

IS AVOIDANCE RULED OUT BY SIMILARITY?
THE CASE OF SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS/ADVERBS
IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with EFL Arab learners' avoidance of the adversative subordinating adverbs *despite/in spite of* and the causal adverb *because of*, which tend to be consistently replaced by the subordinating conjunctions *although* and *because* respectively. The subjects of this study were given two translation tasks, each of which included ten sentences. Task one required the subjects to translate into English ten Arabic sentences containing *despite/in spite of* as well as *although* and *because*. In the second task, they were asked to translate English sentences into Arabic, containing similar adverbs and conjunctions. Analyses of the sentences produced by the subjects indicate that the subordinating adverbs *despite/in spite of* and the causal adverb *because of* are frequently avoided and the sentences to be translated are paraphrased in such a way that *although* and *because* are used instead. Although Arabic has structures linguistically similar to these subordinating adverbs, the Arabic-speaking subjects of this study avoided them even when the sentences they were asked to translate very specifically contained them. This is an indication that avoidance is not ruled out by similarity. Another dimension this study suggests is that reliance on an avoidance strategy is significantly affected by the learner's language proficiency level, with the subjects at lower levels resorting much more frequently to avoidance than those at more advanced levels. The study also provides evidence that avoidance is available not only to the learner when tackling target language structures, but also when dealing with his native language structures over which he has limited mastery. The subordinating adverbs under investigation were avoided by the subjects both in Arabic and English. In either case, paraphrase tends to be the strategy available when avoiding these adverbs.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of avoidance as a strategy for error-free production in a foreign or second language has attracted a considerable amount of interest among researchers as well as practicing teachers concerned with the process of learning English as a second language (ESL). In general, avoidance behaviour is believed to occur "when

specific language structures are under-represented in the learner's production (written or spoken) in comparison with native-speaker production" (Ellis 1986: 293). The explanation for this phenomenon is that ESL learners will often try to avoid using a difficult item or structure in the second language, and will instead use an alternative item or structure, which they perceive as simpler. For instance, for an Arab learner of EFL, two simpler sentences may be used where a relative clause is more appropriate.

Most of the research works published to date seem to link the occurrence of avoidance to interference from the learner's native language. For instance, Schachter (1974: 205-214) attributes her Chinese and Japanese subjects' avoidance of English restrictive clauses to the fact that the rules governing their formation in English and their native languages are different. By contrast, the Arab and Persian subjects involved in her study used English restrictive clauses more frequently, yet not always accurately, than their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, basically because relative clause formation in English is very similar to Arabic and Persian. In the light of this, Schachter concludes that avoidance is a reflection of mother tongue interference. The results reported in a study by Suzanne (1986) concerning avoidance of English idioms by bilingual Spanish-English speakers lend further support to Schachter's findings. In Suzanne's study, the English idioms frequently avoided were those completely different from their Spanish equivalents. Although not stated, these researchers appear to agree that "avoidance strategy is ruled out when the second language is linguistically similar to the native language" (Louda 1981). In simpler terms, the argument put forward in this regard is that avoidance is due to lack of correspondence between the target language structures and those of the learner's mother tongue.

This seems to contrast with the findings of a study by Mattar (2001), which concludes that Arab learners' avoidance of the present perfect in English, which tends to be systematically replaced by the past simple tense, is not purely a reflection of Arabic interference, although the present perfect in English and Arabic are structured completely differently. The Arabic-speaking subjects involved in the study concerned avoided the present perfect tense not because of the differences between the way it is structured in English and Arabic, but rather due to their inability to establish proper form-meaning/tense-aspect associations. It is also concluded in Mattar (1997) that Arab learners' avoidance of reduced relative clauses in written English is largely teaching-induced. Additional evidence concerning the negative effects of formal instruction on Arab learners' production or avoidance of English non-restrictive relative clauses in writing is reported in Mattar (1998). Although more research is required on this subject, such findings suggest that the contrastive analysis hypothesis is not the only diagnostic tool for learner difficulty in the TL or for explaining the phenomenon of avoidance.

