

Libyan EFL Learners' Awareness of the Difference between Predicative and Attributive Adjectives

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Abstract:

Learning the target language grammar is an important step in the language learning process. In English grammar, the role of adjectives is to describe and modify nouns. This study investigates whether Libyan learners of English as a foreign language at Misurata University are aware of the different positions of adjectives in English sentences. This is based on the fact that English adjectives are classified into two main types: central adjectives which can appear before or after the noun they modify and peripheral adjectives which can appear in just one position either before nouns they modify (attributive), or after nouns (predicative). The study concentrates on the second type of adjectives which can only appear either in attributive or in predicative positions. The research instrument used with the 43 students who participated in this study was a grammaticality judgment (GJ) task and a multiple-choice test. The results showed that Libyan EFL learners were not fully aware of the difference between attributive and predicative adjectives as a result of positive evidence-only instructions given in their grammar classes.

Keywords: attributive adjectives, predicative adjectives, Libyan EFL learners, GJ tasks, positive evidence in grammar.

اختبار مدى إدراك الطلبة الليبيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية لفرق بين الصفات الإنجليزية التي يجب أن تسبق الاسم والصفات التي يجب أن تلحقه

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المخلص:

يعد تعلم القواعد خطوة مهمة في عملية تعلم اللغة. في قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية، يتمثل دور الصفات في وصف الأسماء وتعديلها. تبحث هذه الدراسة فيما إذا كان المتعلمون الليبيون للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة مصراتة على دراية بالمواقع المختلفة للصفات في الجمل الإنجليزية. يعتمد هذا على حقيقة أن الصفات الإنجليزية تصنف إلى نوعين رئيسيين: الصفات المركزية التي يمكن أن تظهر قبل أو بعد الاسم الذي تصفه والصفات المحيطية التي يمكن أن تظهر في موضع واحد فقط إما قبل الأسماء التي تصفها (السابقة)، أو بعد الأسماء (اللاحقة).

تركز هذه الدراسة على النوع الثاني من الصفات التي لا يمكن أن تظهر إلا في المواضع المنسوبة أو في المواضع الإسنادية. كانت أداة البحث المستخدمة مع 43 طالبا شاركوا في هذه الدراسة هي اختبارات الحكم النحوي واختبار الاختيار من متعدد. أظهرت النتائج أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الليبيين المشاركين فيها لم يكونوا على دراية كاملة بالفرق بين الصفات السابقة واللاحقة نتيجة لتلقيهم شروحات قائمة على الأدلة الإيجابية فقط في فصول القواعد الخاصة بهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصفات السابقة، الصفات اللاحقة، الطلبة الليبيون الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية، اختبارات الحكم النحوي، الأدلة الإيجابية في القواعد.

1. Introduction

Ebaid (2018:1) explains that “Adjectives are integral elements in linguistic structures whose main function is to identify, describe and modify nouns or pronouns”. Adjectives are one of the largest word classes in the

English language as they are possessors of different abilities and carries of diverse meanings, as stated by Alvarez, Garcia, and Spiegel Fandino (2015:59) who define the adjectives as “a syntactically distinct class of words whose most characteristic function is to modify nouns”. They explain that adjectives act as a head of the adjective phrase and that the syntactic role of adjectives in adjective phrases is attributive and predicative. This syntactic role of adjectives is explained by Huddleston (1998: 30) who says that “adjectives function as a head in AdjP [Adjective Phrase] structure. The two main functions of Adjective phrases are predicative in VP [Verb Phrase] structure [predicative function], and pre-head modifiers in NP [Noun Phrase] structure [the attributive use]”.

Abdul Munim (2012:7) explains that “In grammatical descriptions, an attributive is a term used to refer to the role of "adjective" and "noun" when they occur as modifiers of the head of a noun phrase for example; *red* has an attributive function in "The *red* chair ", this term is different from the predicative function of these words as in "The chair is *red*". Bueno (2016:11) explains that predicative adjectives are always preceded by a linking verb like to be, to seem, to become, to feel, to look, to remain”. Those adjectives are used predictively because they modify and characterize the subject of the sentence by means of a linking verb, e.g. *The flower smells nice*.

Huddleston (1998: 30) explains that “the great majority of adjectives can be used both predicatively and attributively”. However, “others can only be used either predicatively or attributively. Among the adjectives that can work both as predicative and attributive adjectives such as old, true, and perfect” (Alvarez et al 2015:71). The position of an adjective in a phrase or a

sentence can affect its meaning as explained by Abdul Munim (2012:8,9) who indicates that some adjectives shift their meanings when moving from one position to another such as the peripheral adjectives, "Bad, good, small, heavy, light and old, used in expressions as a bad sailor, a good swimmer, a big eater, a small farmer, heavy drinker, light sleeper, old Friend soldier, etc... *A small farmer* is a man who has a small farm, but *the farmer is small* means that he is small physically”.

