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## **EFL Students' Difficulties with Lexical and Syntactic Features of News Headlines and News Stories**

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**Abstract.** Sixty-eight undergraduate translation students received direct instruction in the features of news headlines and news stories. A week later, they took a test that required them to identify the syntactic and lexical features of a sample of news headlines and news stories, supply deleted word, and substitute punctuation marks, infinitives, and block language by their meanings. Results showed that 75% of the subjects could identify initials, 72% recognized surnames and infinitives used instead of the 'future', 51% recognized deleted articles, 49% identified block language, 21% identified passive without agent, 19% recognized instances where verb "to be" was deleted, and 6% identified ellipted words. Incorrect responses revealed syntactic and semantic/lexical problems, lack of knowledge of current world events, and insufficient ability to apply features of newspaper language to news headlines and news stories unseen before. To help students read and comprehend news headlines and news stories, pedagogical implications are given.

**Keywords.** News Headlines, News Stories, Newspaper Language, Media Reports, Lexical Features, Syntactic Features, Media Texts, Processing Problems, stylistic features.

### **1. Introduction**

Due to latest developments in information and communication technologies, foreign language students nowadays have access to audio and visual news in the foreign language (L2) in print, online and mobile forms. Numerous studies in the educational, journalism, communication and language teaching and learning literature such as [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8] and [9] have shown that newspaper articles can provide many learning opportunities for students in all educational levels and all subject areas including first and second language learning. Those studies found that newspaper articles provide authentic materials through which students can analyze language, make connections, solve problems, think critically, explore mainstream culture, and develop media literacy by introducing media-related knowledge explicitly and systematically. In those studies, exposure to news broadcasts contributed to the development of students' listening, speaking, reading, writing skills, vocabulary knowledge, cultural analysis, and media literacy. They also enhanced students' skills in word identification, comprehension, critical thinking, analyzing propaganda, inferring, evaluating, and appreciating ideas in the newspaper text.

Although satellite T.V., online and mobile news have made it easy for students to follow and read the news in numerous foreign languages, especially English, another group of

studies in the literature have indicated that news stories are difficult to understand by the average L2 student because of their linguistic, pragmatic, rhetorical and functional features. [10] indicated that even advanced students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) or learning English for specific purposes (ESP) have difficulty coping with headlines because of the prosodic and phonic patterns deliberately created by using sound enhancing devices such as alliteration, rhyme, or rhythm.

Further studies in the literature showed that newspaper headlines are difficult for their syntactic complexity and morpho-syntactic ambiguity which result, as [10] indicated, from word class ambiguity, nominalizations, embeddings, extremely dense and extended noun phrases, which word performs as a verb, verbless lengthy headlines, and ellipsis (omission). [11] added that news headlines often contain incomplete sentences, and have idiosyncratic features in the use of punctuation, abbreviation, verb tense, organization, and grammar. In addition, newspaper syntax, as [12] pointed out, differs from book prose in number rather than kind of structure, with each structure appearing more frequently in newspaper prose. Taken as a whole, however, the structure results in systematically different sentences.

Another source of difficulty is word semantics and semantic implicitness, i.e., the failure to explicate logico-semantic relations in the surface structure which interfere with undergraduate students' ability to give an account of and answer questions about TV news. The effect of these features was found to be more far-reaching, especially when the topic is more unfamiliar. This is because students' comprehension of TV news depends primarily on the syntactic and semantic features of the surface structure of news headlines and news stories [13]. In addition, [14] tested the effect of the readability of national and regional factors in Czechoslovak newspapers, such as word and sentence length, connection type, word repetition, sentence recurrence, part of speech distribution, informational entropy and redundancy. Results showed that word semantics was a comprehension-determining factor.