Kleinman (1983: 373-374), for instance, "ascribes the relative nonuse of certain L2 structures *partially* to avoidance". However, he arrives at conclusions which seem to conflict with Schachter's as to the role of the contrastive analysis hypothesis

in predicting learners' avoidance of certain L2 structures. Kleinman (1983: 371-371) suggests another possible cause of avoidance: confidence. He argues that "it seems reasonable to think that confidence is a variable that would affect an individual's choice to avoid or not to avoid. Confidence does not necessarily reflect the learner's knowledge of some structure. Rather, it reflects the learner's perception of his knowledge, which may or may not be accurate". Kleinman's (1978: 96-120) research work with Arab, Spanish, Portuguese and American students (native speakers) lends partial support to Schachter's CA-based stand, but also shows that "CA alone cannot predict when structures will be circumvented or produced". Kleinman finds that personality factors, such as anxiety, self-confidence, and willingness to take risks, may provide information on which structures are likely avoid various L2 structures. This suggests that avoidance may to some extent be psychologically determined (Jordens in Enkvist 1973). Another explanation for avoidance as a communication strategy, although not sufficiently researched, is the effects of proficiency level. Ellis (1984: 183) finds quantitative but not qualitative differences between the strategy use of ESL children and native-speaking children. The former relied on avoidance, and the latter more on *paraphrase*.

2. Research topic

Most of the research works completed to date in connection with Arab learners' acquisition of English as a foreign language in general, and the rhetorical organization in Arabic and English in particular, provide consistent evidence that Arabic and English sentences are differently organized. These research works show that coordination is more common in Arabic than it is in English, while subordination is more frequently used in English than in Arabic (Mohamed et al. 1999). Teachers of English as a foreign language in the Arabic-speaking world, writing teachers in particular, observe the influence of Arabic rhetoric on their students' writing as well as the unusual emphasis on coordination as opposed to than subordination (Yorkey 1974). Despite this reality, it should be made clear that subordination, and as a result subordinating conjunctions, exist in Arabic and function in almost the same way they do in English.

The present research study examines adult EFL Arab learners' avoidance of certain subordinating conjunctions and adverbs in English across various levels of language proficiency. The subordinators dealt with in the study include two groups: conjunctions expressing contrast [*although* + *clause* and *despite/in spite of* + *noun phrase/gerund*], where the latter tends to be frequently avoided and replaced by the former, and conjunctions expressing cause [*because* + *clause* and *because of* + *noun phrase*], where the former tends to be used more frequently than the latter. It is worth stating at this stage that all the above structures have almost identical equivalents in Arabic, which should rule out any possibility of avoidance being a reflection of mother tongue interference. Rather, more explanations should be explored.

3. Research questions

The current research deals with adult EFL Arab learners' use and avoidance of two groups of subordinating conjunctions/adverbs expressing *contrast* and *cause*. Basically, the study attempts to explain why Arab learners have a tendency to avoid the subordinating adverbs *despite* and *because of*, which are followed by a noun phrase or gerund, and their consistent preference for *although* and *because*, which require a clause. To provide some possible answers to these questions and others, the following research questions will be addressed:

- (1) Is avoidance as a communication strategy *ruled out by similarity*? In other words, is avoidance likely only when the structures in the L1 and L2 are different?
- (2) Do even native speakers when communicating in their own language resort to avoidance?
- (3) What alternative achievement strategies do Arab learners employ when dealing with the subordinating conjunctions/adverbs they perceive difficult?
- (4) Does language proficiency level have any significant effect on learners' avoidance? In simpler terms, do less advanced learners have a greater tendency to resort to avoidance strategy than more advanced learners?

