

Language Transfer: The role of L1 in Learning L2

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Abstract

Language transfer is a linguistic phenomenon which refers to integrating elements from the native language (L1) while learning a second language (L2). The presence of L1 in L2 learning was not accepted by all researchers; some highlight its facilitating effect and others emphasize its hindering effect in learning L2. Language transfer has been tackled by contrastive analysis and error analysis. Besides, language transfer manifest in different forms and different factors influence its use. It is of different types, and its role in L2 classrooms is regarded differently by teachers. However, positive transfer is of immense help in learning L2.

Key Words: Transfer—Didactics—Teaching—Learning—Contrastive Analysis

Résumé:

Le transfert de langue est un phénomène linguistique qui se réfère à l'intégration des éléments de la langue maternelle (L1) en apprenant une deuxième langue (L2). La présence de L1 dans l'apprentissage L2 n'a pas été acceptée par tous les chercheurs; certains stressent son effet de facilitation quand les autres soulignent son effet entravé dans l'apprentissage de L2. Le transfert linguistique a été abordé par l'analyse contrastive et l'analyse d'erreur. Il se manifeste sous différentes formes et différents facteurs influent son utilisation. Il est de différents types, et son rôle dans les classes de L2 est considéré différemment par les enseignants. Cependant, le transfert positif est d'un grand secours pour apprendre L2.

Introduction

The role of the native language (L1) is controversial in second language acquisition (SLA). Language transfer is the incorporation of L1 elements while learning L2. Some researchers see that L1 facilitates L2 learning, whereas others see that L1 hinders L2 learning. Contrastive analysis and error analysis dealt with this issue from different stand points. Language transfer can manifest in different forms. It is of different types but the prominent one is the phonological transfer. Certain teachers believe in the exclusive use of L2 in their classrooms whereas other believes in L1 use in L2 classes with certain precautions.

1. First Language(L1) in Second Language Acquisition(SLA)

According to Ellis⁽¹⁾, the term second language acquisition is generally used to refer to any language other than the first language. Mohebbi⁽²⁾ sees that the issue of employing learners' first language (L1) in second language acquisition has been an ongoing debate, and inspite of the decline of L1 influence in the 1970s, there has been a renewed interest in L1 transfer in the past 20 years or so⁽³⁾. Yu⁽⁴⁾ sees that the role of the native language is complex, as it influences the second language acquisition to some degree. He clarifies that L2 learners have already had a fully developed native language system in their minds⁽⁵⁾.

According to Al-Zoubi & Abu-Eid⁽⁶⁾), Sharwood-Smith (1979) refers to three eras with respect to the attitudes towards the role the L1 plays in L2 learning. The first era is characterized by the influence of structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology. In this era, transfer from the native language is taken to be a matter of habit. In the second era, cognitivism in psychology and language acquisition, the role that the L1 plays in L2 learning is disregarded and second language acquisition is considered as a creative process. The third era is considered as a corrective movement within the cognitive approach to language learning. The role of the native language in theory-building has been revived, and the notions of creativity in learning have been extended to include inter lingual transfer. learner is viewed as an active participant in the process of learning, one who decides which elements of the native language are transferable and which are not.

2. Language Transfer

Selinker⁽⁷⁾ considers the following processes as central in second language learning: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication and overgeneralization of the target language linguistic material. Language transfer has an extended history in the field of SLA as researchers and linguists have been discussing this issue for many decades.

Language transfer is considered as one of the most problematic phenomena in L2 acquisition. It is known as: "mother tongue influence", "cross-linguistic influence" or "cross-linguistic generalization"⁽⁸⁾. O'Malley & Chamot⁽⁹⁾ define language transfer as "Using previous linguistic knowledge or prior skill to assist comprehension or production". Ellis⁽¹⁰⁾ clarifies that L1 transfer usually refers to the incorporation of features of the L1 into the knowledge systems of the L2 which the learners is trying to build. For Al-Zoubi & Abu-Eid

⁽¹¹⁾, language transfer is taken as the effect of speakers' or writers' L1 on the perception of his or her L2; "the knowledge of their L1 will be used in the L2 or target language as a way to acquire the L2 itself" ⁽¹²⁾. They further clarify that the two, language acquisition and language transfer, are linked, because language transfer is a process that goes hand in hand with the learning of an L2 since once a person starts learning another language the transfer process begins ⁽¹³⁾. Language transfer, then, refers to the process of integrating one language while learning another one.

Yule ⁽¹⁴⁾ further explains the term 'interlanguage' which he considers as the basis of all L2 production; "there is some in-between system used in L2 acquisition which certainly contains aspects of L1 and L2, but which is an inherently variable system with rules of its own" ⁽¹⁵⁾. Yu ⁽¹⁶⁾ further highlights that L1 is a resource of knowledge which learners will use both consciously and subconsciously to help them sift the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can in the L2.

3. Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

According to Talebi ⁽¹⁷⁾, in SLA studies the concept of transfer was first introduced in *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)* assuming that certain elements in the first language hinder or facilitate second language acquisition. Tahaineh ⁽¹⁸⁾ adds that CAH gained grounds as a means of predicting areas of similarity and difference between L1 and L2. Talebi ⁽¹⁹⁾ explains that in CAH where two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur, and where two languages were different, negative transfer (or interference) would occur. However, Grami ⁽²⁰⁾ show that CAH faced certain problems especially that it predicts a number of difficulties that are not observed in second language learning; "the differences between the first and the second language do not always highlight particular difficulties in second language learning" ⁽²¹⁾. Then, not all the differences between L1 and L2 lead to error and that not all errors made by L2 learners are due to the influence of L1. The other problem is that CAH fails to predict certain difficulties that were observed in second language learning.

As a result of the dissatisfaction with CAH, Error Analysis succeeded in elevating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the learner's internal processing used for acquiring L2 knowledge and using it for creating speech ⁽²²⁾. Error analysis makes a clear distinction between errors and mistakes, errors reflect gaps in students' knowledge and mistakes reflect occasional lapses in performance, confusion and slips of tongue ⁽²³⁾. Error analysis divides errors into two types: interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual errors are related to the mother tongue while intralingual errors (also known as developmental errors) are related to the target language itself.

4. Manifestations of Language Transfer

According to Ellis ⁽²⁴⁾, "transfer may not always manifest itself as errors (the focus of early studies), but also as avoidance, overuse, and facilitation". Errors, negative transfer, would occur as a result of the differences between L1 and L2; "errors occurred as a result of the negative transfer of mother tongue patterns into learner's L2" ⁽²⁵⁾. It is also referred to as

interference. However, when L1 and L2 are similar this would lead to positive transfer and learners' L1 will have a facilitating role in learning L2. Yu explains, "when both the L1 and the L2 have the same form, pattern or rule, the transfer facilitates learning, and this is positive transfer, which results in correct performance, because the new behavior is the same as the old" ⁽²⁶⁾.

Language transfer would also manifest in learners' avoidance of using certain structures because of their difficulty that result from its differences with L1. Yu clarifies, "Both the extent of learners' knowledge of L2 and the attitudes learners hold toward the native and the target language cultures act as factors that interact with L1 knowledge to determine avoidance behavior" ⁽²⁷⁾. Avoidance can result in language overuse, "over-use can also result from transfer- often as a consequence of the avoidance or underproduction of some 'difficult' structure" ⁽²⁸⁾. Ellis further explains that over-use can occur as a result of overgeneralization. In addition, ⁽²⁹⁾ clarifies that the over-use as a result of transfer can be shown in two ways: first, the over-indulgence of certain grammatical forms in L2 acquisition can occur as a result of intralingual processes such as overgeneralization; second, over-use is also evident at the discourse level.

5. Factors Influencing Language transfer

According to Yu ⁽³⁰⁾, there are two types of factors that influence language transfer: Language factors and non language factors. First, language transfer related to language factors is recognized at the different language levels such as phonology, lexis, grammar and discourse, among which transfer at the level of phonology is the most obvious. He explains that in grammar, transfer may also occur in word order, clause and negative structures. Second, language transfer related to non- language factors refers to the distance between L1 and L2. Ellis ⁽³¹⁾ points out that language distance can be viewed as both a linguistic phenomenon and a psycholinguistic phenomenon. The former refers to the degree of actual linguistic difference between two languages, the latter means the degree of difference between two languages in learners' opinion.

6. Examples of (L1) Arabic Transfer in Learning L2 (English)

Ellis ⁽³²⁾ pinpoints that language transfer occurs in relation to all aspects of language: phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Grami & Alzughaihi ⁽³³⁾ provide the following examples:

The transfer of L1 (Arabic) grapheme-phoneme correspondence

Arabic language spelling depends on consistent grapheme-phoneme mappings. In contrast, English has some changeable grapheme-phoneme spelling such as the phoneme /k/ can be spelled as <c> as in *picnic*, <k> as in *kitchen*, <ck> as in *stuck*, <ch> as in *school*. Arab ESL learners may transfer their L1 spelling knowledge to deal with English spelling such as *piknik* for *picnic* and *fone* for *phone* (Fender, 2008 cited in Grami & Alzughaihi 2012, p. p.1558).