A third difficult aspect of news articles is interface, double grounding, or topic driven metaphor, i.e., lexis from the semantic field of the topic or subject matter that is being used figuratively [10]. Double-grounded metaphors in news headlines and news stories appeared to be more difficult for students because they are more cognitively demanding than single-grounded metaphors. They also take longer reading times of news headlines than single-grounded metaphors with a similar meaning [15]. Familiarity with headline formulation techniques could be greatly beneficial for ESP students and would enable them to solve mysterious headline codes and hence enhance their idiomaticity skills [10]. Mastering newspaper metaphors can increase students' chances of becoming competent language users as well [16].

As for rhetorical and pragmatic features, English news headlines are characterized by wordplay and certain speech acts dominant in news channels. English news headlines and news stories contain one or more clearly defined tropes or metonymy, but no polysyndeton, anadiplosis, antimetabole, epistrophe and polyptoton [17]. Assertive speech acts are the most frequent in CNN and BBC headlines. However, CNN headlines use a plethora of commissive speech acts, whereas BBC headlines use a greater amount of expressive speech acts [18].

Comprehension of news headlines and news stories depends on text schemas, and prior knowledge. Recall, among undergraduate students who read a stimulus passage rewritten to follow either a news, narrative, or an expository text structure, was significantly affected by the structure of the passage and by the strength of students' text schemas [19]. Another study found that average political stories were more difficult to read than sports stories, and international and national news stories were more difficult than sports stories due to students' familiarity with and prior knowledge of sports stories [20]. Similar findings were obtained by

[21] when high school students with limited knowledge of baseball took a comprehension test on a Spanish-language report of a baseball game. Their findings indicated that background (prior) knowledge had a significant effect on comprehension. This means that background knowledge has a significant effect on comprehension, and in some cases, it could be more important for comprehension than the language level. Differences in students' comprehension of a particular genre were attributed to their various degrees of familiarity with the content and context, but not the structure of the text [21]; [22].

Difficulties that Arab students, in particular, have in translating news headlines were revealed by a limited number of studies. For example, analysis of the translated Arabic news headlines to English (L2) by [23] showed that Jordanian EFL college students made grammatical and lexical errors in the English translation respectively, whereas analysis of the translated English headlines revealed grammatical, discoursal and lexical difficulties in the Arabic (L1) translation in that order. Her findings confirmed the assumption that Jordanian students have inadequate experience with English headline features.

Despite the variety of issues investigated by prior studies, there is a dearth of studies that focus on Arab EFL and translation students' ability to identify the lexical, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and functional features of news headlines and news stories. Henceforth, the present study aims to investigate Saudi undergraduate translation students' ability to comprehend and analyze English news headlines and news stories, to identify their lexical and syntactic features, and to explore the lexical and syntactic features that are easy and those that are difficult to recognize. It also aims to explore the sources of students' difficulty with lexical and syntactic features of news headlines and news stories, and the strategies they use to determine those features.

The comprehension of news headlines and news stories by undergraduate students majoring in translation at College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud university, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia is of ultimate importance since the students take a Stylistics course in semester 5 of the translation program in which they study the features of specialized texts such as journalese, advertisement, legal, business, and technical texts. In semester 6 of the translation program at COLT, the students take a Media Translation course in which they read and translate a variety of mass media texts. To be able to fully comprehend and translate different types of media texts such as news headlines, **straight news**, **hard news**, international news, investigative news, feature articles, columns/editorials, letters to the editor, advertisements, business, lifestyle/entertainment and sports articles, fiction, comic strips, profiles, and weather forecasts, the students must be able to apply advanced reading and stylistic analysis skills and synthesize meaning from different sources in the text. They must pay attention to the lexical, semantic, syntactic, rhetorical, functional, and pragmatic features of the different types of media texts as those are important factors in comprehending and transferring their meaning of media texts from English to Arabic and Arabic to English. Comprehensibility of specialized text types by advanced language learners requires an adequate handling of the grammatical, lexical, and stylistic characteristics of those text [24].

