

Sources of Difficulties in English Grammar and Reading Comprehension among Arabic-Speaking Learners: A Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract

Arabic-speaking learners of English tend to struggle with the same handful of grammatical points and the same kind of reading obstacles, semester after semester, regardless of where they study. This paper asks why, using a contrastive comparison of English and Arabic grounded in Lado's (1957) procedure and in the error-analysis and interlanguage traditions built by Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972). It compares the two languages across tense and aspect, articles, prepositions, word order, negation, and question formation, then follows the same contrasts into the reading process itself, looking at script transfer, sentence parsing, vocabulary inferencing, and cultural background knowledge. Throughout, the analysis is checked against two decades of empirical work on Arab EFL learners (Aljouhani, 2019; Abdelmohsen, 2022; Bensalah & Gueroudj, 2020; Qrquez & Ab Rashid, 2017). The central claim is a simple one: grammatical error and reading difficulty are not two separate problems in these learners but two visible symptoms of the same structural gap between Arabic and English. The paper closes with a set of classroom recommendations built directly on that claim.

Keywords: Contrastive Analysis, Arabic-Speaking Learners, English Grammar, Reading Comprehension, Error Analysis, Interlanguage, Schema Theory.

1. Introduction

English is now the language through which most Arab university students reach scientific literature, professional certification, and international scholarship, and yet, by nearly every classroom account, Arabic-speaking learners acquire it slowly and unevenly. Instructors across Arab universities routinely watch students reach advanced stages of instruction while still stumbling over basic verb forms, article use, and the ability to pull meaning out of an ordinary academic paragraph (Abdelmohsen, 2022). This paper treats those two struggles, grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension, as one problem rather than two: both traces back to the structural distance between Arabic and English.

The idea that a learner's first language shapes, and sometimes blocks, the acquisition of a second one goes back to Lado (1957), who argued in *Linguistics Across Cultures* that similarity between two languages predicts ease of learning and difference predicts error. Later research complicated this picture considerably. Error analysis and interlanguage theory showed that learners also make errors

with no trace of their first language in them, and that some differences predicted by contrastive comparison never actually surface as errors at all (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972). Even so, the core insight held up: a systematic comparison of Arabic and English grammar still explains a large share of the errors that keep recurring, in the same places, in Arab EFL classrooms (Catford et al., 1974; Khalil, 1999).

What gets less attention is that the same points of contrast driving grammatical error also shape how Arabic-speaking learners read English. A learner who hasn't internalised the English tense-aspect system will also misjudge how events line up in a narrative passage. A learner unsure how the English article system works will also struggle to tell whether a noun phrase is introducing something new or pointing back to something already mentioned (Nassaji, 2002). Grammar and reading draw on the same underlying knowledge of the language, so a contrastive account of one goes a long way toward explaining the other, and that is the assumption this paper is built on.

The paper proceeds as follows. After the statement of the problem and the aims of the study, the theoretical framework brings contrastive analysis, error analysis, and reading theory together under one roof. A review of related studies then looks at what the Arab EFL literature has already established, separately, about grammatical interference and about reading difficulty. From there, the paper works through a systematic contrastive comparison of the grammatical areas most often implicated in learner error, before turning the same lens on the reading process itself. It ends with the researcher's own reading of what all this means for the classroom.

2. Statement of the Problem

Grammar and reading are taught, and assessed, as separate skills in most Arab university English departments, often by different instructors using different materials entirely. Learners' actual errors don't follow that division. A student who keeps dropping the copula in English, a transfer error traceable straight to the Arabic nominal sentence, is very often the same student who misreads an English sentence precisely because it lacks the overt subject-predicate marking Arabic supplies through other means (Abdelmohsen, 2022). Building grammar drills and reading drills as though they had nothing to do with each other ignores the fact that both come from the same small set of contrasts between Arabic and English.

What this paper is really after is the absence of a single contrastive account linking the grammatical errors documented in one strand of the literature to the reading difficulties documented in another, largely separate, strand (Qrquez & Ab Rashid, 2017; Bensalah & Gueroudj, 2020). Grammar studies tend to stop at the sentence: they catalogue misused tenses, prepositions, and articles without asking how those same contrasts play out once a learner is reading a real, multi-sentence text. Reading studies tend to lean on motivation, vocabulary size, or strategy use, without tracing the difficulty back to the specific grammatical contrast that produced it in the first place. Closing that gap is the job of this paper.

There is a practical cost to leaving the gap open. Where the two strands of research stay disconnected, remedial teaching follows suit: a learner flagged as weak in reading gets routed to vocabulary work or generic reading strategies, and a learner flagged as weak in grammar gets routed to verb drills, as though these were two independent deficits needing two independent fixes. If the two deficits usually share one contrastive root, a learner can spend real classroom time on both remedies and still never touch the structural gap actually causing them.

3. Significance of the Study

The value of this study is mostly practical. An instructor who understands why an error keeps recurring, not just that it does, can design remedial material aimed at the actual source rather than its surface. A curriculum built around the contrastive priorities set out in Section 9, rather than around whatever order a British or American textbook happens to introduce topics in, would spend more time on the structures learners genuinely struggle with and less on the ones Arabic already hands them for free through positive transfer (Khalil, 1999). The study also brings two strands of Arab EFL research, grammatical error analysis and reading comprehension research, into contact with each other after years of developing more or less in parallel. And it matters for learners directly: someone who understands that a persistent difficulty has a linguistic explanation, not a personal one, is in a better position to work on it than someone who has simply been told, again, to try harder.

