

An Analysis of Grammatical Ambiguities of English through Translation Tactics for the Improvement of Saudi Female Students' Awareness at Al-Baha University

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Abstract

The study attempted to analyze the grammatical ambiguities of English sentences for the improvement of awareness of Saudi students of English in Al-Baha University. Data were collected through the means of translation which is assumed to form an effective tactic. Paper-pencil questionnaires were also distributed to students to give their impressions about grammatical ambiguities. Data analysis was intended to give descriptive statistics including percentage score and mean scores along with the computation of coefficient-correlation. The study revealed that Saudi female students varied in their awareness of grammatical ambiguities of English sentences. Results also revealed that translation is an effective tool to determine their trouble spots. There were no statistically significant differences between their translation scores according to their questionnaire responses.

Keywords: grammatical ambiguities, awareness, translation, Saudi female students, trouble spots.

INTRODUCTION

Language teachers and applied-linguists in Saudi Arabia arguably pay much attention to the process of learning English among Saudi students because of the current global position of the English language. However, Saudi students like other foreign language learners of English encounter difficulties in learning English. Al-Shurafa (2008) and As-Safi (2011) explained that the learning of English arguably forms a complicated area for these students. Al-Rawi (2012) and Akan (2014) clarified that this is probably due to the syntactic differences that exist between English and Arabic. Specifically, Saudi students arguably find some ambiguity learning English grammar. Ambiguity problems occur when the students try to write in English or translate Arabic text into English. In this regard, Elyas and Picard (2010) and Karoly (2014) pointed out that it is possible to detect many ambiguous sentences written by Saudi students of English whenever, you correct their exercises, home works, diaries and so on. Alamoudi (2017) reported ambiguity problems resulting from the little knowledge of English syntax of Saudi students of English. Translation probably represents a rich task where ambiguity outcome of a second language (L2) occur. It shows how learners have mastered the syntactic rules of the target language, their grammatical ability in producing a well-written L2 text. Linguists and those who are interested in language teaching and learning describe vagueness or uncertainty taking place due to syntax as 'ambiguity'. This study attempts to analyze the performance of Saudi EFL female learners in English of sentence via translation.

It focuses on how the students manage grammatically ambiguous sentences of English. That is, the study aim to base our analysis of ambiguous English sentences on translation tactics.

Statement of the Problem

This study addresses grammatical ambiguities that Saudi female students face structural performance such as writing English.. This attempts to analyze the extent to which these students are aware of the linguistic inability to decide on the correct English linguistic forms due to the differences between the English and Arabic syntax. These differences occur at the level of various syntactic structures such as noun phrase (NP), verb phrase (VP) or prepositional phrase (PP). The inability of tolerating such syntactic differences can result into problems on the performance of Saudi EFL learners' writing of English. The problem might be clearer when the students carry out translation assignments of English written discourse into their mother tongue (e.g. Al-Shurafa, 2008, Ghazala, 2008, As-Safi, 2011, Akan, 2014, and Karoly, 2014). This study attempted to examine grammatical ambiguities of English sentences that Saudi female students frequently face in English written discourse through translation method. The topic of the study covered grammatical ambiguities of the target language students covering written formal English sentences.

Research Questions

The study tried to provide answers for the following questions:

1. How does the performance in English grammar differ among Saudi EFL female learners? (This question will be measured based on participants' performance in the translation text).
2. Is translation procedure effective in figuring out ambiguity of English sentences?

Hypothesis

The present study tested the following hypothesis:

- 1-Translation has positive effective figuring out grammatical ambiguities of English Saudi students.

Purpose of the Study

This study attempted to analyze grammatical ambiguities which Saudi EFL undergraduates experience in managing English written discourse. It specifically aimed to determine how grammatical ambiguities occurring due to structural differences affect the performance of Saudi EFL female students. Moreover, the study aimed to find insight into the causes behind these problems and to suggest solutions eliminating the structural problems of Saudi EFL female students. Most importantly, the study aimed to examine how translation represents an effective tool of ambiguity interpretation.

Significance of the Study

The study attempted to enhance the students' linguistic tactics as well as their skills in managing grammatical ambiguity of English language. The study was designed to help Saudi EFL female students improve their linguistic competence. Consequently, they could deal with ambiguous grammar of English at Al-Baha University, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Moreover, the study has advantaged for those who are interested in the learning and teaching problems in other domains of education; undergraduate, secondary school scales.