Furthermore, this study is significant for translation instructors, as it sheds light on the areas of difficulties that undergraduate translation students have in comprehending news headlines and news stories, and in recognizing and interpreting their lexical and syntactic features. As [25] indicated, the complex comprehension strategies that facilitate the understanding of news headlines and news stories in a foreign language must be acquired by L2 students. To achieve that, the present study will give some pedagogical implications for teaching comprehension of news headlines and news stories based on the findings of this study.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Sixty-eight Saudi female undergraduate students majoring in translation at COLT participated in the study. The students were all native speakers of Arabic with English as their L2. They had completed four levels (semesters) of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary building courses in the first four semesters of the program in semesters 1-4 (20 hours per semester). They were all in semester 5 of the translation program and were taking Semantics (3 hours), Text Typology (2 hours), Linguistics (3 hours), Contrastive Analysis (3 hours) and 2 Interpreting courses (4 hours). In addition, they were enrolled in a Stylistics course (3 hours per week) that the author taught. In this course the students study the stylistic features of some specialized text types (technical and scientific, business, legal and journalese). They study the lexical and syntactic features of media texts particularly news headlines and news stories.

In semesters 6 the students take a Media Translation course, in which they are required to translate different kinds of media texts especially news headlines and news stories from English to Arabic and vice versa. After graduation, some translation graduates work as translators for a newspaper or interpreters for a news TV network. Therefore, knowledge of the stylistic features of news headlines and news stories is significant for performing the translation/interpretation task efficiently, especially because English and Arabic news headlines and news stories differ completely in their lexical and syntactic features (See the Discussion section).

### 2.2 In-class instruction

The subjects received instruction in the lexical and syntactic features of news headlines and news stories such as punctuation, abbreviations and acronyms, and pragmatic, lexical, syntactic, and semantic features in one class session. A news article or news story was defined as a report on an event that has taken place. Newspaper articles may include a by-line, body text, photo, and caption. The subject matter, i.e., the lexical, semantic, and syntactic features of news headlines and news stories covered in class were adopted from [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], and [32]. The syntactic features taught were as follows:

- Headlines use nouns not verbs for actions: *Edwards tells BL Unions that strike would bring closure.*
- Headlines use a series of three, four or more nouns together: *Party Leader Question Time.*
- Headlines usually contain noun phrases without a verb and noun phrases describing nouns: *Under Pressure from Protestors; Overwhelming Response on Social Media.*
- Simple tenses are used instead of continuous or perfect forms: *Forgotten Brother Appears.*
- The infinitive form is used in place of the future: *Film star to wed.*
- Auxiliary verbs are deleted in passive forms: *Man Killed in Accident.*
- Passive clauses are used with no agent: *Imports influx feared as Post Office profits are creamed off.*
- Definite and indefinite articles are usually deleted: *Mayor to Choose Candidate.*
- The comma is used instead of the conjunction *and*: *Trump, Putin to meet in Washington.*

- Headlines can be ambiguous, i.e., having two possible meanings. A word can have more than one meaning and more than one part of speech: *\$1,900,000 paid to attack victims; Students Plan Grants Cuts Protest March.*

The lexical features taught were as follows:

- Use of surnames without the first name: *Trump to meet with Putin.*
- Newspaper headlines use block language i.e., their own vocabulary such as: *bid = attempt; ban = forbid; probe = investigation; Tory = Conservative; trek = journey; rap = rebuke; pact = treaty.*
- Use of initials or acronyms to describe companies, organizations...etc.: *U.M.B.=United Builders Merchants; M.E.P.C.=Metropolitan Estate and Property Co.*
- The idiomatic use of words and phrases as in: *the stock went firmly ex-growth the same year.*
- Use of words with emotive associations as in: *Escalate; Mounting anger at silence; Tight-lipped.*
- Journalists are often vague, because they are not free to specify their exact source of information. They would often say: *A spokesman says; well-informed sources in Paris.*
- Journalists are fond of irrelevant detail, such as the ages of minor participants in an incident, e.g.: *said 50-year-old ex-army captain.*

Each syntactic and/or lexical feature was explained and illustrated by examples using a smart board. The students brought the same copy of Arab news (a Saudi English newspaper) to class. The online (digital) version of the newspaper was located and displayed on the smart board and on the students' smart phones. Sample headlines and news stories were analyzed, and their features identified by the students.