4. Subjects of the study

The subjects of the current study were eighty-nine (male and female) native speakers of Arabic in their first, second, third and fourth year of the English degree programme run by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature in the University of Bahrain. During the study, they were enrolled in the following courses:

Group 1:	Engl. 446: <i>Advanced Grammar</i>	16 students	fourth year
Group 2:	Engl. 305: <i>Lang. Development III</i>	15 students	third year
Group 3:	Engl. 308: <i>English Grammar</i>	22 students	second/third year
Group 4:	Engl. 112: <i>Lang. Development II</i>	21 students	second year
Group 5:	Engl. 111: <i>Lang. Development I</i>	15 students	first year
Total:		89 students	

The vast majority of the subjects included in the study are taking English as a major with education as a minor, as they are being trained to be EFL teachers in public schools in Bahrain. A few, however, are taking French, history or translation as a

minor. Most of the courses they are taking as college or university requirements are taught in Arabic. Accordingly, they can be classified as EFL learners.

5. Research data collection method

In order to study the extent of avoidance tendencies with regard to the subordinating adverbs *despite/in spite of* as well as *because of*, the subjects were given two translation tasks: one from Arabic into English and another from English into Arabic. Each task included ten sentences containing the subordinating conjunctions *although/despite* as well as *because/because of*. The English into Arabic task was used in order to find out whether or not Arab learners of EFL have a tendency to avoid the subordinating adverbs *despite/in spite of* and *because of* in Arabic in the same way they do in English.

In task one, where the subjects were required to translate ten Arabic sentences into English, sentences 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 contained the subordinating adverbs *despite/in spite of* and *because of*. As mentioned earlier, these subordinators tend to be avoided by Arab learners of EFL. The alternative structures preferred will be dealt with later in this paper. Sentences 2, 4, and 10 of the first task included *although* and *because*, which seem to cause no difficulty for Arab learners.

In task two, the subjects were required to translate ten English sentences into Arabic. Sentences 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9 included *despite* and *because of* while 2, 4, 7, and 10 contained *although* and *because* (sentences appended). The following examples are from task two:

She turned down the job offer despite the good salary. (NP)
Although she is qualified, she wasn't offered the job. (clause)

6. Results

A detailed analysis of the subjects' translation versions in both tasks indicates a clear tendency among Arab learners of EFL to avoid the adversative subordinating adverbs *despite/in spite of* as well as the causal adverb *because of*, both of which require either a noun phrase or a gerund. The former tends to be replaced by the subordinating conjunction *although*, while the latter is replaced by *because*, which are followed by a clause. A close examination of Table 1 below reveals such avoidance tendencies among the subjects in all groups in task one (Arabic into English translation).

Table 1. Task 1: Translation from Arabic into English (Cases of avoidance for all groups)

Subordinating conjunctions or adverbs expected		All Groups (98 students)		
		Avoidance	Use	Sig.
1	<i>despite</i> + (NP)	52.8%	47.2%	.002*
2	<i>although</i> + clause	0%	100%	1.000
3	<i>because of</i> + NP	36%	64%	.013*
4	<i>because</i> + clause	0%	100%	1.000
5	<i>because of</i> + NP	27%	73%	.025*
6	<i>although</i> + clause	1.1%	98.9%	.295
7	<i>despite</i> + (gerund)	60%	40%	.003*
8	<i>although</i> + clause	1.1%	98.9%	.519
9	<i>because of</i> + NP	23.6%	76.4%	.285
10	<i>although</i> + clause	1.1%	98.9%	.519

The table above shows the subjects' clear tendency to avoid the subordinating adverbs *despite* and *because of*. The figures with an asterisk next to them indicate that the difference between the subjects' avoidance and on-avoidance of *despite* and *because of* is statistically significant. By contrast, almost all the Arabic sentences containing *although* and *because* were translated into English accurately. In all cases of avoidance the subjects systematically used *although* and *because* instead of *despite* and *because of* respectively. The following example illustrates avoidance by the subjects of this study:

Transliteration of Arabic sentence to be translated into English (task 1)

- *Raghma ihmaliha, lam tahsel ala al wadhifda.*

Appropriate English equivalent:

- Despite her qualification/being qualified, she didn't get the job.

Version preferred by Arab learners (*Avoidance*):

- Although she is qualified, she did not get the job.