This study also introduces the English non-native variety of Saudi English and depicts some of its syntactic aspects. The study, therefore, can serve the objectives of both Al-Baha University and the Saudi government to support the learning of English as an indispensable international language nowadays.

Limitations

The study was limited to Saudi female EFL undergraduates at the College of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Al-Baha University. However, its expected findings could also be useful to other Saudi universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Elmawati (2013) indicated that ambiguity often appears in communication, particularly in newspapers headlines. In this context, Elmawati examined the ambiguity of sentence structures of newspapers headlines. Data collection relied on online corpus elicited from the website of the Bucknell University, especially those of the Department of Languages & Linguistics. The data collected through note-taking and observation technique. For the purpose of data analysis, Elmawati employed the X-Bar theory where syntactic structures are explained based on the heads. Elmawati found that structural ambiguity can be classified into three different types, namely differences related to syntactic categories, adjunct placement particularly prepositional phrases, and the sub-categorization of verbs. Elmawati clarified that structural ambiguity necessarily occurs in language and communication at the oral or written levels. Structural ambiguity leads to vague communication which affects clearness of communication. Thus, it leads to miscommunication and misunderstanding between the writer and the reader. Various newspapers rely on using ambiguous headlines by employing vague and multiple-meaning lexis. The headlines ambiguity differs from that of the oral speech because it lacks the phonological elements of pitch, tone, and stress which provide a sort of clarity to the speech.

Al-Raba'a (2013) investigated the influence of using translation as a means of contact on the passive translation due to the contrast between English and Arabic. Al-Raba'a assumed that there is a model of using the propositional phrase 'by' in association with the doer in the passive structure of Arabic. The use of such model resulted in replication of English abstract features. The researcher compared the translation of five English passive sentences into Arabic between two groups of participants. The first group comprises Arabic-English bilinguals and the second group includes Arabic monolinguals. Both groups employed the same strategies of translation. However, they varied in the kinds of the Arabic passive models which they employed. In other words, the group of bilingual depended on using the Arabic verbal sentences in doing the translation compared to the monolingual group that relied on using the nominal sentences in Arabic. The finding indicated that the monolingual group tended to make compromises between the English and Arabic languages by being more dependent on the Arabic language rules in order to make the translation task easier. Al-Raba'a found that EFL learners are more indulged in the process of replication as compared to other bilinguals.

Mizher (2016) discussed the translation of English passive sentences into Arabic. Mizher analyzed the translation strategies adopted by EFL in fulfilling a translation task. The

participants were 6 Jordanian undergraduates taking the course of general translation. The participants sat for a translation test in which they were required to translate five English passive sentences into Arabic. The findings showed that the participants tended to employ exact translation strategies such as topicalization and activization in the case of translating agentive English passive voice sentences. On the other hand, they employed lexicalization and periphrastic structure in translating the agentless passive sentences. These strategies are compatible with the strategies of clause and structures changes. Mizher emphasized that translation studies should rely on contrastive analysis in order to determine the divergences and convergences between the source and target languages. As such, contrastive analysis can facilitate the target language learning process by using the means of translation.

Alamoudi (2017) investigated the structural ambiguity of attaching the prepositional phrase in Saudi newspapers Arabic headlines. Data were elicited by using a corpus of Saudi newspapers headlines. Data analysis revealed the complexity of Arabic language which depends on employing complex structure. Alamoudi relied on the analysis of the attachment of prepositional phrases because it is frequently viewed as the main source behind the occurrence of syntactic ambiguity in different Saudi newspapers. Alamoudi clarified that the Saudi newspapers tended to form ambiguous headlines as a way of attracting readers, the ambiguous headlines often arise the readers' confusion and curiosity. The findings indicated that the newspapers headlines prefer to rely on attaching the noun phrase rather than the verb phrase. They also prefer to attach the first noun phrase more than the second noun phrase. Alamoudi noted that structural ambiguity resulted from prepositional phrases requires further investigation because it has seldom been examined.

Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017) discussed different types of perceptions in which Saudi undergraduates perceive the use of Google translation. Google translation was selected as a research topic for this study due to its popularity as a translation engine which many users rely on for various types of translation. Data were collected through a perception questionnaire distributed to 92 Saudi EFL undergraduates are majoring in English and enrolled in the Department of English at Aljouf University. The findings showed that the majority of participants made use of Google translation for various purposes such as searching for vocabulary, fulfilling reading and writing tasks and doing translation. However, translation was the least among different purposes for which Google translation was used by the participants. The participants positively perceived Google translation due to its convenient usage and benefits in facilitating the learning of English to Saudi EFL learners. On the other hand, the participants admitted that reliance on Google translation had negatively affected their vocabulary retention ability.