### 2.3 The Test

A week after instruction, the students took a test which consisted of two questions. In the first question, they were asked to write all the lexical and/or syntactic features in each of the 20 news headlines in Table 1, give examples from the headlines that illustrate each feature they mention, insert the missing parts, and substitute punctuation marks, infinitives, and block language by their meanings.

*Table 1. News Headlines on the Test*

[1] Imelda hails US court approval of settlement deal.	[11] Action against policemen ordered.
[2] Iran, Eritrea sign reconciliation pact.	[12] Indian heat toll 110; Delhi schools closed.
[3] Polluting firm allowed to reopen.	[13] Lions lose last chance to impact championship race.
[4] Singapore economy seen growing 2% in revised forecast.	[14] Bell tolls twice to lead the D'backs.
[5] London bombings seen as bid to revive racism.	[15] 3 injured in Moscow hotel blast.
[6] US to launch WTO action against EU in trade row.	[16] Britons urged to help catch racist bombers.
[7] Iran, Britain upgrade ties.	[17] Turkish govt to fall as crisis comes to a head.
[8] Philippines: Opportunities abound in electronics sector.	[18] Iran hails 'positive climate' for ties with Egypt.
[9] India: Political crisis keeps investors guessing.	

[10] Sweeping electoral reforms needed, says election chief.	[19] Mass killers on trial in Ukraine.
	[20] 400 held in Uganda anti-crime crackdown.

In the second question, the students were asked to read the two news stories below and write 5 lexical and/or syntactic features that they can find in each, illustrating each feature with at least one example.

**1) SMALL BLAST OCCURS AT U.S. MISSION IN ECUADOR**

QUITO, Nov. 21 (R) - A quarter stick of dynamite was thrown over a wall into the ground of the U.S. Embassy in Ecuador, but no one was injured and damage was only slight, authorities said yesterday. The small blast occurred on Thursday night at the embassy, which is next to a university. Police cordoned off the embassy and were investigating the explosion but had not identified who threw the device.

**2) 13-YEAR-OLD KILLED BY AFRICAN BEES**

MEXICO CITY (AFP) - A 13-year-old boy was killed after being stung by poisonous African bees during a religious ceremony in the southern state of Morelos, medical officials said Friday. The brother of the victim, Martin Santamaria, has also been hospitalized and remains in 'critical' condition from the bee stings. Some 200 people had gathered on a hill in Tlayacapan, 100 kilometres south of here, for an annual ceremony when the incident occurred. Another major bee attack took place earlier in April when 20 people were hospitalized in Morelos for bee stings.

The students were not given a list of lexical and syntactic features along with the questions to match or select their answers from. They had to identify the features from memory as this is significant for understanding the meaning of news headlines and news stories, and then translating them when they take the media translation course and after they graduate and work as translators or interpreters in which case, they are given a news story to translate without a list of features to guide them while translating or interpreting. While interpreting, they must recognize the features automatically because they do not have time to search for the features or even read them if they have them in hand. Searching for the lexical and syntactic features of news stories while on the job, or while taking a media translation exam, is a waste of time and effort.

The task of recognizing the lexical and syntactic features of news headlines might seem difficult at first, but it gets easier and students will internalize them with practice and memory training.

**2.4 Scoring the Responses**

The students' written responses were marked by the author. In grading the responses, only features which the students had studied in class were taken into consideration. To be marked as correct, each lexical and/or syntactic feature had to be associated with a correct example from the 20 news headlines on the test. Features which were not associated with an example or were associated with wrong examples were considered incorrect. The students did not have to classify the features they identify into lexical or syntactic. Percentages of students who could identify each specific lexical or syntactic feature correctly were calculated.