In order to shed light on the extent of avoidance tendencies regarding the conjunctions under consideration, and the differences in the performance between the five groups included in this study, let us examine Table 2 below, which offers a comparative picture of avoidance strategy across various language levels.

Table 2. Task 1: Translation from Arabic into English (Avoidance within groups)

#	Sentences	446		305		308		112		111	
		English Avoided	Use	English Avoided	Use	English Avoided	Use	English Avoided	Use	English Avoided	Use
1	<i>despite</i> + (NP)	26.77%	73.2%	37.5%	62.5%	40.9%	59.1%	71.4%*	28.6%	86%*	14%
2	<i>although</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%
3	<i>because of</i> + NP	40%	60%	25%	75%	31.8%	68.2%	19%	81%	73.3%*	26.3%
4	<i>because</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%
5	<i>because of</i> + NP	14%	86%	6.2%	93.8%	50%	50%	23.8%	76.2%	80%*	20.7%
6	<i>although</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%
7	<i>despite</i> + (gerund)	66.7%	33.3%	53.8%	56.2%	59.1%	40.1%	70%*	30%	90%*	10%
8	<i>although</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	5%	95%	0%	100%
9	<i>because of</i> + NP	24%	76%	18.8%	82.2%	40.9%	59.1%	20%	80%	60%*	40%
10	<i>although</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	5.2%	95.8%	0%	100%

Note: Boxed areas show avoidance percentages and asterisks indicate significance

It is clear from the table above that avoidance of *despite + (NP)* and *because of + NP* is a communication strategy adopted by Arab learners at all levels of English proficiency. The table also shows that *although* and *because*, which require a clause, are used with greater confidence. Almost all the subjects of this study translated the sentences with *although* and *because* correctly (note sentences 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10). Another dimension the figures in the table seem to confirm is that avoidance of these language structures is greater at lower levels and much less at more advanced levels. Statistically, the difference between avoidance and non-avoidance for fourth and third year students is insignificant. Second year students' avoidance was found to be significant only for sentences 1 and 7. By contrast, first year students' reliance on avoidance was found to be highly significant in all sentences requiring *despite + (NP)* and *because of + NP*, indicating that such structures are not yet fully under control.

Having examined the subjects' avoidance tendencies as observed in the first elicitation task (Arabic-English translation), we turn now to the results obtained from task two. Here, the subjects were required to translate English sentences containing the same types of subordinating conjunctions and adverbs into Arabic. The primary aim is to find out whether or not avoidance as a communication strategy is employed by learners even when dealing with various structures in their native language. In other words, does avoidance as a communication strategy exist across languages. Table three below details the extent of avoidance of *despite + (NP)* and *because of + NP* found in task 2.

Table 3. Task 2: Translation from English into Arabic (Cases of avoidance for all groups)

	Subordinating conjunctions or adverbs expected	All Groups (98 students)		
		Avoidance	Use	Sig.
1	<i>despite + (gerund)</i>	47.2%	52.8%	.000*
2	<i>although + clause</i>	13.5%	86.5%	.000*
3	<i>because of + NP</i>	28.1%	71.9%	.000*
4	<i>because + clause</i>	0%	100%	1.000
5	<i>although + clause</i>	4.5%	95.5%	.029
6	<i>despite + (NP)</i>	18%	82%	.000*
7	<i>although + clause</i>	15%	85%	.000
8	<i>although + clause</i>	25%	75%	.000*
9	<i>despite + (NP)</i>	25%	75%	.028*
10	<i>because + clause</i>	24.7%	75.3%	1.000

As the figures in the table above reveal, avoidance is also likely when the Arab learner produces sentences in Arabic containing *despite + (NP)* and *because of + NP*. However, the extent of learners' reliance on avoidance in their native language is clearly much less significant than it is when dealing with English structures. According to the results in Table 3 above, the differences between the subjects' avoidance and non-avoidance of the subordinating adverbs in question is insignificant. The only exception is sentence one, where they were expected to use *despite + (gerund)*. In fact in some cases, *despite + (NP)* and *because of + NP* were used instead of *although + clause* and *because + clause*, which are supposed to be linguistically more complex. This is mainly the case among the subjects whose mastery of English is better, as Table 4 below illustrates.