METHOD

Theoretically, the present study is based on (1) the concept of grammatical ambiguity (2) previous studies about how syntactic differences between English and Arabic influence ambiguity stymieing intelligible interpretation and (3) the researcher also discusses translation as an effective method for discovering grammatical ambiguities (Paul, 2009; Mahboob and Tariq, 2014; Sukkhwan and Sripetpun, 2014; andRose, 2015).

The Sampling

The study sample comprised Saudi female EFL undergraduates at the College of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Al-Baha University. The researcher adopted the 'Convenience or Captive audience' sampling which is one of the non-probability samplings. It means that the researcher decided to a certain class to carry out her research. In this concern, the researcher decided to take the whole class of 30 students at the above-mentioned college for the purpose of data collection. Choice in this way is intended to target a uniform sample with the same demographic and educational features. This sampling procedure can be easily conducted and allows the collection of a large data.

Methods of data collection

The researcher adopts a mixed method conducting the study. The mixed method encompasses quantitative (translation test) (Tables 1 &2) and qualitative (questionnaire) (Table 3).

The purpose behind the use of translation is that it enables us to trace ambiguity occurrence or absence after translation. We collect data via translation because it gives us insight into the nature of grammatical ambiguity. Either the interpretation is correct and therefore no ambiguity is absent or students give different interpretations (readings) and this case suggests that ambiguity is present.

Table 1: Students' Copy

No	English Sentence	Translation into Arabic
1	They are canning peas.	
2	Social legislation is the way to better living.	
3	We observed another sail.	
4	They stamped upstairs. The children ran outside.	
5	I'm not going home then.	
6	The fort was simply demolished.	
7	new patient counselor	
8	double job pay	
9	new patient counselor	
10	student hero	
11	Radi and Sally got married	
12	He said I saw her last year	
13	The man killed the lady with the gun	

14	I saw the dog crossing the road	
15	All of you won't attend the class	
16	I did not park the car because he left	
17	The teacher of my little sister who stayed there travelled abroad	
18	The mother of my friend who rented the house was promoted	
19	She loves her cat more than her brother	
20	I know a more famous actor than Jack	

Table 2: Raters' Copy

No	Sentence	Ambiguity potential
1	They are canning peas.	Compound noun or verb + object noun
2	Social legislation is the way to better living.	Verb or adjective
3	We observed another sail.	Function noun or determiner
4	They stamped upstairs.	Adverb of place or of direction
5	I'm not going home then.	Then" - adverb of time or of result
6	The fort was simply demolished.	"Simply" adverb or qualifier
7	new patient counselor	Adjective + noun -f- noun head
8	double job pay	Predeterminer -\ - noun -f noun head
9	new patient counsellor	Adjective + noun -f- noun head
10	student hero	Noun -f- noun head
11	Radi and Sally got married	Coordinated clauses or noun phrases
12	He said I saw her last year	Adverbial phrases or clauses
13	The man killed the lady with the gun	Prepositional phrases that could be related to the noun or the verb
14	I saw the dog crossing the road	Non finite clause whose subject is unclear
15	All of you won't attend the class	Negative sentences
16	I did not park the car because he left	Negative sentences

17	The teacher of my little sister who stayed there travelled abroad	Relative clauses
18	The mother of my friend who rented the house was promoted	Relative clauses
19	She loves her cat more than her brother	Ellipsis in the second clause
20	I know a more famous actor than Jack	Ellipsis in the second clause

Paper pencil Questionnaires

Firstly, participants were asked to fill up a background questionnaire about their personal data, their efforts of learning English and how often they use English (Appendix A). The background questionnaire aimed to collect information that can help analysis the subjects' responses to the paper pencil questionnaire and their performance in the translation test. The collected information includes their knowledge of other foreign languages and their cultures; their practice of English with the native speakers; their usage of English like listening to TV or radio programs and watching English films; how long they have been studying English and whether they have stayed in an English-speaking country and for how long. It covers factors that can affect subjects' performance in English. There are five responses: 5= always, 4= often, 3= sometimes, 2=rarely, 1=never. Subjects should select the number which represents their best response. It is divided into four sections, namely (A) interests, (B) Habits of studying English, (C) Grammatical ambiguity problems and (D) effects of practice.

