

Comparative Grammar & How First Language Interference Affects English Language Acquisition

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When working with English language learners, First Language Interference can result in problems with second language acquisition. If the tutor is aware of some of the common patterns of the learner's first language, they will be more likely to spot an error as a transfer issue. This workshop highlighted some of the differences between English and the five most common first languages of the students at Literacy Volunteers Charlottesville/Albemarle: Spanish, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, and Korean.

Word Order

Sentence Structure

Standard sentence structure in English starts with the subject (and any modifiers), then adds the verb, and then finishes with the object(s) if present. However, in creative writing, particularly poetry and song lyrics, word order is more fluid. The chart shows standard sentence structure, but other forms are possible in all languages.

	Subject – Verb – Object	V – S – O	S – O – V	O – V – S
English	Yes			
Spanish	Yes		Yes	Yes
Persian			Yes	
Arabic	Yes	Yes		
Chinese	Yes			
Korean			Yes	

Nouns and Adjectives

There are two basic rules of nouns and their modifiers in language: head-initial and head-final. Head-initial has the noun first followed by its modifiers while head-final places the modifiers first with the noun at the end.

Nouns and Adjectives	
English	Adjective first – adjectives come in a specific order
Spanish	Noun first
Persian	Noun first – but the last adjective is most important
Arabic	Noun first
Chinese	Adjective first
Korean	Adjective first

Order of Adjective in English

While we may not be consciously aware of it, adjectives in English fall in a particular order. We may not be able to explain why the order feels wrong when we hear it, but we know it does.

Determiner	Number	Opinion	Size	Shape	Condition	Age	Color	Pattern	Origin	Material	Type	Purpose	Noun
A/An	1, 2, 3...	Good	Small	Round	Hot	Young	Red	Striped	American	Wooden	All-purpose	Sports/ spotting	
The	First, second...	Bad	Medium	Square	Decayed	Old	Rusty	Polka-dotted	Japanese	Plastic	Last-minute	Hunting	
This/That		Beautiful	Large	Flat	Poor	New	Blonde-haired	Flowered	Southern	Metal	Heavy duty	Gardening	
These/Those		Awful	Tiny	Uneven	Smart	Preowned	Gray	Plaid	Eastern	Cloth		Shopping	

Verbs

Verbs frequently conjugate to show five different attributes: Tense, Aspect, Mood, Person, and Number.

- Tense deals exclusively with time (although we often broaden that definition when talking about tenses in English, usually including the aspect). In English, we technically only have past and present since our future is not formed through conjugation but rather through the use of an auxiliary verb.
- Aspect deals with how the verb is acting over time. In English, we use what are commonly referred to as the Progressive (or Continuous) and the Perfect aspects.
- Mood deals with the attitude of the speaker. In English, we use Indicative (a fact), Interrogative (a questions), Imperative (a command), Conditional (a condition), and Subjunctive (a wish or possibility).
- Person deals with the distinction between those who are speaking, those who are being addressed, and those who are neither speaking nor being addressed. In English, we use First, Second, and Third person.
- Number deals with the distinction between one and more than one of whatever the verb is relating to.
- Derivatives are unique to Semitic languages and provide additional information with the verb.

Aspect

- Perfective shows an action that has been completed. It may also be used to show the relationship between one action and another action or event.
- Progressive (also called Continuous) shows an action that is ongoing or moving through time.
- Imperfective shows actions that are habitual, repeated, or progressive.
- Inchoative shows the beginning of an action.
- Durative shows actions that lasted a specific period of time.

Mood

- Indicative mood is used to make a statement or show a fact.
- Interrogative mood is used for asking a question.
- Imperative mood is used for giving commands.
- Conditional mood is used for showing unreal or unrealized events dependent upon another event.
- Subjunctive mood is used in dependent clauses for discussing imaginary or hypothetical situations, expressing opinions or emotions, or making polite requests.
- Jussive mood is used in the second and third persons only and is for making pleas, expressing desires, or making commands.
- Short Energetic mood is used for making suggestions or giving advice.
- Long Energetic mood is used for making strong recommendations or giving commands.

- Inferential mood is used for reporting events where the speaker did not witness what is being discussed.
- Retrospective mood is used to examine past events and display the speaker’s feelings about the event. It is uniquely Korean.
- Formal mood is used to display the level of formality of the speaker in regard to the audience. In Korean, there are seven levels: very formally polite (exclusively for royalty or religious text), formally polite, casually polite, semi-formal, familiar, formally impolite, and casually impolite. (Impolite does not mean rude in this context.)

	Tense	Aspect	Mood	Person	Gender	Derivatives	Number
English	Past, Present, Future	Progressive, Perfective	Indicative, Imperative, Conditional, Interrogative, Subjunctive	1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd	No		Singular, Plural
Spanish	Past, Present, Future	Imperfective, Perfective	Indicative, Imperative, Subjunctive	1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd	No		Singular, Plural
Persian	Past, Present, Future	Imperfective, Perfective	Indicative, Imperative, Subjunctive	1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd	No		Singular, Plural
Arabic	Past, Present, Future	Imperfective, Perfective, Inchoative, Durative	Indicative, Imperative, Subjunctive, Jussive, Short Energetic, Long Energetic	1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd	Masculine, Feminine	Intensive, Causative, Reciprocal, Reflexive, Frequentative, and more	Singular, Dual, Plural
Chinese	none	Imperfective, Perfective, Durative, Experiential	None	No	No		No
Korean	Remote Past, Past, Present, Futures	Present Progressive, Perfective, Imperfective,	Indicative, Imperative, Subjunctive, Jussive, Conditional, Inferential, Retrospective, Formality (7 levels)	No	No		No

Nouns and Pronouns

Nouns and pronouns can conjugate in three basic ways: Number, Case, and Gender. Not all languages use all of these. Some will use other words or grammatical structures to relay this information.

A unique feature of English (and a few other languages) is the absence of the null-subject. In most languages, if the subject of the sentence would be a pronoun whose antecedent is either obvious or was given in the previous sentence, the sentence does not require a subject. In many languages, the verb will conjugate, which would also make the subject clear.

Number

Most languages will use a singular and plural system. Some will add dual to this list, while others do not conjugate their nouns for number.

Case

In English, only pronouns conjugate for case: typically referred to as Subjective, Objective, and Possessive.

- Nominative is used for the subject of the sentence.
- Accusative is used for the object of the sentence.
- Genitive is used for possessives.
- Dative is used for indirect objects.
- Disjunctive is used for the object of a preposition.
- Comitative is used for something going “with” something else.
- Accusative with Dative is used when the direct object is given directly to the indirect object.
- Oblique is used when both the direct object and indirect object are pronouns.
- Instrumental is similar to Comitative but includes both “with” and “without.”
- Locative is used after a preposition dealing with location.

	Number	Case	Gender	Subject Pronoun Optional?
English	Singular, Plural	Nominative, Accusative, Possessive	none	No
Spanish	Singular, Plural	Nominative, Accusative, Dative, Possessive, Disjunctive	Masculine, Feminine	Yes
Persian	Singular, Plural	Nominative, Accusative	none	Yes
Arabic	Singular, Dual, Plural	Nominative, Accusative, Possessive	Masculine, Feminine	Yes
Chinese	none	Nominative, Accusative, Dative, Accusative with Dative, Oblique, Possessive, Disjunctive, Comitative, Instrumental, Locative	none	Yes
Korean	none	Nominative, Accusative, Dative, Accusative with Dative, Oblique, Possessive, Disjunctive, Comitative, Instrumental, Locative	none	Yes