Table 4 details the results obtained from the second translation elicitation task (English into Arabic) by group.

The results included in Table 4 above indicate that the subjects of the present study resort to avoidance strategy when dealing with *despite + (gerund/NP)* as well as *because of + NP* even in their native language Arabic. Here too the subjects opted for the Arabic equivalents for *although* and *because* together with a subordinate clause when translating into Arabic English sentences very clearly containing the adverbs *despite* and *because of* followed by a gerund or noun phrase. In this task, like task one, avoidance appears to vary across different language proficiency levels, with more advanced learners resorting to avoidance much less frequently than their less advanced counterparts. As Table 4 shows, avoidance among second and first year learners is statistically significant, which is not the case with third and fourth year learners.

7. Discussion

Three research questions gave direction to this research study. The chief question was to examine the validity of one hypothesis which claims that *avoidance* as a communication strategy is *ruled out by similarity*. To be more specific, according to this hypothesis, "avoidance is unavailable to the student when the structure he is attempting in the second language is linguistically similar to the native language" (Louda 1981). Similar conclusions are reported in other research studies on avoidance linking avoidance to mother tongue interference. Schachter (1974), Dulay et al. (1982) and Kleinman (1987) all conclude that foreign language learners tend to avoid L2 structures which are different from their native language, but use with confidence structures similar to their native language.

The results of the present study seem to conflict with such assumptions. As Tables 1-4 reveal, the subordinating adverbs *despite + (gerund/NP)* and *because of + NP* were frequently avoided by the subjects of the current study, although structures similar to these exist in Arabic. They were given two translation tasks: one from Arabic into English and the other from English into Arabic. Each included ten

Table 4. Task 2: Translation from English into Arabic (Avoidance within groups)

#	Sentences	English		305		308		English		111	
		Avoided	Use	Avoided	Use	Avoided	Use	Avoided	Use	Avoided	Use
1	<i>despite</i> + (gerund)	6.3%*	93.8%	20%*	80%	72.7%*	27.3%	73.3*	26.7	73.3*	26.7
2	<i>although</i> + clause	37.5%	62.5%	40%	60%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%
3	<i>because of</i> + NP	12.5%*	87.5%	15%	85%	72.7*	27.3%	66%*	44%	66%*	44%
4	<i>because</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%
5	<i>although</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	5%	95%	20%	80%
6	<i>despite</i> + (NP)	12.5%*	87.5%	0%	100%	64%*	36%	70%*	30%	54%	46%
7	<i>although</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%
8	<i>because of</i> + NP	37.5%*	62.5%	27%*	73%	60%*	40%	60%*	40%	74%*	26%
9	<i>despite</i> + (NP)	25%	75%	15%	85%	37%*	63%	95.2%*	4.2%	70%*	30%
10	<i>because</i> + clause	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%

Note: Boxed areas show avoidance percentages and asterisks indicate significance

sentences, some of which contained *despite*+ (*gerund/NP*) and *because of*+ NP. The subjects of the current study, especially those at lower levels of English proficiency, consistently avoided these subordinating adverbs, which were systematically replaced by *although* and *because* together with subordinating clauses. Reliance on avoidance of these structures by those at more advanced levels was significantly less. In fact, the results provide evidence that in some cases more advanced learners used *despite*+ (*gerund/NP*) and *because of*+ NP even when *although* and *because* were clearly included in the sentences they were expected to translate into English or Arabic (sentence 1 in Table 4).

The second hypothesis the present study attempted to explore was whether avoidance as a communication strategy is available to language acquirers when communicating in their own native language in the same way it is available to the learner when dealing with a foreign language. To the best of my knowledge, this question has not been addressed in language acquisition research, as most studies seem to be concerned with avoidance among learners of EFL. Analysis of the Arabic sentences produced by the subjects of this study in the second translation task provide sufficient evidence that avoidance is a strategy adopted across languages. In this study, the Arabic equivalents for *despite*+ (*gerund/NP*) and *because of*+ NP were frequently avoided and almost always replaced by *although* and *because* respectively (see tables 3 & 4). In this task, avoidance of these structures in Arabic was also found to be greater among learners at less advanced language levels.