Table 3: Paper-Pencil Questionnaire

questionnaire item	score				
A. Interest	5	4	3	2	1
1. I have a good command of English language					
2. I understand English grammar well					
3. I do not understand English grammar					
4. English grammar is difficult					
5. If you enjoy reading something in English that takes a while to figure out completely.					
6.					
C. Grammatical ambiguity problems					
1. Do you find English sentences ambiguous?					
2. how often do find English sentences ambiguous?					
3. How often do you find English sentences clear?					
4. Does grammar form the main cause behind ambiguity?					
5. If differences between English and Arabic word order is a factor					
D. Effect of practice					
1. When I write English composition, I can't express my ideas correctly					

2. I can't differentiate between definite and indefinite articles.					
3. It bothers me that I can't use English prepositions properly.					
4. I am always confuse personal relative clauses					
5. I don't observe subject-verb agreement when I write English.					
D. Strategies for avoiding grmaatical ambiguities					
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					

Testing procedure

Data were collected in two different sessions with each session lasting for one and a half hours. In the first session, participants were asked to translate 20 ambiguous context sentences from English into Arabic. In the second session which was held separately, participants were asked to respond to the paper pencil questionnaires. In this regard, participants were instructed to make a tick to one of the five options representing well their answer. The questionnaire items are translated into Arabic to facilitate the participants' full understanding of the questionnaire's items.

Data analysis

Analysis bases on the type of data obtained qualitative (descriptive-analytical) or quantitative. Qualitative description will include:

1. Percentage of each possible interpretation of the 20 ambiguous sentences (Al- Khawalda and Al-Saidat, (2012; and Nuhiua and Ejupia, 2015).
2. Percentage of the subjects' responses to the paper pencil questionnaires' items.
3. Quantitative analysis was conducted to state that whether there are statistically significant relationships between participants' translation scores and their responses to the paper pencil questionnaires' items. For this purpose, the researcher will use the T-Test.

Overall results

This section presents all the results of the study including both tests and questionnaires.

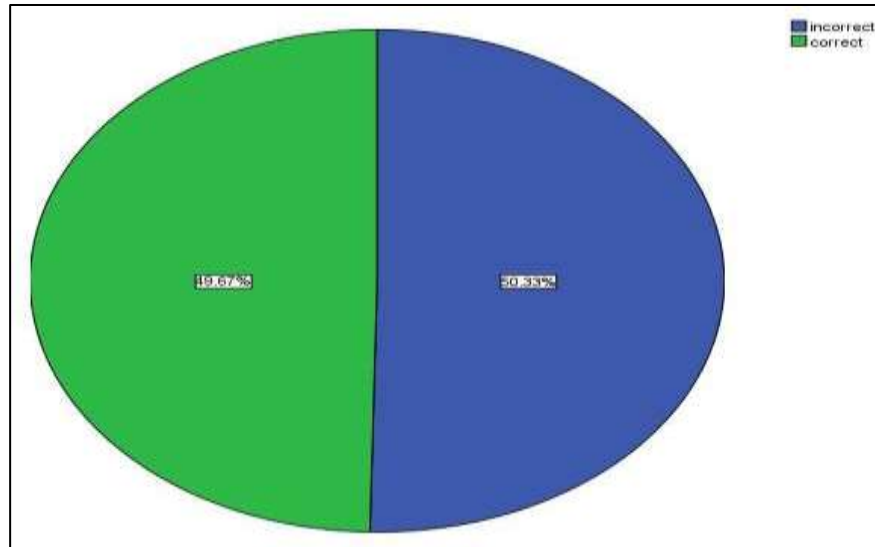


Figure 1 Overall percentage (total mean) of 30 Saudi female students interpreting 20 ambiguous English via translation Figure 1 shows the totals mean of correctly interpreted English

Sentences are 49.67, while the total mean of incorrectly interpreted sentences is 50.33. The results suggest that students found that around 50% of the English sentences difficult to interpret. Discussion of the results will take place in the next section.