4. Objectives and Research Questions

The study has four aims: to identify the main points where Arabic and English grammar diverge in ways likely to cause learner difficulty; to show how those same divergences extend into reading comprehension; to bring the existing empirical findings on Arab EFL learners' grammatical and reading errors together within one contrastive frame; and to draw pedagogical recommendations directly from the contrastive findings rather than from generic teaching advice.

These aims translate into four questions. What are the main points of grammatical contrast between Arabic and English that predict difficulty for Arabic-speaking learners? How do these contrasts extend into the processes involved in reading comprehension? To what extent does the existing empirical literature on Arab EFL learners bear out what contrastive analysis predicts? And what follows, pedagogically, from the sources of difficulty this paper identifies?

5. Scope and Limitations

The comparison here is limited to Modern Standard Arabic and Standard English, since Modern Standard Arabic is the variety formally taught in schools and used in nearly all the published contrastive work on this language pair (Catford et al., 1974). The colloquial dialects, which vary considerably by region, are acknowledged but not treated systematically; a dialect-by-dialect comparison is a different, larger project. The focus stays on university-level learners, the population most heavily represented in the literature reviewed in Section 7 and the one most relevant to the setting this paper is written for; findings on younger learners are drawn on only where they speak

directly to a point already established at university level. The design is descriptive-analytical rather than experimental: the paper synthesises an existing body of contrastive and empirical work rather than collecting new data, which means its conclusions are strongest where more than one study backs them up and more tentative where a contrastive prediction hasn't yet been tested directly. Pronunciation and phonology, though clearly part of the wider Arabic-English picture, sit outside the paper's focus on morphology, syntax, and reading.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis:

This paper starts from the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, first set out by Lado (1957) in *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Lado's claim was that the areas of difficulty a foreign language presents to a given group of learners can be predicted in advance by systematically comparing the two linguistic systems: similarity predicts ease and positive transfer, difference predicts error and negative transfer, and the wider the gap, the harder the learning. Catford et al. (1974), in *A Contrastive Study of English and Arabic*, and later Khalil (1999), in *A Contrastive Grammar of English and Arabic*, carried this comparison out in detail for exactly this language pair, and both remain standard references for anyone working on it.

The strong version of the hypothesis, the claim that nearly every learner error could be predicted from a prior contrastive comparison, didn't survive contact with the evidence: learners produce plenty of errors with no trace of their first language, and some predicted difficulties simply never show up. A more moderate version has held up better, and it is the one this paper works from: native-language interference remains a genuine, often the single largest, source of systematic error, even if it isn't the only one (Betti & Bsharah, 2023).

6.2 Positive and Negative Transfer:

Contrastive analysis distinguishes two directions of influence from the first language. Where a native-language structure matches the target-language structure, the learner's existing habit helps rather than hurts, which is positive transfer. Where the two diverge, the same habit gets misapplied to the target language, producing negative transfer, which shows up as a systematic, recurring error rather than a one-off slip. Aljouhani's (2019) tense study makes this distinction unusually visible within a single design: the same learners scored highly on tenses Arabic and English share and poorly on tenses specific to English, positive transfer and negative transfer sitting side by side in one test.

This distinction is why contrastive analysis doesn't just generate an undifferentiated list of every difference between two languages; it generates a ranked set of predictions. The heaviest, most persistent difficulty should cluster around the points where Arabic and English genuinely diverge, while shared structures should cause comparatively little trouble no matter how complex they look on paper. Sections 9 and 10 are organised around exactly that expectation.

6.3 Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory:

Where contrastive analysis predicts error before it happens, error analysis works backward from the errors learners actually produce, classifying them by source. Corder (1967) reframed the whole field by arguing that learner errors aren't performance failures to be corrected and forgotten but systematic evidence of the rule system a learner is currently working with. That reframing opened the door to Selinker's (1972) concept of interlanguage: a second-language learner's output as a linguistic system in its own right, related to but independent of both the native and target languages, evolving in a fairly predictable sequence as proficiency grows.

For this paper, the useful part of error analysis and interlanguage theory is the distinction between interlingual errors, traceable to first-language transfer and therefore within reach of contrastive prediction, and intralingual errors, which come from the learner's incomplete or overgeneralised grasp of the target language itself and can't be explained by contrastive comparison alone (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023). The analysis that follows focuses mainly on interlingual sources, while flagging, where the literature suggests it, that a given error type is more plausibly intralingual.

6.4 Schema Theory and the Reading Process:

Reading comprehension isn't about producing correct forms; it's about reconstructing meaning from a written text, and the theory that fits this best is schema theory. Comprehension, on this view, is not passive decoding but an interactive process in which a reader's existing knowledge, both linguistic and cultural, gets brought to bear on the text in front of them (Nassaji, 2002). Where a reader's schemata match what the text assumes, comprehension moves smoothly; where they don't, comprehension slows or stalls even when every individual word is, in principle, known.

Grabe and Stoller (2002) add an important piece to this: fluent reading depends on fast, largely automatic recognition of grammatical patterning. A fluent reader isn't consciously parsing each sentence but running on overlearned expectations about how subjects, verbs, and modifiers get ordered and marked. When a learner's first language builds sentences on a different template, as Arabic does, that automatic pattern-recognition breaks down, and comprehension drops to the level of slow, conscious decoding. This is the bridge, picked up again in Section 10, between grammatical contrast and reading difficulty.