Concerning this difference between adjectives, Matthews (2014:2) explains that adjectives mainly belong to two different types: central adjectives and peripheral adjectives. Adjectives that are free to occur at attributive or at predicative positions are known as central adjectives like *tall* which is a “Central member of the category, it can freely occur in both an attributive and, a predicative function ", those which do not fulfill all the criteria are known as peripheral adjectives. Bueno (2016:16) indicates that “peripheral adjectives are the ones that do not fulfill these features because they cannot be graded (non-gradable) nor can they occur both attributively and predicatively”.

Abdul Munim (2012:9) gives some examples of adjectives which can only appear predicatively but not attributively such as, “Afloat, afraid, alight, alike, alive, alone, ashamed, asleep, awake"; ablaze, agleam, averse, aware, askew, and awry, these adjectives composed with prefix a- are used only predictively as in *the vessel is afloat*”. On the other hand, examples of attributive adjectives are “principal, sole, main, utter, mock, latter, mare, frigging, and, eventual. In those cases, adjectives can occur freely in attributive function as in *I crossed the main road*.

This difference in the syntactic position of adjectives in English sentences is also related to semantics, Castillo (1997:303,305) explains that “a structure of predication is made on the basis of three components: semantic component, the predicative component, and the syntactic component”. He explains the difference between these three components by saying that the semantic component is the base for the adjective: to mean and relate with other words. The predictive component is the base for the adjective to create predication. The syntactic component is a manifestation of the other two manifestations of the adjectives, concerning the difference between predicative and attributive adjectives, it is a distinction made from a syntactic point of view as explained by Castillo (ibid). He refers to the idea that adjectives perform two functions which have to do with the potential capability of the combination of adjectives that is with the predicative force of adjectives: the attributive function and the predicative function. In both cases, the adjective is the element that creates a predication.

Matthews (2014:3) clarifies the semantic difference between predicative and attributive adjectives by saying that there are many occasions where an attributive adjective has a meaning that it cannot have in a predicative position. For example, the adjective *late* is a central adjective which can appear in attributive and in predicative positions, but its meaning is different in every position. This adjective can be used attributively in a phrase such as *a late bus*, or predicatively as in *The bus is late*. However, in every situation, the meaning is slightly different. By *a late bus*, one could refer in principle to a bus that happens on a particular occasion to be running behind schedule. But the phrase could also refer to one whose place in the

timetable is late in the evening. In a predicative position *late* could again mean behind schedule.

According to Connolly (2020: 234), the obvious simplicity of adjective-noun order in English is what makes this error an interesting one to investigate, as such knowledge is needed to understand the produced spoken and written language. When undertaking an error analysis, it is important to be able to distinguish between mistakes and errors. This observation appears a valid one since if we are undertaking an error analysis then mistakes must not be included. For that reason, a clear line needs to be drawn between the two different positions of adjectives (Corder 1967, cited in Ellis .1994).

1.2 Research Problem

The aim of this study is to investigate whether English as a foreign language learners in Libya will be aware of the correct positions of adjectives in English sentences. It sheds light on whether they have this second language knowledge about the differences between predicative and attributive adjectives as a result of the positive evidence-only instructions (given to them at Misurata University) which concentrate on the correct positions and neglect explaining incorrect positions. This aims to shed light on the importance of teaching this kind of information using also negative evidence in addition to positive evidence because misplacing adjectives in English sentences can change the meaning and can produce ambiguous and unclear structures. The study mainly seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Are the participating Libyan EFL university students able to recognize the difference between predicative and attributive adjectives?
2. Does the target group of EFL learners in Libya have enough instruction in English grammar classrooms to enable them to recognize this difference?
3. Will they commit more errors in predicative or in attributive adjectives?

1.3 Research Hypotheses and Objectives

The study hypothesizes that the level of instruction which is based on presenting just positive evidence in the classroom will not be enough for the Libyan EFL learners to know the difference between English adjectives concerning their place and whether they should be put before or after the noun they modify. Positive evidence-only instructions present the correct grammatical structures without presenting how they can be incorrect which is known as negative evidence.