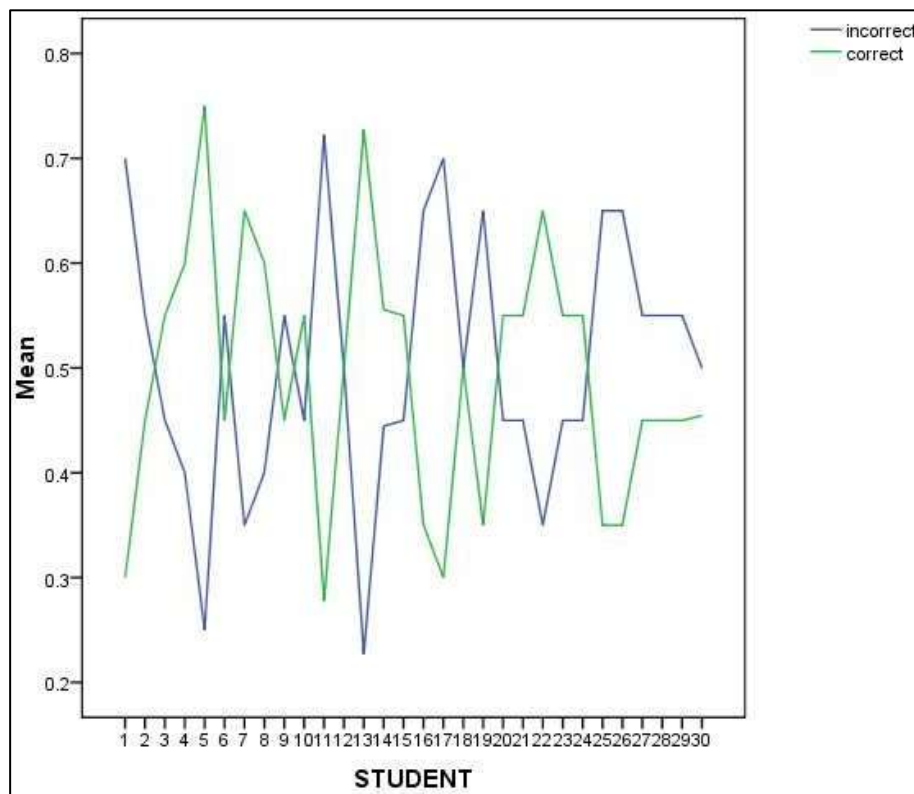


Figure (2) Individual percentage (total mean) of 30 Saudi female students interpreting 20 ambiguous English via translation

Figure 2 provides more detail about the scores of 30 Saudi female students regarding the interpretation of the English sentences. The figure reveals some parallel pattern of performance. In comparison to standard interpretations of the same list of sentences our students provides nearly 50% of the sentences are wrongly interpreted.

Table 4 Incorrect interpretation of 20 English sentence list by 30 Saudi female students

no	A	B	C
	Sentences	Frequency of ambiguity	Explanation of ambiguity
1	All of you won't attend the class	19	Negative sentences
2	He said I saw her last year	18	Adverbial phrases or clauses
3	I did not park the car because he left	12	Negative sentences
4	I know a more famous actor than Jack	17	Ellipsis in the second clause
5	I saw the dog crossing the road	6	Non finite clause whose subject is unclear
6	I'm not going home <u>then</u> .	17	adverb of time or of result
7	Radi and Sally got married	11	Coordinated clauses or noun phrases
8	She loves her cat more than her better than her brother	7	Ellipsis in the second clause
9	Social legislation is the way to better living.	20	verb or noun
10	The fort was <u>simply</u> demolished.	16	adverb or qualifier
11	The man killed the lady with the gun	14	Prepositional phrases that could be related to the noun or the verb
12	The mother of my friend who rented the house was promoted	19	Relative clauses

no	A	B	C
	Sentences	Frequency of ambiguity	Explanation of ambiguity
1	All of you won't attend the class	19	Negative sentences
2	He said I saw her last year	18	Adverbial phrases or clauses
3	I did not park the car because he left	12	Negative sentences

4	I know a more famous actor than Jack	17	Ellipsis in the second clause
5	I saw the dog crossing the road	6	Non finite clause whose subject is unclear
6	I'm not going home <u>then</u> .	17	adverb of time or of result
7	Radi and Sally got married	11	Coordinated clauses or noun phrases
8	She loves her cat more than her better than her brother	7	Ellipsis in the second clause
9	Social legislation is the way to better living.	20	verb or noun
10	The fort was <u>simply</u> demolished.	16	adverb or qualifier
11	The man killed the lady with the gun	14	Prepositional phrases that could be related to the noun or the verb
12	The mother of my friend who rented the house was promoted	19	Relative clauses

Table 4 above provides number of students who fail figure out the correct interpretation of test of English sentences list.

