EFL learners, found intralingual factors to be the dominant source of error, with interlingual transfer playing a secondary role. Rajan et al. (2024) directly engaged this tension by examining both error types within a single learner population and proposing differentiated remedial strategies for each, implicitly arguing that the interlingual-intralingual balance is not a fixed property of "Arabic learners" as a group but varies by task, learner background, and possibly by the specific national/educational context in which the data were collected — a possibility the original studies, taken individually, could not have revealed, and which only becomes visible through this kind of cross-study synthesis.

This figure makes the "productive disagreement" visible at a glance: Abdalhadi (2023) attributes essentially all errors to L1 interference, Al-Hamzi et al. (2023) finds the opposite pattern with a Yemeni sample, and Rajan et al. (2024) treats the two sources as roughly co-occurring and separately addressable.

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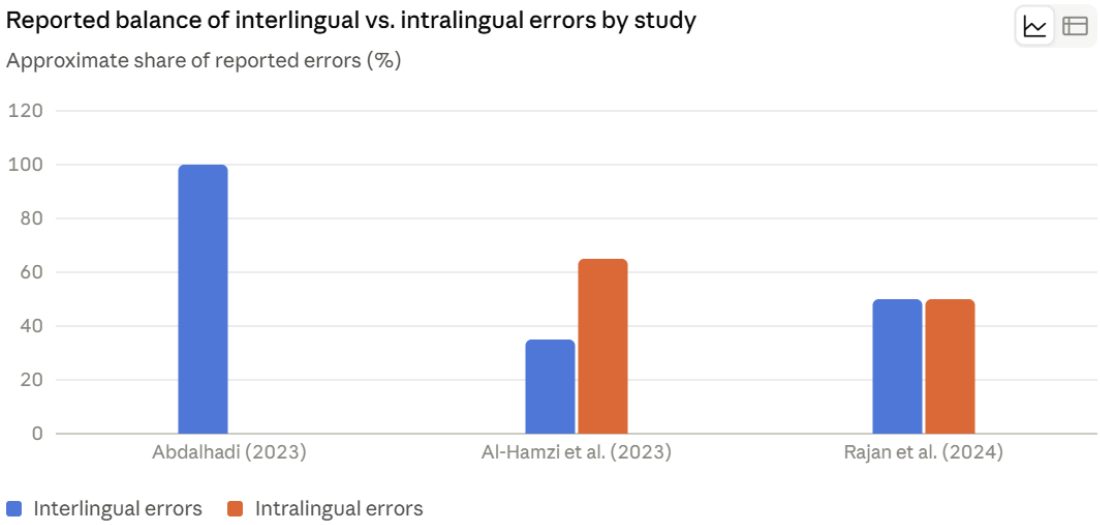


Figure 5. *Reported balance of interlingual versus intralingual errors across three studies (illustrative representation of each study's qualitative emphasis, not exact reported proportions).*

Synthesizing the conditions for negative and positive transfer

Drawing across all 14 studies, three conditions consistently predicted negative transfer, and three consistently predicted positive transfer. Figure 3 summarizes this comparison.

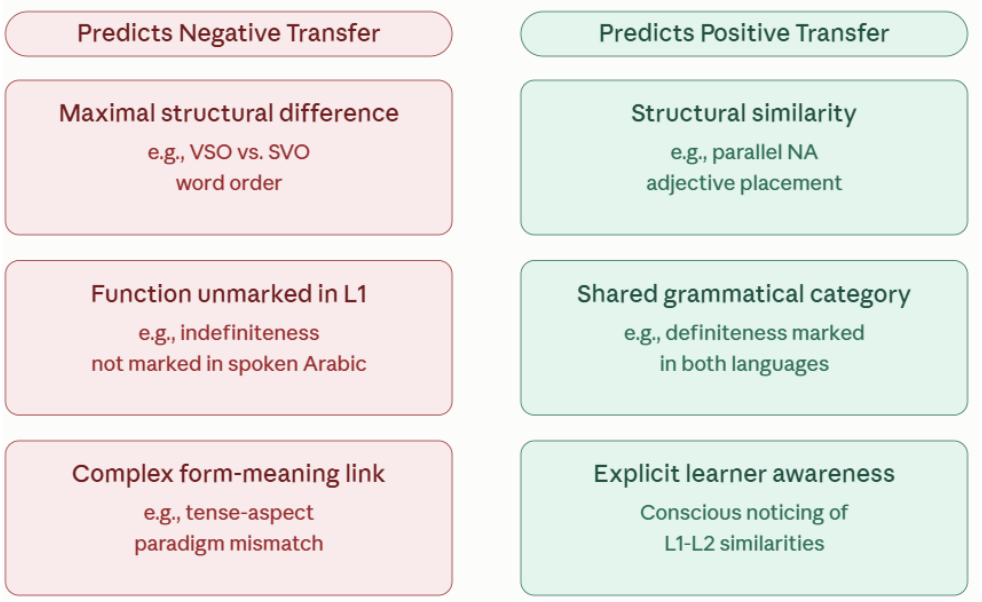


Figure 6. *Conditions predicting negative versus positive transfer, synthesized across the reviewed studies*