6.5 The Threshold Hypothesis and L1–L2 Reading Transfer:

A further strand concerns how reading ability in the first language relates to reading ability in the second. Cummins' threshold hypothesis holds that a bilingual learner needs to reach a certain minimum level of proficiency in the second language before the reading skills already built up in the first language can transfer and become useful, and before those skills can shield the learner from negative interference. Below that threshold, first-language reading habits can work against second-language reading rather than for it; above it, years of literacy in Arabic become an asset rather than an obstacle. Work applying this hypothesis to Arab EFL learners has generally borne it out, finding a

positive correlation between Arabic and English reading ability once English proficiency clears that threshold.

7. Review of Related Studies

The studies below are presented one at a time: aim, sample and method, then key results, followed in each case by how the study agrees or disagrees with the present paper and a short comment from the researcher. Grammar-focused studies come first, then reading-focused ones, and a closing subsection draws out the gap between the two strands as a whole.

7.1 Studies on Grammatical Interference:

Aljouhani (2019) set out to test how the tense systems of Arabic and English affect learner accuracy, comparing tenses the two languages share against tenses unique to English. The sample was thirty-five freshman students in the Management Science programme at Yanbu University College, and the instrument was two purpose-built grammar tests, one on shared tenses and one on English-specific tenses. Shared tenses were answered correctly ninety-one percent of the time, against twenty-seven percent for English-specific tenses.

This agrees closely with the present study's central premise, that difficulty tracks structural divergence rather than complexity as such, and Section 9.1 leans on Aljouhani's figures directly as empirical confirmation of that premise. The two studies differ in scope: Aljouhani tested one narrow population on tense alone through a purpose-built instrument, while the present paper works from published contrastive description across several grammatical systems and extends the argument into reading. In the researcher's view, Aljouhani's contribution is best understood as the single cleanest data point behind an argument this paper tries to generalise and carry further.

Btoosh (2019) examined how Arab learners use tense and aspect in academic writing through a corpus-based comparison, focusing on the simple present and simple past, perfective and imperfective aspect, and verb-form errors arising from a missing or added third-person -s and from omitted copula and auxiliary verbs, comparing a learner corpus against a similarly sized native-speaker corpus.

This lines up with the present study on the specific error types involved, particularly the copula and auxiliary omissions discussed in Sections 9.1 and 9.4, and Btoosh's corpus evidence supports those sections directly. The two studies part company on method: Btoosh works from authentic learner writing collected as a corpus, which gives the finding firmer empirical footing than a library-based contrastive study can offer on its own, though the present paper widens the lens by tying the same error types back to a fuller grammatical contrast and forward into their consequences for reading. The corpus method is, if anything, close to what Section 13 recommends as a next step.

Abdelmohsen (2022) investigated how the Arabic morphosyntactic system shapes Omani students' English writing, along with the socio-cultural context of that writing and teachers' and students' own perceptions of it. The study drew on nearly six hundred Omani EFL students in the General Foundation Programme and fifty-four teachers across eight public higher education institutions,

combining a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and an essay-writing test within a mixed-methods design.

The two studies agree on the basic claim that Arabic morphosyntax measurably shapes L2 writing, and Abdelmohsen's finding that teachers and students often blame these errors on carelessness rather than their linguistic source is used directly, in Sections 2 and 12, to argue for explicit contrastive training. The main difference is evidence type: Abdelmohsen collected primary data from teachers and students, while the present study works secondhand from findings like this one to build a broader contrastive account. In the researcher's view, this is the single most directly useful study reviewed here for the pedagogical argument in Section 12, since it documents the exact misattribution problem that argument is built to correct.

Betti and Bsharah (2023) set out to identify the grammatical problems Iraqi EFL learners face in Arabic-English translation, testing two hundred fourth-year students, morning and evening sections combined, at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Thi-Qar, using a twenty-item translation test. The greatest difficulty areas were the past participle, conditional sentences, the nominal-versus-verbal sentence distinction, tenses, the emphatic auxiliary do, word order, and sentence connectors.

The overlap with the present study is specific and considerable: the nominal-versus-verbal contrast, the emphatic does, and word order are exactly the points developed in Sections 9.1, 9.4, and 9.6, and their error ranking supports those sections directly. The difference lies in task type: translation puts direct pressure on structural transfer in a way ordinary composition does not, whereas the present study's grammatical analysis is not tied to one task and is meant to apply across writing, translation, and reading alike. In the researcher's assessment, a translation task is close to the strictest possible test of a contrastive prediction, since it forces exactly the point-by-point substitution contrastive analysis assumes, which may explain why their error profile matches this paper's predictions as closely as it does.

Al-Hamzi et al. (2023) examined the linguistic errors in the writing of Yemeni EFL Arabic-speaking learners, analysing essays from twenty eighth-semester students at Sana'a University through Ellis' five-step error-analysis procedure and a surface-strategy taxonomy. Omission was the most frequent error type, accounting for well over half of all errors found, followed by addition, incorrect formation, and word order, with error categories spanning number marking, verb tense, articles, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and pronouns, and with intralingual transfer identified as the leading cause overall.