The third research question this study was designed to address is connected with the alternative strategies Arab learners tend to employ in their attempt to avoid errors when dealing with the subordinating adverbs *despite*+ (*gerund/NP*) and *because of*+ NP. The overall results suggest that the communication strategy commonly adopted is *paraphrase*, which basically involves "the rewording of the message in an alternate, acceptable, target language construction in order to avoid a more difficult form or construction" (Tarone et al. 1983). When extended to this study, avoidance involved restructuring *despite*+ (*gerund/NP*) and *because of*+ NP as *although* and *because*, which are followed by clauses, probably because these are regarded less complex. Such avoidance tendencies were observed in both translation tasks. Very isolated cases of risk-taking with regard to using these supposedly complex structures were observed. In very few cases, *despite* and *because of* were used together with clauses, rather than gerunds or noun phrases.

The fourth and last purpose of this research was related to whether there is any significant relationship between learners' reliance on avoidance as a communication strategy and language proficiency levels. The findings of this study, as tables one and three show, suggest that language proficiency level has a significant effect on learners' avoidance or non-avoidance of the subordinating adverbs *despite*+ (*gerund/NP*) and *because of*+ NP. The results included in tables two and four indicate that in both translation tasks the proportion of avoidance cases vary significantly with language level, with those at lower language levels resorting more to avoid-

ance. A close examination of avoidance cases within individual groups indicates that the differences between avoidance and non-avoidance is insignificant among more advanced students, but significant among less advanced students.

8. Conclusions

Generally speaking, the results reported in the present study provide ample empirical evidence against the hypothesis which links avoidance to interference. Avoidance of the subordinating adverbs *despite* + (*gerund/NP*) and *because of* + *NP* by the Arabic-speaking subjects of this study, despite the presence of linguistically similar structures in Arabic, is a strong indication that avoidance as a communication strategy is not ruled out by similarity. Contrastive analysis alone cannot explain learners' reliance on avoidance. Although not within the scope of this study, other factors such as complexity of a given target language structure, anxiety, self-confidence and willingness to take risk should be explored.

In addition to this, another dimension the current study attempted to explore is that avoidance as a communication strategy is not available to foreign language learners only, but also to native speakers who tend to avoid certain structures in their own language. The subjects of this study avoided *despite* + (*gerund/NP*) and *because of* + *NP* equivalents in Arabic, probably because they thought they were difficult to produce. In both translation tasks, the alternative strategy used to fill the gap was using *although* and *because*, which almost all the subjects produced accurately.

The alternative communication strategy used by the subjects of this study was *paraphrase*, which consistently involved steering around *despite* + (*gerund/NP*) and *because of* + *NP* by paraphrasing them as *although* and *because*, over which they seem to have mastery. This was the case in both translation tasks, especially among those subjects at less advanced language levels, indicating that the question of complexity is probably relevant in this regard. The general trend observed is that *although* or *because* + *clauses* are apparently easier to produce than *despite* or *because of* + *noun phrases and gerunds*, as these involve more transformation and linguistic manipulation.

This study also provides evidence that a learner's language proficiency level has a significant effect on how often he/she relies on avoidance strategy. More advanced learners are more competent, and a result, more confident when communicating not only in the foreign language but also in their own language. The present study shows reliance on avoidance to be much less among more advanced learners in comparison with their less advanced counterparts. On the whole, the results of this study reveal that even the subjects at advanced levels resorted to avoidance, but the difference between avoidance and non-avoidance among these subjects was statistically insignificant, which indicates that a possible cause of avoidance is confidence, or rather lack of confidence (Kleinman 1983). This dimension, however, is beyond the scope of this study, and could be an issue for further research on the subject of avoidance.

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