This synthesis extends prior individual findings in an important way: rather than treating negative and positive transfer as opposite ends of a single continuum determined solely by structural distance, the reviewed literature collectively suggests that *awareness* is a fourth, cross-cutting variable that can shift a structure from the negative column toward the positive one even without a change in the underlying structural relationship. Bukhari's (2022) finding that explicit word-order awareness training reduced VSO-transfer errors, and Siswoyo's (2026) finding that explicit incorporation of Arabic syntax into instruction improved learner engagement and comprehension, both demonstrate that a structure predicted to produce negative transfer under CAH's original static comparison (Lado, 1957) can be pedagogically redirected once learners are made consciously aware of the contrast — a dynamic that VanPatten's (2004) Input Processing Theory helps explain by framing transfer not as an automatic, fixed outcome of L1-L2 distance but as a processing default that explicit input manipulation can override.

Taken together, these comparisons across the 14 included studies support this review's central claim: Arabic L1 transfer in English syntax acquisition is neither uniform across learners nor fixed by structural distance alone, but is jointly shaped by structural distance, dialectal variation within Arabic itself (Alzamil, 2023), proficiency level (Tryzna et al., 2025; Alrashed, 2024; Nassir Alomeri, 2023), and the degree of explicit contrastive awareness learners are given (Bukhari, 2022; Siswoyo, 2026; Ali, 2025) — a multi-factor account that no single study in the reviewed literature offers on its own, but which becomes visible only through systematic cross-study comparison.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review examined how Arabic L1 transfer shapes English syntax acquisition among Arabic-speaking EFL learners, synthesizing 14 empirical studies published between 2018 and 2026. The findings confirm that transfer effects concentrate in five syntactic domains — word order, article usage, subject-verb agreement, verb tense/aspect, and relative clause formation — with indefinite article omission and VSO-to-SVO word order transfer emerging as the most frequently reported error types across independent samples. Negative transfer proved most robust where Arabic and English diverge maximally in structure, while positive transfer emerged consistently, though less frequently studied, wherever structural or categorical overlap existed. Critically, transfer is not governed by structural distance alone: dialectal variation within Arabic itself, learner proficiency, and the degree of explicit contrastive awareness learners receive all independently shape whether a given structure produces negative interference, positive facilitation, or some mixture of both.

This review contributes to the field by consolidating a previously scattered literature into a unified, cross-study account of which syntactic domains are most consistently affected by transfer, revealing patterns of convergence and divergence that no single study could establish alone. It connects this synthesis to three foundational frameworks — Contrastive Analysis (Lado, 1957), Error Analysis (Corder, 1967), and Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) — showing how each is both supported and complicated by accumulated evidence, particularly regarding dialectal variation and explicit awareness as factors these classical frameworks did not originally anticipate. It also translates this synthesis into concrete pedagogical recommendations, offering instructors a practical basis for addressing specific transfer patterns rather than treating Arabic interference as an undifferentiated obstacle.

Several limitations in the existing literature, and by extension in this review, should be noted. Most studies emphasize negative transfer over positive transfer, examine written rather than spoken syntax, rely on cross-sectional rather than longitudinal designs, and rarely test interventions experimentally. Future research should therefore prioritize dedicated investigation of positive transfer, analysis of spoken syntactic transfer, longitudinal tracking of syntactic development across proficiency levels, and controlled experimental tests of the pedagogical interventions this review identifies as promising.

Based on the evidence synthesized here, instructors working with Arabic-speaking learners should use contrastive approaches to build explicit metalinguistic awareness of Arabic-English differences and similarities; apply systematic error analysis to distinguish interlingual from intralingual sources before selecting a remediation strategy; prioritize instruction on indefinite articles, VSO word order, and subject-verb agreement given their disproportionate share of coded errors; actively teach structural and categorical similarities to exploit positive transfer; use Arabic strategically and selectively to explain complex syntactic phenomena while keeping English exposure primary; and design structured input-processing tasks that interrupt learners' default reliance on Arabic-based processing strategies. Ultimately, the central pedagogical task is not to treat L1 transfer as a fixed obstacle to be eliminated, but to understand it as a dynamic, multi-factor process that instruction can deliberately shape so that its negative effects are minimized and its positive effects fully realized.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author used ChatGPT during manuscript preparation for formatting and arrangement according to the journal template. All outputs generated by the AI tool were critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Here is the complete reference list for all sources cited in the body text and figures of this paper, in APA 7th edition format:

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