To find out the strategies that the students used in identifying the features of news headlines and news stories, and the sources of faulty feature identification, students' incorrect responses were subjected to further analysis. There was a total of 578 anomalies. This corpus consisted of responses in which a feature was given without an example, or examples were

incomplete or totally incorrect. Percentages of incorrect responses within each strategy were calculated.

Reliability of the students' test scores was calculated using the Kuder-Richardson 21' formula as it estimates the internal-consistency of the test items. The reliability coefficient was .89. Moreover, inter-scorer reliability was calculated by having a colleague who taught Stylistics mark a sample of answer sheets, and then comparing marked answers for each student by the two scorers. Inter-scorer reliability was 94%. Disagreements were solved by discussion.

### 3. Results And Discussion

#### 3.1 Frequency of features identified by the students

Analysis of the correct responses of the undergraduate translation students presented in Table 2 show that 22% of the students identified fewer than 5 features, 67% of the students identified 6-9 features, and 11% identified 10 or more features out of 17 lexical and syntactic features mentioned above.

*Table 2. Percentages of Correctly Identified Features*

Number of Features	%	Number of Features	%	Number of Features	%
No features	1%	5 features	5 %	9 features	12%
1 feature	2.5%	6 features	20%	10 features	7%
3 features	7.5%	7 features	19%	More than 10	4%
4 features	6%	8 features	16%		

#### 3.2 Distribution of correct and incorrect responses

Analysis of the correct responses indicated that lexical features related to punctuation, abbreviations and acronyms in news headlines were easier to identify than syntactic features. The higher the percentage of the correct answers, the easier the feature. Table 3 shows that the easiest lexical features to identify were the use of the comma instead of *and* (83%), use of initials and acronyms (75%), use of surnames and deletion of first names (72%) in that order. Use of block language was of average difficulty (49%).

Furthermore, results in Table 3 show that the easiest syntactic features were use of infinitives instead of the future (72%) and use of the present tense (71%) respectively. Recognition of deleted articles was of average difficulty (51%); the most difficult syntactic features were: Use of passives without an agent (21%), deleted verb *to be* (19%), and use of figures instead of words (15%). Identification of ellipted parts and use of emotive associations and irrelevant details were extremely difficult (6%).

*Table 3. Percentage of Students Who Identified Each Feature Correctly*

Features	%	Features	%
• Use of comma instead of <i>and</i>	83%	• Use of colons	31%
• Use of initials, abbreviations & acronyms	75%	• Subject predicate inversion	28%
• Use of surnames	72%	• Use of passive without agents	21%
• Use of infinitive instead of the future	72%	• Deleted Verb to Be	19%

• Use of the Present Tense	71%	• Use of figures instead of words	15%
• deleted article	51%	• Ellipsis	6%
• Use of block language	49%	• Use of emotive associations	6%
• Use of semicolons	38%	• Irrelevant details	1.5%
• Use of action nouns	38%		

Analysis of the error data showed that 45% of the errors were syntactic and 21% were lexical and semantic. In 34% of the errors, the subjects failed to match the feature with its example, they confused headline features or did not provide any examples.

### **3.3 Causes of errors and faulty strategies used**

The subjects' errors reflect poor processing of English news headlines and news stories which may be due to their inadequate linguistic competence as revealed by the following:

- Failure to identify action nouns as in the following faulty responses: *toll, crisis, racism, catch, keeps, against, London, investors, bombers, deal, guessing, approval*. Failure to insert the correct article before the correct noun as in the following faulty responses: *The guessing, the catch, the Delhi, the Imelda, the London, the racism, The Britons, the investors a racism, a trade, a WTO, an approval, a political, a settlement, and a bid*.

- Failure to supply the ellipited (deleted) parts. In headline [12] in Table 3, the following faulty words were supplied: *Indian heat toll (reaches) 110 (students, schools, degrees, and injuries)*. Sixty-one instances were left blank which reflect complete failure.

- Failure to locate infinitive verbs that refer to the future tense as in *to revive* in headline [5], *to impact* in headline [13], *to lead* in headline [14] and *to help* in headline [16] in Table 3.

