

Arabic and English Conditional Clauses: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: According to a study done by Covitt (1976), Conditional sentences ranked fifth on a list of most serious teaching problems encountered by ESL teachers. Hence, this paper aims to conduct a comparative study of conditional clauses in Arabic and English, to discuss some of the difficulties facing the students and English language learners in understanding the conditional structure and its translation from Arabic to English and vice versa. Conditional sentences and its structures are difficult sometimes become confusing for some students so they may become a puzzle that is hard to understand. Studying the conditional structure in general, and our understanding of its nature and the functions of its structure, helps us as educators and linguists to reach to our students' needs who find difficult to perform conditional clauses in Arabic and English and translated them correctly. Therefore, 40 lecturers had been asked about the difficulties in conditional clauses in order to focus on what should be done to analyze these difficulties encountered by students and language learners in the field of teaching in both Arabic and English. In this vein, the study aims to discuss the following aspects; first, the concept of conditional clauses and its classification in Arabic and English. Second, summarizes the similarities and differences of conditional clauses in both languages. Third difficulties that students face in learning conditional clauses and; finally, explore and clarify strategies for conditional clauses used to teach them to the students.

Keywords: Conditional clauses, Arabic, English, Strategies, Students

Introduction

It is important when presenting ideas in any language one must create a logical, linguistic relationship between them, relationships such as contrast, addition, expressions and condition is one of them. Every language has its methods of forming conditional sentences; however, each language has its way to express conditional sentences such as English and Arabic. Translators must know the particular structure indicates the condition of the target and source languages, then translate it into its equivalent structure.

In English, there are different possibilities; real, unreal, possible and impossible or hypothetical (AboAnzeh, 2006, .P 297). Besides, forms, meaning, tense all these elements of conditional structure are difficult for learners while mother-tongue language (Arabic) conditional clauses are easier to produce.

Most English language learners face difficulties in conditional clauses and sometime they are confusing and become a puzzle that is hard to understand, although, the structure is similar to linking verbs such as "because", "when", "and" etc., these difficulties lead many researchers study the reason behind delayed the usage of conditional clauses by children in many languages such as English, German, Turkish and others (Newcombe, 1996, 240). There are common denominators among languages, especially in conditional sentences that is, these sentences contain virtual and imaginary positions far from reality and the relationships that are almost metaphysical, tangible or intangible far from reality, or concrete, which sometimes causes us to go beyond the limits of logic and familiarity in our thinking and our beliefs. Therefore, contribute in our quest to understand the nature of our behavior, our ideas, our attitudes, what stands behind them, and what drives them to be as they are now.

From these points, studying conditional structure in general, and our understanding of its nature and the functions of the structure help us as educators to meet the needs of our students who may find it difficult to learn conditional clauses in English and translated correctly.

Arabic and English Conditional Clauses

Although there are differences concerning conditional clauses in English and Arabic, but both languages contain two main clauses "if-clause" which refers to the condition (subordinate) and the result clause. The important point is that the main action happens if the situation in if-clause is fulfilled (Abu Anzeh, 2006, p 298)

English Conditional Clauses

Conditional sentences based on the relationships between a conditional verb and its answer which can be real or hypothetical depending on our understanding and the intention of the speaker. Conditional clauses refer to cause and effect indicate as antecedent clause and consequent clause. The antecedent is defined as a subordinate clause referring to a supposition situation, while the consequent consists of a proposition situation that occurs if the antecedent is realized (Alexander, 1988, p. 27).

Yule (1998, 125) refers that English has three main states; factual state, real possibility and the hypothetical state described by an antecedent:

Nowadays, if people want something they can buy it (actual state)

If you lend me some money, I will pay you back..... (real possibility)

If I were you, I would help him..... (hypothetical state)

Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 62) said there are only three types of conditional clauses; past, present and future. Grammarians like Yule (1998) and Wu (2012) said there are four types of conditional; zero, future, present and past conditionals.

Conditional clauses falls into two parts real and not real depending on the verb of the antecedent. In real structure, the antecedent part indicates a condition, the reality of which is unsubstantiated and the verb in the result clause can be in three tenses, past, present and future. In unreal conditions, the antecedents indicate a condition that is known to be false or impossible (Palmer, 2001, pp. 78, 125, 208).