The two studies agree on which grammatical categories are affected, articles, prepositions, tense, and agreement all appear in Sections 9.1 through 9.7, but they disagree on the primary cause: Al-Hamzi et al. attribute most errors to intralingual transfer, meaning errors arising from learners' developing knowledge of English itself, while the present paper treats the same categories as primarily interlingual, tied directly to specific Arabic-English contrasts. This is a genuine point of tension rather than a difference in emphasis, and the researcher's own reading is that an omission-heavy error profile

is compatible with either explanation: omitting an article, an auxiliary, or an agreement marker is exactly what an interlingual account predicts for a learner whose first language does not require the omitted element, so the two explanations may be harder to tell apart from the surface pattern than the original classification suggests.

Al Towity (2022) described the grammatical errors committed by Arabic-speaking EFL learners at Al-Dayer University College, Jazan University, analysing student compositions using the comprehensive error taxonomy of Byrd and Benson (1994) and sorting errors into the most serious problems, intermediate problems, and punctuation and mechanical problems, with roughly a third of all errors falling into the punctuation and mechanics category, just ahead of the most serious problems category.

This agrees with the present study on the general claim that Arabic-speaking learners produce a predictable, classifiable set of errors, but it differs sharply in focus: punctuation and mechanics, the largest category in Al Towity's data, are not treated as a grammatical contrast at all in the present study, which concentrates on morphosyntax rather than orthographic convention. The researcher would note that this is a genuine gap in the present paper's scope rather than something to explain away, and that a fuller contrastive account would need to ask why Arabic-speaking learners find English punctuation and mechanical conventions difficult, a question this study leaves open by design.

Aljuraifani and Alanazi (2025) examined grammatical errors linked to Arabic interference in the academic writing of Saudi female EFL students, aiming both to confirm whether L1 influence remained a significant source of error and to identify its underlying causes and propose remedial strategies, using a mixed-methods approach.

The agreement with the present study is direct: both treat L1-Arabic interference as a persistent, identifiable cause of error rather than a beginner-level problem that fades with more instruction, a point Section 7.1 and the discussion in Section 11 both lean on. The difference is one of population and timing, since Aljuraifani and Alanazi studied students who had already received extensive formal instruction, which sharpens rather than contradicts the present study's argument. In the researcher's view, this is one of the more important studies reviewed here precisely because it closes off the easy objection that contrastive difficulty is simply an early-stage problem that instruction eventually clears up on its own.

Hmidani (2017) developed and tested a didactic model aimed at improving how Arabic first-year students at a medical college handle the English tense system, working with fifty-seven students overall and applying the model to a study group of twenty-seven of them, with pre-, mid-, and post-tests administered to both the study group and a control group.

This agrees with the present study in treating the English tense system as a distinct source of difficulty worth a dedicated pedagogical response, the same premise behind the recommendation in Section 12. It differs from the present study in being a genuine classroom intervention with pre- and post-testing,

rather than a descriptive-analytical comparison, and it is exactly this kind of design, an actual before-and-after test of a contrastively informed teaching method, that Section 13 recommends as the logical next step beyond what a library-based study can establish on its own.

7.2 Studies on Reading Comprehension Difficulties:

Qrquez and Ab Rashid (2017) investigated reading comprehension difficulties among first- and second-year students at Yarmouk University in Jordan, using a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from an earlier instrument, with a reported reliability coefficient of 0.89. The results pointed to low interest and motivation for academic reading in both Arabic and English, together with specific difficulties around vocabulary and identifying a passage's main idea, and listening emerged as students' preferred language skill overall.

The agreement with the present study is partial: both identify reading comprehension as a genuine problem in its own right, and the vocabulary-related difficulty they report matches the lexical-inferencing argument in Section 10.3. The disagreement is more substantial, since their explanation leans heavily on motivation and attitude, factors the present study's contrastive framework does not directly address, and this paper has no distinct linguistic explanation to offer for the low reading interest they describe. The researcher's own reading of this gap, picked up again in Section 11, is that motivational disengagement of this kind is plausibly a downstream consequence of the same reading difficulties this paper explains linguistically, rather than an independent, competing cause, though that connection cannot be established from the present study alone.

Bensalah and Gueroudj (2020) tested the effect of cultural schemata on EFL reading comprehension among Algerian learners, using an experimental design in which one group received pre-reading activities meant to activate relevant background knowledge and a control group received no such preparation before both sat the same comprehension test on a topic requiring specific cultural familiarity. The group whose schemata had been activated significantly outperformed the control group.

This agrees closely with the present study's treatment of cultural schemata in Section 10.5, and its experimental result is used there directly as evidence that a comprehension failure can be a schema failure rather than a grammatical or lexical one. The main difference is methodological: Bensalah and Gueroudj ran a controlled experiment capable of establishing a causal link between schema activation and comprehension, something a descriptive-analytical design cannot do on its own, and this is, in the researcher's view, exactly the kind of design contrastive-reading research should aim for once a specific structural contrast, rather than a cultural one, is the variable being isolated.

Al-Qahtani (2021) investigated the order in which Arab EFL learners at three ability levels use reading strategies and whether ability level predicts that order, working with ninety-two college students at King Khalid University who were placed into ability groups using a TOEFL reading section and then surveyed on their strategy use. Higher-ability readers relied more on strategies

presupposing fluent, less effortful processing, such as guessing meaning from context, while lower-ability readers stayed more dependent on strategies tied to basic word-level decoding.