- Failure to recover passive structures. Some students provided a Present Perfect verb form instead of a Passive verb form as in *have seen*. They also provided different forms of verb "to be" regardless of the number of the controlling subject and tense that should be provided as in the following faulty responses: *is seen, was seen, are seen, were seen, are closed, was closed, were closed, were urged, was urged, are urged, and is urged*. Thirty-three responses were left blank, showing complete failure.

- Faulty identification of ambiguous phrases. Some subjects thought that *Ban, reopening, export ban, and beef export* were ambiguous, i.e., have two meanings but in the news headlines tested they were not.

Furthermore, incorrect responses reveal the subjects' inability to match the lexical items in the news headlines with their corresponding lexical features, meanings, or substitutes such as:

- Failure to identify block language. Some students supplied faulty examples of block language such as: *heat, toll, racist, launch, deal, urged, bombings, settlement, Delhi, revive*.

- Failure to identify surnames in the tested headlines as in following faulty examples: *Imelda, Britons*.

The subjects' difficulty with the syntactic and lexical features of news headlines and news stories is consistent with findings of studies by [33] and [23]. [33] found that intermediate learners of German whose first language is English experienced more semantic difficulties when reading an English text (L1) and more syntactic difficulties when reading a

German version of the same text (L2). In translating news headlines, undergraduate Jordanian students had grammatical, discoursal and lexical difficulties in translating English headlines to Arabic but had grammatical and lexical difficulties in translating Arabic news headlines to English, due to their inadequate experience with English headlines features [23].

Difficulty with syntactic features may be attributed to syntactic complexity such as embeddings, nominalizations, and failure to explicate logico-semantic relations in the surface structure as those might interfere with the students' ability to give an account of, and answer questions about TV news. The effect of these features was found to be more far-reaching especially when the topic is unfamiliar [13]. Morpho-syntactic ambiguity were reported to result from word class ambiguity, extremely dense and extended noun phrases, which word performs as a verb, verbless lengthy headlines, and ellipsis [10].

Difficulty in selecting lexical items to illustrate the lexical features identified could be attributed to the students' unfamiliarity with some of the lexical items in the tested headlines such as *toll*, *launch*, *revive*, and *settlement*, and inability to access their meaning. Incorrect responses also revealed inadequate transferring and application skills, i.e., inability to apply the lexical features studied to news headlines and news stories that were unseen before. This is supported by results of a study by [34] which showed that students' domain-specific knowledge is more influential in generating relevant inferences from discourse than in recalling specific information. This is true of the special lexical items (jargon) used in news headlines and news stories. Word semantics, such as word and sentence length and connection type, word repetition, sentence recurrence, part of speech distribution, and informational entropy and redundancy, constitute a comprehension-determining factor in the readability of newspapers as well [14].

Moreover, problems that students have in recognizing and processing news headlines and news stories successfully might be attributed to the differences in the linguistic features of news headlines and news stories in the two languages. Arabic news headlines and news articles do not have the same lexical and syntactic features as those of English. Arabic news headlines are short sentences with normal word order. Arabic is concise. A single word may contain a verb, a subject, and object pronouns all together. Voice is shown by mutation (change of vowels) in the verb. The definite article /al/ (*the*) and conjunction /wa/ (*and*) are attached to the word, i.e., they are part of the word. No punctuation marks are used in headlines. Arabic has three tenses (Present, Past, Future) only, with four prefixes attached to the verb, each indicating tense, gender, number, voice, and case together. No articles and verbs are deleted in Arabic news headlines. No infinitives are used instead of the future tense. Arabic headlines use both nouns and verbs. Ambiguous nouns, block language, initials, and idiomatic use of words and phrases are not used at all in Arabic news headlines. Names of organizations and companies are normally reduced to one or two main words. Like English, Arabic news headlines use the present tense to describe something that happened in the past in order to make readers feel that the events in the news have just happened. This feature can be attributed to the timeliness of news. Like English, Arabic headlines use surnames and words with emotive associations. Arab journalists do not specify the exact source of information and would say: "*Informed sources, agencies*" and are fond of irrelevant details.