It also gives the potential causes of grammatical ambiguities proposed. Table (4) suggests that the most difficult sentences to interpret including; 1.2.4.6, 9, 12, 14, 18, 15, 20. and 17. Interestingly, longer or complex sentences are also mistaken (see table for more detail).

The Computation of correlation coefficient

Table 5: Correlations

		correct	incorrect
correct	Pearson Correlation	1	-.990**
incorrect	Pearson Correlation	-.990**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level(2-tailed).

Computation of correlation coefficient reveals statistically a negative correlation where p-value = -.990 (0.01). The means with respect to correct and incorrect performance of the students, there is always an increase in correct scores is associated with a decrease in incorrect scores of the student. Interestingly, these results suggest a sense of balance between the two scores.

Hypotheses testing

We accept the directional Hypotheses “Translation has positive effective figuring out grammatical ambiguities of English Saudi students.” This is because the computation of correlation coefficient reveals statistically a negative correlation where p-value = -.990 (0.01).

The interpretation of this relation suggests that students make an incorrect response whenever, they make correct response.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

On the light of the results presented above sentences including determiner and preposition proved to be difficult to interpret. Moreover, misunderstanding of English word order possibly forms a major cause behind these grammatical ambiguity problems. Saudi female students find ambiguous English sentences difficult to interpret probably because they do not fully understand complex English sentences and because they interpret the English sentences in grammatical conceptual representatives of their L1 (Khawalda and Al-Saidat 2012). The results also suggest that the interpretation of English sentences via translation is robust idea that place learners closer to the problems. The results indicate that Saudi female students have problems when interpreting the ambiguous sentences. These problems are visible due to the lack of awareness of the target language syntactic rules. The problems of Saudi female students in relation to comprehending L2 syntactic rule apparently exist in the following rules: That is, in relation to relative clauses; the majority of Saudi female students failed to correctly interpret the use of the relative clause 'who' in sentence no.13. They could not figure out whether the relative clause 'who' in that sentence is related to the subject noun or the object noun. Similarly, the adverb of place or direction: most respondents failed to correctly interpret the adverb 'upstairs' whether it indicates place or direction (See sentence 15). Moreover, most respondents could not comprehend whether the negation in sentence 1 includes all students or some of them. Adverbial phrases or clauses as in sentence 2 where most of Saudi female respondents could not distinguish whether the adverbial phrase 'last year' is related to the main verb 'said' or the second verb 'saw'. Compound noun or verb + object noun: the majority of Saudi female respondents was unable to figure out whether 'canning' in sentence 14 is a verb or should be interpreted as a compound noun 'canning peas'. The findings are similar to those reported by Elmawati (2013), Al-Raba'a (2013), Mizher (2016), and Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017).

As to the influence of questionnaire's responses on the Saudi female students' scores in the translation test, responses to the questionnaire do not show significant difference in the translation test scores of Saudi female students. This finding supports the third null hypothesis that the performance of Saudi female students in interpreting ambiguous sentences does not differ in terms of their interest, grammatical ambiguity, strategies for avoiding grammatical ambiguity, and interpretation of grammatical ambiguity. However, Saudi female students have high interest in learning English grammar. This is evident in their mean scores of items reflecting interest. They have high mean scores the first two items reflecting positive interest while having low mean scores in the third and fourth items concerning difficulty of English grammar.

This result can be positively exploited in developing the grammatical competence of Saudi female students as they positively view the learning of English grammar. Responses of Saudi female students to the questionnaire items of grammatical ambiguity reveal two reasons that causing ambiguity: (1) grammar and (2) differences between English and Arabic word order. The second reason has higher mean score (3.5) than the first one (2.5) This finding again affirms the need for intensive translation instruction that can help Saudi female students reduce the rate of ambiguity which they encounter while interpreting English sentences.

Recommendations

Further studies can be done at different population like the Saudi male students and can be replicable to Saudi students at different educational stages like secondary schools.

- The role of pragmatic context can be examined figuring out grammatical ambiguity.
- The present study can be replicable by testing ambiguous sentences based on lexical ambiguity instead of the syntactic ambiguity investigated in the current study.
- Awareness of ambiguous sentences by Saudi students can be investigated on the basis of other social and psychological variables. These variables include social class, attitude, motivation, learning styles, personality, and self-esteem.

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