According to Quirk et al. (1985, pp. 91-97) there are four types of conditional clauses:

1. Zero conditional: This type used to describe facts, scientific facts, rules or anything that's true. The structure of this type is present simple for both antecedent and consequent clauses:
If you like it, we do it.
2. First condition: this type refers to possibilities, potential which could happen in the future. The tense of this type is either present or future and modals can be used such as (can, may and should)
If you work hard, you will promote.
3. Second condition: it is used for imaginary and unreal event in the present or future. Past tense is used in this type to indicate present or future.
If I were you, I would take it
4. Third condition: it is used for unreal or impossible event (didn't occur) in the past. The structure can be with past perfect.
If I had gotten the job, I would have started a new life.

According to Haegeman (2009, pp. 33-43) there are different ways of expressions implied condition in English. One of these ways to form conditional sentence is using "if-so". Instead of repeating, we can use *so* and *not* or negative clause (*Have you got a free ticket or the concert? If so, let's tell Ali*).

(*If- only*) used with past referring to present or past perfect referring to past for strong wish or regret (*If only you had more money, you could buy that house*).

Mixed tense, in which the time of the antecedent is different from result clause. One clause can be in present and the other in the past (*if I had done my work this morning, I would go with you to the cinema*).

Sometimes, (*If*) is not exist or just omitted and the verb and the subject represent the conditional sense (*You do this again, I'll kill you*).

Double negative used in an informal speech where sometimes there is additional (*not*) in (*if-clause*); however, it doesn't indicate negative meaning (*I wouldn't be happy, if she didn't tell him*).

There are words and phrases can place (*if*) and give the same meaning: *that, as/so, unless, one condition that* and etc. (*I will give the car, on condition that you finish your work.*

(*Otherwise*) used to indicate the negative condition (*do your work, otherwise you will be out*). Also, (*whether.. or*), and (*whatever*) can be used to indicate conditions (*whether you cried or not, we will go without you*).

Conjunctions also used to implied condition such as *and, or, only* and *but*:

Do as required, and you will be happy.

Do your works or you shall be punished.

He would have a new car, only he had enough money.

David would have shot the pig, but the lion had come very fast.

Arabic Conditional Clauses

Arabic conditional clauses have three main particles to indicate if- clause (لو, إذا, إن) and they have different use and meanings. For instance, (لو) it refers to unreal, something impossible of contrary to fact, such as (*If I were you*). It can be in past, present or future (Abu Anzeh, 2006, pp. 297-30).

(*If he had studied, he would have succeeded*) لو درس لنجح

(*If I had a thousand dollars, I would buy a car*) لشترتيت سيارة دولار ألف معي كان لو

(إن) indicate conditional if-clause without referring to possibilities

) (*If he studies, he will succeed*) إن درس نجح

(إذا) indicates some degree of possibility just like *when, whenever*.

) (*If we go by train, we shall be late*) إذا ذهبنا بالقطار فسنتأخر

There are other particles which can be regarded as conditionals. Some of these particles are (ما, متى, من, أما) (ibid), أيا.

Similarities and Differences between Arabic and English Conditional Clauses

This section studies the similarities and differences in order to overcome difficulties of learning and translating conditional clauses between Arabic and English.

Similarities

As we said previously that conditional clauses in English and Arabic have (if-clause) and (result clause) which means the main structure of conditional clause is similar in both languages.

In Arabic the conditional verb could come independently from the result or it comes after just like in English and also it could have حتى, إلا, و:

الاحد إذا أردت أحضر الى المكتب

Come to the office Sunday, if you want to

سأذهب الى المتحف إذا زرت تركيا

I will go the museum if I visit Turkey

لن يسمح لك بالسفر إلا إذا اكملت دراستك

You will not be permitted to travel unless you finish your study

It is important to say that *unless* can be translated as (إلا إذا) and also to (لو لم, إذا لم).