1.4 Previous Studies

Connolly (2020) has done a study in Spain, and Colombia, entitled "Adjectives noun order: An error analysis of Colombian learners of English " in which they tested the idea of using translation as a teaching method to help Colombian learners of English to reduce the frequency of errors related to adjective positions. They tested a number of participants divided into pairs and gave each pair a text in English. The tests were collected and redistributed throughout the class. Each pair translated the new text which they have received back into English. When all the participants have finished, the researchers compared translated the texts with the original source. This

procedure was done to examine whether students were able to make a comparison between the rules in their first language and in the target language. Connolly's study is similar to the current research in terms of measuring the rate of errors in noun-adjective order to investigate whether second language learners can acquire knowledge of the correct order of nouns and adjectives.

Another study was conducted at Aden University by Hassaan (2016) which focused on undergraduate pre-service teacher-trainees of Bachelor by Program in the Department of English in the College of Education. It was particularly about adjectives in attributive positions and the difficulty that students may face in constructing English adjectives in attributive positions at the sentence level because of their mother tongue interference. The participants' mother tongue; Arabic has different processes, and structures in forming and placing adjectives in sentences of various types.

Hassan's study is similar to this study as the participants' mother tongue is Arabic language. In conclusion, Hassan (2016) found that most Arab EFL learners were not familiar with the basic rules of English adjectives structures, especially that of attributive positions in different orders. On the other hand, Hassan's study (ibid) differs from the current study in using more than one quantitative research method instrument, and in discussing only adjectives at the attributive position while the current study also discusses the adjectives at the predicative position.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data used in the study

This recent study analyzes the errors committed by the participants concerning the differences between predicative and attributive adjectives positions in English sentences. The research instrument was a questionnaire given to the students enrolled in Grammar I course which is one of the modules taught to the students in the Department of English at Misurata University. The questionnaire consists of two parts, the first part was a grammaticality judgment task, and the second was a multiple-choice test (Appendix A). The grammaticality judgment task contained 10 English sentences, some of which were grammatical sentences in which the adjectives were put in the correct position either before or after the nouns they modify such as the sentence *my elder sister is a teacher*. The other sentences in this grammaticality judgment task were ungrammatical sentences such as *my sister is elder*, and the students were asked to judge whether they think that these sentences are grammatically correct, or ungrammatical and whether they are not sure.

The second part of the questionnaire used with the participants in this study was a multiple-choice test in which the subjects were asked to choose the correct place of adjectives in the sentences. For example, in the first sentences, the participants were asked to put the two adjectives *afloat* and *floating* in their correct places in the sentence *the vessel is Thevessel*. The idea here is to test their knowledge of which of these two adjectives is attributive which needs to be put before the noun *vessel* and which one is predicative which will have to be put after it.

2.2 The participants in this study

This study included 43 undergraduate Libyan students majoring in English at Misurata University, Faculty of Arts during the academic year 2021-2022. They were a mixture of males and females in the first semester. They were tested during their Grammar I class after taking their permission to participate in this experiment. Their answers were collected and analyzed to find the relationship between the number of errors in the two types.

3. Results and Discussion

The 43 participants involved in this study were given one point (1) for every correct answer in which they were able to recognize the difference between predicative and attributive adjectives. They were given (0) points for every incorrect answer. In the grammaticality judgment task, they were given 1 point for every correct acceptance of grammatical sentences or rejection of ungrammatical sentences. They were given 0 points for every incorrect judgment or whenever the participants were not sure about the judgment.

The next procedure was dividing these answers and responses into two groups based on whether the information in every question is related to a predicative or to an attributive adjective. This was done to test their knowledge of the difference between predicative and attributive adjectives and to test in which type (predicative or attributive) the participants commit more errors and therefore have less knowledge about. Table 1 and Figure 1 below, show the total number of errors committed by the participants in choosing the correct place of attributive and predicative adjectives. As can be seen from the table number 1 below, the participants committed 294 errors in

predicative adjectives (53.6 %), which was a little more than the errors committed in attributive adjectives with 255 errors (46.4%). This means that the percentage of errors was higher in predicative adjectives.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sum	Percent
Predicative adjective	43	1	13	6.84	3.436	294	53.6%
Attributive adjective	43	0	10	5.93	2.414	255	46.4%
Total	43	2	23	12.77	5.259	549	100%

Table 1: Numbers of errors committed in predicative and attributive adjectives

From the results which can be seen in table 2 below, it is clear that the value of the level of significance is less than 0.05, which indicates that the relationship between the number of errors in the two types: predicative and attributive adjectives is significant. It was found that the value of the Pearson correlation coefficient is positive, which indicates that this relationship is direct, thus it can be said that there is a relationship between the number of errors in the two types and that the greater the number of errors in one type will be increased in the other.