Furthermore, incorrect responses may reflect inadequate situational, cultural and world knowledge. The subjects seemed to be unfamiliar with names of countries and cities that occurred in the news stories on the test such as *Ukraine*, *Quito*, *Eritrea*, *Morelos*, did not know that *Imelda* is a first name, some thought that *Santamaria* is the name of a city rather than a surname, due to unfamiliarity with and lack of exposure to English news. They probably could not identify the general meaning or theme of the news headline or news

stories, were not familiar with foreign sports teams and athletes such as *Lion, Bell, D'backs*, and were not familiar with acronyms (*WTO, EU, R, AFP*) that stand for organizations and press agencies. To fully comprehend the news stories, the students need background knowledge of world events, general topic knowledge, topic specific vocabulary, use of explicit and implicit clues available in the news headline and/or news story, ability to infer meanings of difficult words from context, and need to develop a schema for the structure of news headlines and news stories.

Here again, findings of the present study are consistent with findings of prior studies. [19] found that recall was significantly affected by the structure of a text and the strength of students' text schema or students' prior knowledge of the text topic. Students' general topic knowledge and familiarity with the format of English televised news predicted recall and comprehension depending on the type of news story [35]. Exposure to and familiarity with the news constituted a factor in comprehension as 71% of the students who mentioned television or radio as their main source of news found the mapped story easier to read [36]. International, national, and political news stories were more difficult to read than sports stories due to students' familiarity with and prior knowledge of sports stories [20]. Likewise, prior knowledge of baseball was found to be a significant factor affecting the comprehension of a Spanish-language report of a baseball game that high school students with limited knowledge of baseball read [21]. This means that prior knowledge has a significant effect on comprehension, and in some cases, it could be even more important for comprehension than language level. Differences in students' comprehension of a particular genre were attributed to their various degrees of familiarity with the content and context, and not the structure of the text [21]; [22].

Finally, incorrect responses in the present study revealed several ineffective and inefficient strategies in determining news headline features. Some subjects just memorized all the features of news headlines that they had studied in class and wrote them all on the test paper in the order in which they were presented in class and in the handout, whether they all apply to the news headlines and news stories on the test or not. Some errors showed that the subjects are visual, and they responded imitatively rather than discriminately. Correct responses such as use of commas instead of *and* in headlines was the easiest to identify, as commas can be easily noticed, and do not require higher level thinking. Many subjects thought any phrase that begins with *to* as in *to revive* in headline [5], *to impact* in headline [13] *to lead* in headline [14] and *to help* in headline [16] in Table 3 is an infinitive phrase used instead of the future, without taking into consideration the overall meaning, word order and structure of the headline. Some confused *Britons* in headline [16] and *Britain*. Others overgeneralized the use of articles, when they inserted an article before each noun they encountered in a headline, without realizing that use of articles in English is restricted, and that articles cannot be used before certain proper nouns (*London*), and non-count nouns (*racism*), and gerunds (*guessing*). These inadequate (faulty) strategies probably reflect the inadequate mastery of the those features and inadequate linguistic competence.

#### 4. Pedagogical Implications

Comprehension of news headlines and news stories is a developmental process. For readers to understand a text, they must construct its mental representation drawing on their background knowledge. Students' background knowledge of world events can be enhanced by having them watch T.V. news and read news headlines and news stories on their mobile

devices and/or laptop and write a paraphrase of them to help improve their general English proficiency level especially vocabulary and syntax.

Since students at COLT take 4 Reading courses in semesters 1 to 4 of the translation program, reading and comprehending newspaper texts can start early by integrating them in the Reading courses. Then instructors of the Stylistics course can raise the students' awareness of the features of newspaper. A contrastive analysis of the linguistic features of English and Arabic newspaper language can be conducted because Arabic news headlines and news stories – as mentioned above - are generally much simpler in their syntactic and lexical features, and do not share most of the features of English news headlines and news stories.