Wickens (1980, p. 77) refers to an important point that most languages share, including English and Arabic, that is conditional clauses can appear as an imperative form without conditional particles:

أدرس تنجح

Study and you will succeed

However, not all conditional clauses can be in imperative form, especially relevance conditionals those with one possibility:

If you are David Sami, the money for you

It cannot be: *Be David Sami and the money for you*

Differences

Despite these similarities, also there are many differences between Arabic and English conditional clauses. English, for instance, focuses on the verb while using the same conditional particle (if) while Arabic focuses on the changes of conditional particles with the same verb (Abu Anzeh, 2006, p. 297):

1. لو ذهب means (If he had gone) which means he didn't go
2. إن ذهب means (if he goes) which means he might go
3. إذا ذهب means (if he goes) which means he might go

Moreover, in Arabic the result clause verb and condition clause verb can come in the same tense (perfect tense):

1. إن ذهبته فابلته If I go, I will meet him
2. إذا ذهبته فابلته If I go, I will meet him
3. لو ذهبته فابلته If I had gone, I would have meet him

We can see from the examples that the verbs of the conditional and the result clause in Arabic come in the perfect tense with different conditional particles, whereas in English tense changes happen in the verb of the conditional and result clauses.

One of the difficulties that face learners that is the verb (would) has no similar meaning in Arabic and also the conditional particle (لو) followed (ل) which does not exist in English.

In addition, the tense that indicates an unreal situation in English is the past perfective, while in Arabic conditionals is the perfect tense.

Difficulties in Understanding English and Arabic Conditional Clauses

In English, some sentences may have the form of conditional sentences, but they indicate something else like a promise (*I will give you money if you clean the dishes*) it is a problem for Arabic students in understanding the sentences and translate them correctly.

Another problem that students face is that the conditional sentences can be formed without using conditional particles as has been previously explained (*Come early, and you will get it*).

In order to understand the difficulties that students face in translating and learning conditional clauses, an interview made with 40 lecturers (M.A and PhD. Holders) with English grammar specialties from different universities have been asked about the problems that students face.

They said conditional clauses with present simple and future less difficult for students with an average level and conditional clauses with present perfect is the most difficult for all levels. Also, they said most students made mistakes when the conditional clause comes after result clause more than when it comes at the beginning of the sentence. Around 65% of the lecturers said that the changing of the form to different tenses is confusing to the students because conditional structures are formed with different tenses that do not refer to the time state whereas they do not excite in Arabic conditional clauses. Sentences that do not have conditional *if*, but implied condition are difficult for students to translate them into Arabic conditional clauses. It is obvious that *if*-clauses convey a condition; however, the problem is that the students mix between these types and unaware of the specific uses of each type.

Strategies for Teachers in Teaching Conditional Clauses

According to what have been discussed earlier, the study comes with strategies for teachers to help their students overcome the difficulties of conditional clauses:

1. Students must learn first sentence types, tenses and conjunction before learning conditional clauses.
2. Teachers must start with the easier type, like *if*-clause and then other types like using *when*.

3. Following the sequence in teaching conditional clauses starting with real condition and then to unreal or imaginary condition so that students can be able to distinguish between them.
4. Sentences that have if-clause, but do not imply a condition like (*if you please*) lead us as teachers to focus on the context not only the structure while teaching students conditional clauses.
5. Teachers can follow Chomsky's theory TGG (Transformational Generative Grammar) which indicates that some transformations can be performed on linguistic structures in order to clarify some ambiguous meanings in the conditional structures and; thus, understand the deep meaning of the sentences. These transformations are substitutions, deletions, binding, and rearrangement of the sentences.
6. Teachers are advised to teach conditional structures through different situations and different stages in order to give the students enough experience to understand the structures and how to use in life to express wishes, requests, clarification of facts and potential to expand students' perceptions and abilities to think, analyze, connect, imagining and understanding the relationships between things as they are.
7. Teachers should teach conditional structures based on encouraging students to express themselves, their desires and open the horizons in front of their imagination to enable them to use conditional structure in a communicative manner are close to their reality: for example, (*If I were a doctor; If I were you...*).

Conclusion

Teaching English conditionals has always been a difficult task for English teachers. Therefore, the study aims to explore and clarify the nature of conditional clauses in English and Arabic in order to overcome the difficulties that students face. There are a number of differences between English and Arabic conditional clauses; because of these differences the students face some difficulties in understanding and translating the conditional clauses. Thus, the role of the teachers is to reduce these difficulties by teaching them conditional clauses gradually and in the right way, that's why the study comes up with certain strategies for teachers to help their students to understand conditional sentences and all its types.

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