The transfer of L1 (Arabic) phonological knowledge

Transfer of phonological knowledge accounts for some problems that Arab ESL learners may encounter when they acquire ESL phonemic segments and patterns that are not found in Arabic language (Fender, 2008 cited in Idem). For example, English language has two distinctive bilabial plosives, <p> and , whereas Arabic language has only . Arab learners may misspell words such as *blay*, *bicture*, *Jaban* and others. Moreover, Arabic language has only /o/ sound, while English language has /oo / and /o/. This fact usually makes it difficult for Arab ESL learners to distinguish between the pronunciation of *whole* and *hall*, and to write *coast* when they mean *cost* (Ibrahim, 1978 cited in Grami& Alzughaihi 2012, p. p.1558). Another example of this type of error is that Arab ESL learners appear to have difficulty with consonant clusters in English. They tend to insert a vowel to these clusters when they want to write or pronounce them such as *communisem*, *childiren*, *bilastic* and *tiransilate* (Ibrahim, 1978, cited in idem) .

L1 Transfer and English Grammar Rules

When learners are given the rule without its exceptions, the rule is considered incomplete. For example, when learners want to add suffix to a word with a final *e*, they must be taught that in this case if the suffix begins with a vowel letter, the final *e* must be dropped unless that it must be retained such as *complete: completely*, but *compare: comparing*. Ibrahim (1978, cited in idem) also mentions that overgeneralization influences the spelling of Arab ESL learners. He argues that some Arab ESL learners may make error such as *savery* because they know that *brave* becomes *bravery* and *slave* becomes *slavery*.

L1 Transfer and English Lexical Phrases

Grami& Alzughaihi (2012) refer to the incorrect usages of the preposition “from” which were found in texts written by Arabs. Another example of L1 interference is the incapacity to differentiate between verbs such as “record” and “register” and how to use them in their proper contexts.

7.L1 Use in the L2 Classrooms

According to Mahmutoglu & Kicir⁽³⁴⁾, the use of the mother tongue in teaching a foreign language is a controversial topic. Some researchers see that the native language has a facilitating role in the foreign language classrooms; whereas others see it as hindrance. It has been questioned for a long time whether L1 should be used in the L2 classrooms or not? According to Nazary⁽³⁵⁾, there are three approaches in relation to L1 use in L2 classrooms: Monolingual, bilingual and the balanced theory.

EFL teachers who strongly believe that they should never use even a single word from their mother tongue in the classroom are the followers of the ‘Monolingual Approach’. They believe that 1)The learning of an L2 should model the learning of an L1 (through maximizing the exposure to the L2; 2) Successful learning involves the separation and distinction of L1 and L2, 3) Students should be shown the importance of the L2 through its continual use.

Mahmutoglu & Kicir ⁽³⁶⁾ provide Phillipson's (1992) five principles for using only English in language classrooms as follows:

1. English is the best taught mono-lingual;
2. The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker;
3. The earlier English is taught, the better the result;
4. The more English is taught, the better the result.
5. If other languages are used too much, standards of English will drop.

However, the role played by L1 is not ignored by researchers, Cook ⁽³⁷⁾ advances that "even in the most hard-line monolingual classrooms, teachers who have been trained and contracted to teach without translation nevertheless occasionally resort to it when all else fails, which may be quite often". Then, certain teachers are cautious with L1 use in their L2 classes. These are the advocators of the 'Bilingual approach'. Nation ⁽³⁸⁾ introduces another approach called 'the Balanced Approach'. This approach sees a role for the L1 but also recognizes the importance of maximizing L2 use in the classroom. Teachers need to show respect for learners' L1, at the same time, it is the English teacher's job to help learners develop their proficiency in English.

According to Mahmutoglu & Kicir ⁽³⁹⁾, their research findings (questionnaires and interviews) show that both teachers and students do not oppose the use of L1 in L2 classes, but only in necessary situations. Besides, L2 use in the classroom should be increased so that the students be more in contact with the target language. Similarly, in his study, Hussein ⁽⁴⁰⁾ aimed to investigate and analyze the actual reasons, attitudes, and purposes behind the use of the mother tongue (Arabic) in teaching English as an L2 to Arab students at Jordanian private and government-aided universities. The results obtained showed that almost all the respondents expressed the need for the use of Arabic in the English classroom, because it helps them understand the meaning of new or difficult words, explain complex syntactic rules, and save time. Their study also showed that not allowing students to use their mother tongue will result in prohibiting them to have some opportunities to learn English better⁽⁴¹⁾.

Mahmutoglu & Kicir ⁽⁴²⁾ clarify that L1 can be used as a facilitator to make a task meaningful so that the students can focus on the task without difficulty. They highlight certain advantages of using the mother tongue as summarized by Hinai (2011) as follows: 1) It reduces learner anxiety and creates a more relaxing learning environment, 2) It is a means of bringing the learners' cultural background knowledge into the class, 3) It facilitates checking understanding and giving instructions, 3) It facilitates the task of explaining the meaning of abstract words and of introducing the main differences in grammar and pronunciation between L1 and L2.