Pearson Correlation	P-value
0.604	0.000

Table 2: Pearson correlation

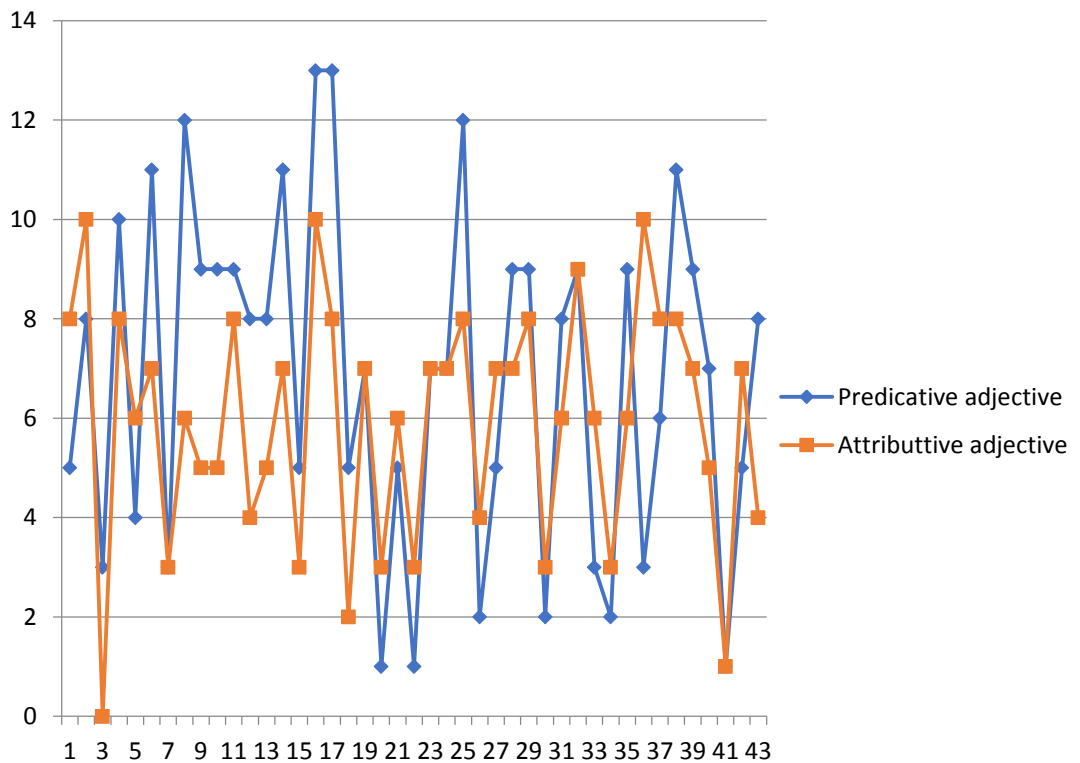


Figure 1: Number of errors committed in predicative and attributive adjectives

4. Conclusion

The current study focused on identifying errors made by foreign language learners in attributive and predicative adjectives. This research investigated the problem of whether students in the Department of English at Misurata University will be able to distinguish between the two types of adjectives or not and whether they will be able to put every type of adjectives in its correct place either before or after the noun they modify.

The results showed that the value of the level of significance is less than 0.05, which indicates that the relationship between the number of errors in the two types is significant therefore it can be said that the relationship between the number of errors in the two types and the greater number of errors in one type will increase in the other. As a result of these notes, it can be said that the positive evidence-only instructions given to the participants who study English language at Misurata University were not enough to enable them to know the difference between predicative and attributive adjectives and to know the correct places of adjectives in relations to the nouns they modify in many cases.

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Appendix A

The questionnaire used in the experiment

Say whether the following sentences are grammatical or not:

Sentences	Grammatical	ungrammatical	Not sure
1. That is the ashamed man.			
2. He feels ashamed.			
3. The sleep baby			
4. The baby is a sleep			
5. My sister is elder			
6. Your soup tastes bad			
7. Her hair looks amazing			
8. I saw an alone woman			
9. He is a talented programmer.			
10. My elder sister is a teacher.			

Put the adjectives between brackets into the correct place

- The vessel is.....The.....vessel. (afloat-floating)
- We were really..... as we watched the film. It was a really.....film. (interesting-interested)
- It was aact. He ought to be.....of his acts. (ashamed-shameful)

4. The children are Thechildren look very peaceful. (Asleep-sleeping)
5. The lobster is..... It is alobster.(alive- live)
6. The buildings areThebuildings. (alight – burning)
7. Everything that is.....needs water. All.....things need water. (living-alive)
8. I wasas I was reading that book. The book was really(bored-boring)
9. When I amIn my.....hours. (awake- waking)
10. That boy is.....of the dog. Theboy was screaming. (afraid-frightened).