Instruction in the features of news headlines and news stories may proceed in the four graded stages: (A) Orientation, (B) Guided Practice, (C) Independent practice, and (D) Translation. In the *Orientation* and *Guided Practice* stages, use of punctuation, surnames, abbreviation, lexical and stylistic features of newspaper headlines are introduced in order of difficulty and practiced one at a time with easier features practiced first, and the most difficult ones last in the following order: Use of punctuation marks such as commas, semicolons, and colons, use of initials, abbreviations and acronyms, use of surnames without first names and titles, and use of block language.

Similarly, syntactic features may be introduced and practiced in the following order: (1) Use of the present tense; (2) use of the infinitive instead of the future; (3) article deletion; (4) use of action nouns; (5) use of passives without agent; (6) deletion of verb *to be* in passive forms; (7) ellipsis; (8) emotive associations, and (9) ambiguity. Each feature should be illustrated by examples. Examples are explained and a paraphrase of each headline is given. Each feature can be highlighted and displayed using a smart board or an LCD projector.

In the case of noun strings, [26] suggested connecting the ideas by reading backward. For example: *Mustang Referral Customer Complaint* can be read backwards as follows: There is a *complaint* made by a *customer* about a *referral* program for *Mustang* cars. It is useful for students to pose questions about the headline such as: *About What? From what? From whom? To whom?* and so on.

Before reading news stories, explicit instruction in predicting the content of a news article can help the students comprehend it by drawing inferences [37]. While reading a news story, the students can infer the meanings of unfamiliar words from context. They can fill in words, phrases, or text segments in news headlines and articles. Difficult lexical and syntactic features can be subjected to extra practice. Instructors may use pre-questions (*About What? From what? From whom? To whom?*) as advance organizers to help the students focus on certain elements of news headlines and news stories while reading.

Furthermore, [6] recommended a systematic approach to teaching students to read English newspaper articles. This approach is based on the following principles: Purpose, integrity, bottom-up teaching, hierarchical and structural organization of newspaper articles, their functional value, acquiring lexical units (block language) used in news headlines and news stories, and comparative analysis of L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English) newspaper language.

In the *Independent Practice Stage*, the students are provided with news headlines from paper and online newspapers and online News TV websites and are asked to read each headline, analyze it, and give its features. Cloze type exercises can be used.

In the *Translation Stage*, the students can be given English and Arabic news headlines (for the same story), can be asked to compare and contrast their stylistic features, and write the Arabic equivalent to English news headlines and the English equivalent to Arabic news headlines.

Finally, students can keep a portfolio for daily breaking news, news headlines and news stories of interest to them. They can discuss the syntactic and lexical features with each other, in pair or small groups [2]. They can write summaries of news stories and paraphrase news headlines [1].

## 5. Conclusion

Newspaper language is characterised by several linguistic, pragmatic, rhetorical and functional features that English-Arabic and Arabic-English translation students need to be familiar with, comprehend and interpret. This study focused on difficulties that a sample of Saudi undergraduate EFL students enrolled in a Stylistics course at COLT have in identifying the lexical and syntactic features of news headlines and news stories. Error analysis showed that the students had numerous difficulties in identifying, understanding, and interpreting syntactic and lexical features of news headlines and news stories. Syntactic features were found to be more difficult than lexical features. To form a global picture of the difficulties that undergraduate translation students at COLT f have with newspaper language, further difficulties that undergraduate translation students have with other features of newspaper articles such as the pragmatic, rhetorical and functional features, and features of the entertainment, editorials, advertisements, Letters to the Editor, business and travel sections of the newspaper are still open for further investigation by future research especially because of the differences between English and Arabic in those aspects. In addition, Saudi undergraduate students' ability to understand, interpret and translate single- and double-grounded metaphors, tropes and/or metonymy, wordplay, and to analyze propaganda, assertive and commissive speech acts, and the role of text schemas on comprehension and translation of a variety of newspaper articles are new venues of future English-Arabic translation and language learning research.

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