The agreement with the present study is close and is used directly in Sections 10.1 and 10.2: the strategy divide Al-Qahtani documents matches the claim that grammatical automaticity, not just vocabulary knowledge, underlies fluent reading. The difference is that Al-Qahtani measures strategy preference rather than the specific grammatical structures behind it, so the study shows that automaticity matters without identifying, as the present paper tries to, which Arabic-English contrasts are responsible for its absence. Set alongside Qrquez and Ab Rashid (2017), in the researcher's assessment, Al-Qahtani's findings sit closer to this paper's linguistic account than to a motivational one, which is itself part of the tension addressed in Section 11.

7.3 The Gap Between Grammar Research and Reading Research:

Reading these two strands side by side makes the gap from Section 2 visible in a way that reading either one alone does not. The grammar studies in Section 7.1 are almost all sentence-level: they pull individual sentences, classify the errors, and report frequency counts. The reading studies in Section 7.2 are almost all passage-level: learners get a continuous text, and comprehension is measured through recall, summary, or questions keyed to the whole passage. This isn't just a difference in scale; it's a difference in what each design can actually show. A sentence-level study can tell you a learner drops the copula; it cannot tell you whether that same drop, buried in the middle of a longer passage, makes the learner misread who a later sentence is even about. A passage-level study can tell you comprehension broke down somewhere in a text; it rarely traces that breakdown back to one nameable grammatical structure.

A handful of studies do try to bridge this gap, and where they do, like Al-Qahtani's (2021) finding that weaker readers stay dependent on decoding strategies that presuppose incomplete grammatical automaticity, the results line up with the integrated account this paper is proposing. That such bridging studies remain rare is part of the reason for writing this paper: rather than add one more sentence-level or passage-level study to an already large literature, it tries to read the two literatures against each other and pull out the connections neither was designed, on its own, to show.

8. Methodology

8.1 Research Design:

This paper uses a descriptive-analytical, library-based design, which fits a contrastive study of this kind. Rather than collecting new data from learners, it applies Lado's (1957) contrastive procedure directly to the grammatical systems of Standard English and Modern Standard Arabic, and reads the resulting points of contrast against the empirical literature reviewed in Section 7. The point of the paper is synthesis, connecting an already substantial body of separately reported findings within one contrastive frame, not new experimental data.

8.2 Data and Corpus:

Two sources of data feed the analysis. The first is the descriptive grammatical literature on English and Arabic, chiefly Catford et al.'s (1974) contrastive study and Khalil's (1999) contrastive grammar, alongside standard reference grammars of each language on its own. The second is the empirical literature reviewed in Section 7, which supplies illustrative learner errors and comprehension outcomes drawn from real Arabic-speaking learner populations across several Arab countries. Putting the two together lets every contrastive point in Section 9 be checked against whether the predicted difficulty is actually attested in learner performance.

8.3 Procedure:

The analysis follows Lado's (1957) four-step procedure: description, characterising each grammatical structure on its own terms within its own language; selection, picking out the structures most relevant to learner difficulty; comparison, setting the two descriptions side by side to see where they match and where they diverge; and prediction, stating what those divergences are likely to cost learners in practice. Each contrastive point in Section 9 is then checked, where the evidence allows, against the findings summarised in Section 7, so the predictions aren't left untested but weighed against what learners actually do.

9. A Contrastive Analysis of English and Arabic Grammar

9.1 The Verb System: Tense and Aspect:

English and Arabic build their verb systems on genuinely different principles, and this is, by a wide margin, the contrast most consistently confirmed in the empirical literature. English marks tense, where an event sits in time, largely independently of aspect, the internal shape of the event, and does both through a fairly elaborate set of auxiliaries: has written, was writing, had been writing. Arabic organises its verb system around aspect first, setting a perfective form, which presents an action as a completed whole, against an imperfective form, which presents it as ongoing or habitual, with tense often left to context rather than marked directly on the verb (Catford et al., 1974).

This predicts, and the literature confirms, particular difficulty wherever English needs a form Arabic has no direct match for. The present perfect, which has no Arabic equivalent, is a recurring source of error, as is the correct placement and use of auxiliary verbs generally (Btoosh, 2019). Aljouhani's (2019) finding, that learners score far higher on shared tenses than on English-specific ones, is direct confirmation: the simple present and simple past, which map fairly closely onto Arabic, tend to be used with reasonable accuracy, while the present perfect and the continuous and perfect-continuous forms stay unstable much longer.

The absence of a dummy auxiliary *do* in Arabic adds to the difficulty. Arabic builds negatives and questions with particles and word-order shifts rather than an auxiliary carrying no meaning of its own, so the requirement to insert *do* or *does* into an English negative or question, a purely structural

requirement, is acquired late and applied inconsistently, a pattern that shows up across Iraqi, Omani, and Yemeni learner populations alike (Betti & Bsharah, 2023; Abdelmohsen, 2022).

9.2 The Article System:

English distinguishes a definite article, the, from an indefinite one, a or an, and allows zero-article marking with plurals and non-count nouns under certain conditions. Arabic has a definite article, al-, prefixed straight onto the noun, but no indefinite article at all: indefiniteness is marked either by simply leaving off the definite prefix or, in formal registers, by a final vowel marking called tanwin, neither of which gives a learner anything article-like to transfer into English. The predictable result is a persistent, well-documented pattern of omitting the indefinite article altogether, since Arabic expresses the same meaning without inserting any comparable word (Khalil, 1999).

English article use is also governed by a cluster of interacting rules, countability, specificity, prior mention in discourse, none of which lines up with a single Arabic category, which makes the difficulty harder to shake. Article omission and substitution stay frequent even at advanced levels, a pattern documented across Saudi, Omani, and Yemeni learners alike (Al Towity, 2022; Al-Hamzi et al., 2023).

9.3 Prepositions:

Prepositions are a further site of sharp contrast, precisely because prepositional meaning in both languages is only loosely rule-governed to begin with: the preposition attached to a given verb or adjective is often a matter of convention rather than logic, so a learner can't reliably work out the right English preposition from the Arabic one used in the equivalent sentence. The two systems overlap only partially, and a single Arabic preposition often corresponds to several distinct English ones depending on context, and vice versa.

The result, confirmed across the learner-error studies above, is a persistently high rate of preposition substitution, omission, and unnecessary insertion, an error type that resists explicit rule teaching precisely because the system underlying it is only partly rule-governed. It's also one of the few error categories that stays stubbornly frequent even among learners who have otherwise reached a high level of proficiency, which fits with how idiomatic and weakly systematic English preposition use actually is.

9.4 Word Order and Sentence Structure:

Arabic allows both a verb-initial (VSO) order and a subject-initial (SVO) one, the choice carrying subtle discourse and stylistic weight, and it also allows, and in many registers prefers, nominal sentences built from a topic and a comment with no overt verb at all, the way an English speaker would say the book is useful but Arabic can say it with no equivalent of is. English requires a fixed subject-verb-object order and an overt copula in every finite sentence, whether or not the state it describes is one Arabic would leave unmarked.

Two well-documented error types follow from this: dropping the copula be in English sentences that correspond to an Arabic nominal sentence, and a tendency toward word-order flexibility in English writing that Arabic's greater tolerance for verb-initial and topic-comment structures would predict (Betti & Bsharah, 2023). Both interact with sentence length, since the longer and more complex the English sentence a learner attempts, the more the working-memory demands of building it compete with a still-incomplete grip on English word order.

9.5 Negation:

Arabic negates verbal and nominal sentences with distinct particles depending on tense and sentence type, among them la, lam, lan, and ma, each carrying its own tense and mood restrictions, while English negates finite verbs almost uniformly by inserting not after an auxiliary, reaching for the dummy auxiliary do wherever no other auxiliary is present. Because Arabic spreads negation across several particles while English concentrates it in one structural slot, Arabic-speaking learners often either drop the required do or place not in the wrong spot relative to the verb, a structural mismatch rather than a vocabulary gap.

9.6 Question Formation:

English builds yes/no questions and most wh-questions through subject-auxiliary inversion, an operation Arabic has no direct equivalent for; Arabic forms questions mainly through intonation, an initial question particle, or simply placing a wh-word without touching verb-subject order. Arabic-speaking learners accordingly tend to form English questions without the required inversion, producing what you want instead of what do you want, an error pattern also seen in learners from other first-language backgrounds, but here traceable directly to the missing inversion operation in the learners' own grammar.

9.7 Subject-Verb Agreement and Number Marking:

One more contrast, and an underdiscussed one, concerns agreement. Standard Arabic marks subject-verb agreement for person, number, and gender, and further distinguishes singular, dual, and plural across nouns, pronouns, and verbs, a three-way number distinction English simply doesn't have. Arabic agreement is also sensitive to word order in a way English isn't: a verb preceding its subject takes singular agreement no matter the subject's actual number, while a verb following its subject agrees with it fully, a rule with no English parallel at all.

This produces two distinct, easily confused error tendencies. Some learners default to invariant singular agreement regardless of subject number, plausibly tracing back to Arabic's verb-initial agreement rule; others overgeneralise plural marking onto nouns that are grammatically plural in meaning but singular in English form, or vice versa, more plausibly tied to Arabic's three-way number distinction against English's two-way one. Because these tendencies pull in opposite directions, agreement errors in learner writing can look inconsistent from one sentence to the next, which tends to hide, from a teacher unfamiliar with the underlying contrast, that a single systematic cause sits behind both.

10. From Grammar to Comprehension: A Contrastive View of Reading

10.1 Orthographic and Script-Level Transfer:

Before an Arabic-speaking learner can process the grammar of an English sentence, they have to decode a script that differs from Arabic in almost every visual respect: English runs left to right in a Roman alphabet with obligatory vowel letters, while Arabic runs right to left in a consonantal script where short vowels, in most everyday text, go unmarked and have to be supplied from context. Word recognition, the most basic piece of reading, can't simply transfer from Arabic to English on this basis; it has to be rebuilt almost from scratch, even for learners who are already highly literate in their first language.

The consequence, documented in studies of Arab EFL reading, is that lower-proficiency readers stay dependent, longer than learners of typologically closer languages, on slow, letter-by-letter decoding, which leaves fewer cognitive resources for the higher-level work of building meaning out of a sentence or paragraph (Al-Qahtani, 2021). Only once word recognition becomes automatic does a reader have spare capacity left over for grammatical structure and overall meaning, exactly the pattern Al-Qahtani (2021) finds when comparing higher- and lower-ability Arab EFL readers.

10.2 Syntactic Parsing and Sentence Processing:

Once a word is recognised, a reader has to fit it into the syntactic structure of its sentence, and this is where the grammatical contrasts from Section 9 come back in directly. A reader whose internalised grammar still leans, even partly, on Arabic-style verb-initial or topic-comment structures will parse an English sentence more slowly and less reliably than one whose grammar has fully settled on the fixed English subject-verb-object order, simply because the automatic structural expectations a native speaker relies on aren't fully there yet (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

The tense-aspect contrast from Section 9.1 bears on reading just as directly: a reader who can't reliably tell a present perfect from a simple past will misjudge how events line up across a passage, an error invisible at the single-sentence level but capable of distorting comprehension of an entire narrative or argument. Several of the grammatical difficulties catalogued in Section 9 as production errors, in other words, resurface in reading as comprehension errors, which is the paper's central point: the two problems share one linguistic source.

10.3 Lexical Inferencing and False Cognates:

A further comprehension difficulty comes from how little the Arabic and English lexicons overlap, leaving Arabic-speaking readers with almost no cognate vocabulary to fall back on when they hit an unfamiliar English word, unlike readers of a Romance or Germanic language, who can often guess at meaning from resemblance to a word they already know. Arabic-speaking readers have no comparable shortcut and have to rely instead on contextual inferencing, a strategy that itself depends on the syntactic parsing ability discussed above (Qrquez & Ab Rashid, 2017).

10.4 Discourse-Level Cohesion:

Understanding anything longer than a single sentence means tracking how sentences connect, through pronoun reference, conjunctions, and other cohesive devices, into a coherent whole, and Arabic and English differ here too. Formal Arabic prose tolerates, even favours, a high frequency of the coordinating conjunction *wa*, roughly and, linking clauses that an English writer would more often split into separate sentences or connect with a more specific conjunction signalling cause, contrast, or sequence.

A reader whose sense of cohesion has been shaped by Arabic discourse habits may, reading an English text, either supply a connection between two sentences the writer never intended, or miss the more specific logical relationship, contrast or causation rather than plain addition, that an English writer has signalled through a conjunction with no equally general Arabic counterpart. This kind of comprehension difficulty operates above the sentence entirely, which is exactly why it's invisible to any test that only checks grammar and reading through isolated sentences, and it's a good argument for reading assessment in Arab English departments to lean more heavily on extended, multi-paragraph passages than it currently does.

10.5 Cultural Schemata and Background Knowledge:

Beyond the purely linguistic level, comprehension depends on a reader actually having the cultural and content schemata a text assumes. Bensalah and Gueroudj's (2020) finding, that Arab EFL learners given pre-reading activities to activate background knowledge outperformed a control group with no such activation, shows that a good deal of what looks, on the surface, like a linguistic comprehension failure is really a schema-activation failure: the reader can recognise every word and parse every sentence correctly and still fail to build a coherent reading of the text, simply because the cultural framework it assumes was never available to draw on.

This has a clear practical implication. A learner who fails a comprehension question after a passage about an unfamiliar Western institution or custom may not be missing any grammar or vocabulary at all; the relevant schema may simply never have been built. Telling this kind of failure apart from the grammatically rooted ones discussed above is one of the more useful distinctions this paper has to offer a classroom teacher, since the two call for entirely different remedies.

11. Discussion: The Researcher's Reflection

Looking at the evidence from Sections 9 and 10 together, what stands out is not the sheer number of differences between Arabic and English but how tightly they cluster around a small set of structural properties: tense and aspect marked through auxiliaries rather than aspectual verb stems, an indefinite article Arabic simply doesn't have, an English copula that's always obligatory, and a fixed word order where Arabic allows real flexibility. Nearly every recurring error in Section 7.1, and nearly every reading obstacle in Section 7.2, traces back to one of these four or five contrasts. That clustering is, to my mind, the paper's most useful finding: the sprawling catalogue of learner errors reported across

dozens of separate studies isn't actually sprawling at all. A remarkably compact set of causes is generating most of it.

A second point concerns the split between grammar instruction and reading instruction discussed in Section 2. If a learner's trouble with the present perfect and the same learner's trouble sequencing events in a reading passage are two faces of one gap in their grammatical representation, then treating them separately, a grammar exercise here, a reading exercise there, addresses the symptom twice without ever touching the shared cause. Instruction organised around the contrastive points in Section 9, rather than around the conventional grammar/reading split, would likely prove more efficient, though that remains a hypothesis for classroom-based testing rather than something this library-based study can establish on its own.

A third point is about how long these difficulties last. The literature in Section 7.1 draws mostly on undergraduate and foundation-level learners, but the same handful of contrastive difficulties, tense-aspect instability, article omission, preposition substitution, keep showing up well past that stage, in the writing of students who have already had years of English-medium study. That points to something other than a phase learners simply pass through: these look more like stable interlanguage features that don't respond to the kind of incidental correction ordinary continued exposure to English is supposed to provide. If that's right, it strengthens rather than weakens the case, made in Section 12, for explicit, contrastively informed instruction, since these particular difficulties don't seem likely to resolve on their own.

A fourth and last point is about the limits of this whole account. Not every learner error is interlingual, and Arabic transfer clearly doesn't explain the entire range of difficulty Arab EFL learners face with English. Motivation, exposure, instructional quality, and sheer practice all matter too, and some of the studies in Section 7.2, Qrquez and Ab Rashid (2017) among them, point squarely at motivational and attitudinal factors that sit outside anything contrastive analysis can capture. The claim here is more modest: the contrastive dimension has been comparatively neglected relative to how much it actually explains, and giving it a more central place in both research and teaching is worth the effort.

12. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

The English tense-aspect system should be introduced explicitly against the Arabic perfective/imperfective distinction rather than presented tense by tense as isolated forms to memorise, since learners pick up shared categories with relative ease and struggle specifically, and predictably, with categories Arabic has no counterpart for (Aljouhani, 2019).

Article use should be taught as a discourse-level matter governed by countability, specificity, and prior mention, not as a single memorisable rule, since the real source of difficulty is the total absence of an indefinite-article category in Arabic rather than any confusion between two existing ones.

Given how idiomatic and weakly rule-governed English prepositional usage actually is, instruction should lean on extensive input and lexical chunking, teaching common verb-plus-preposition and

adjective-plus-preposition combinations as fixed units, rather than on abstract explanations of preposition meaning that the evidence suggests won't transfer reliably into accurate use.

Most centrally, grammar and reading instruction should stop being taught apart. Reading passages should be chosen, at least in part, for their density of the structures flagged in Section 9 as points of contrastive difficulty, and comprehension questions should draw learners' attention directly to how interpreting a passage depends on correctly processing those structures, so that grammar practice and reading practice reinforce one underlying competence instead of developing as two uncoordinated skills.

Given the schema-related findings in Section 10.5, reading tasks should routinely open with brief activities designed to activate or supply relevant background knowledge, especially where a text assumes cultural or institutional knowledge Arabic-speaking learners can't be expected to already have, so a genuine schema gap doesn't get mistaken for, and treated as, a grammatical or lexical one.

Assessment should also catch up with the discourse-level cohesion difficulties discussed in Section 10.4. Grammar tests built entirely from isolated sentences can't detect a learner's trouble with cohesive devices operating across sentence boundaries, and reading tests built from very short passages underestimate the comprehension difficulties that only emerge once a learner has to track a chain of reference or a logical relationship across several sentences. Longer, more discourse-rich passages, paired with questions that specifically probe pronoun reference and connector meaning, would give teachers and learners a far more accurate picture of where the real difficulty lies.

Finally, teacher training in Arabic-medium English departments would benefit from an explicit contrastive-linguistics component. Several studies in Section 7.1, Abdelmohsen (2022) among them, found teachers themselves frequently blaming contrastively motivated errors on carelessness or low effort. A teacher who knows the specific contrasts catalogued in Section 9 is better placed to recognise a systematic, predictable error for what it is, and to respond with targeted instruction rather than generic correction, or worse, a judgement about the learner's diligence the error simply doesn't warrant.

13. Recommendations for Further Research

The library-based design of this paper has an obvious limitation: its conclusions rest on synthesising existing studies rather than on new data collected to test the integrated grammar-reading account it proposes. A useful next step would be a single study measuring both grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension in the same learner sample, targeting the contrastive points identified in Section 9, to test directly whether a learner struggling with, say, the present perfect or the article system also shows a correspondingly specific comprehension difficulty in passages that lean on that same structure.

Dialectal variation is a second avenue. Because this paper restricts itself to Modern Standard Arabic, it can't speak to how a learner's own spoken dialect, which typically diverges from Standard Arabic in its own verb morphology and word order, might layer an additional contrast on top of the one

described here. Since most Arabic-speaking learners acquire their dialect well before they acquire Modern Standard Arabic in school, a fuller account would need to weigh both varieties at once. A third avenue is the pedagogical recommendations in Section 12 themselves, which follow from the contrastive analysis but haven't been tested experimentally; a classroom-based comparison of an integrated, contrastively informed teaching approach against the conventional separated one would be the most direct test of this paper's central practical claim.

14. Conclusion

This paper set out to trace the linguistic sources of the grammatical and reading comprehension difficulties so widely reported among Arabic-speaking learners of English, and to argue that these two categories of difficulty, usually studied and taught apart, are better understood as one underlying gap between Arabic and English wearing two different faces. The contrastive analysis in Section 9 identified tense and aspect, the article system, prepositions, word order, negation, and question formation as the main sites of contrast, and Section 10 followed each of these forward into the specific reading difficulties it produces, from slower word recognition through disrupted parsing to misjudged event sequencing. The empirical literature reviewed in Section 7 backed this account up with real consistency across learner populations from several different Arab countries.

There's a broader point here too about how contrastive analysis should be used in second-language research now. As a standalone predictive tool, capable of listing every error a learner will ever make, it was rightly abandoned decades ago. Used instead as one lens among several, checked continually against the kind of empirical evidence surveyed in Section 7, it still does real work: it turns what would otherwise be a long, shapeless list of individual learner errors into a handful of coherent, explainable categories. That more modest, evidence-checked use of contrastive analysis is what this paper has tried to model, and it should travel well beyond Arabic and English.

None of this means contrastive difference is the whole explanation, or that this paper has covered every relevant contrast; pronunciation and discourse-level phenomena would repay similar treatment elsewhere. What it does mean is that the contrastive dimension deserves a more central place than it currently holds in both research and classroom practice in Arab English departments, and that teaching grammar and reading together, with the contrastive picture in view, will likely serve learners better than the divided approach still standard today.

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