8. Functions of L1 in L2 Classroom

According to Mohebbi ⁽⁴³⁾ L1 might be employed effectively in L2 activities to provide assistance, initiate and maintain interrelationships, and externalize and vocalize L2 learners' thought. Also, L1 can serve social and cognitive functions. He further explains that the novice teacher uses L1 mainly for translation, whereas the experienced teachers employ it to provide a relaxed atmosphere "by making personal comments and jokes in learners' L1" ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

In addition, Atkinson ⁽⁴⁵⁾ sees that L2 teachers make reference to learners' L1 for eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving instructions, co-operation between learners, discussing classroom methodology, presenting and reinforcing language, checking for sense, testing, and development of useful learning strategies. Similarly, Samadi ⁽⁴⁶⁾ highlights that teachers used the L1 mostly for establishing a non-threatening classroom environment, explaining grammar, translating vocabulary, managing the classroom, and giving instruction. L1 can also be beneficial to maintain communication in the classroom; "The students express themselves in English when they fail to understand and when they want to clarify the meaning of a word in L2 and express themselves in English" ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

Mattioli ⁽⁴⁸⁾ refers to five functions of L1 in an EFL classroom: explaining vocabulary, giving instructions, explaining language rules, warning students, and talking to individual students. Nazary ⁽⁴⁹⁾ concludes that functions of L1 in classroom activities are as follow: conversation activities, discussion of intensive reading, preparation for writing and some fluency tasks, awareness-raising activities, contrasting L1 and L2, research in L1, and presentation in L2. In addition, by referring to the current theories of second language acquisition and reviewing the recent literature, Nazary ⁵⁰⁾ sees that the first language of learners (L1) has a necessary and facilitating role in all aspects of language instruction.

9. Pedagogical Implications

From the above literature, both teachers and learners should be aware that language transfer is an unavoidable process while learning another language. Learners make appeal to their L1 linguistic repertoire in order to ease the learning of L2, and teachers use L1 in L2 classroom in situations where L2 is not effective in explaining and learners face problems of understanding. However, using L1 while learning L2 should be controlled by both teachers and learners. But the question to be asked here is how?

Teachers' role

In order to develop learners' awareness of their language transfer, teachers themselves should have a deep knowledge of this linguistic phenomenon: its definition, types, functions, manifestations, ...etc. Besides, teachers should clarify to their students the difference between positive transfer and negative transfer and how positive transfer eases L2 Learning. Hence, while presenting lessons, teachers should be keen on showing the similarities and the differences between L1 and L2. In fact, learners, too, need certain theoretical background on language transfer to understand it better.

Moreover, teachers should motivate learners to recognize their errors in order to avoid interference, the negative transfer. In this case, teachers may design sessions or part of sessions in involving learners in discovering their errors, their types, their source, and how to correct them. By discovering their errors by themselves, learners will be more equipped to recognize language transfer when it occurs, and this awareness will help in avoiding its excessive use.

Besides, in the classrooms, teachers should involve learners in many learning tasks in order to help them develop their thinking skill in L2. Involving learners' in intensive L2 classroom tasks will develop gradually the habit of thinking in the target language. Moving away from thinking in the mother tongue to thinking in the target language is not automatic; it needs time, will, and patience.

In the L2 classroom, the official language should be L2. Teachers are responsible on developing this habit in their classrooms. The first step towards this is the teacher himself/herself. By doing so, the teacher becomes the model for their students. Then, the students themselves will develop an inner need to use L2 and avoid using L1 as much as possible.

Therefore, teachers should make appeal to learners' L1 only when necessary. In certain situations, using L1 will save time, energy, and ease the understanding. Here, teachers should be aware that they use L1 not for its own sake but as a helping tool to learn L2 effectively.

Learners' role

Gaining knowledge about language transfer will help learners control how they use it. Learners need to avoid translation as much as possible and the only way to do this is through the constant use of L2. Then, instead of using English-Arabic or Arabic- English dictionaries, learners need to use English-English dictionary as the primary source of learning L2. Doing so will enlarge their L2 vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, and even grammatical repertoires.

Besides, reading in the target language can assure learners' decrease of negative transfer. By constant reading practices, learners will develop gradually their L2 thinking skills and this will diminish their appeal to L1. This regular contact with the target language will develop learners' L2 linguistic repertoire. However, learners may use positive transfer as an L2 learning strategy. They can use the similarities between L1 and L2 in order to facilitate the learning of L2.

Conclusion

Language transfer is the process of integrating some aspects of a learned language while learning another one, usually using L1 while learning L2. This linguistic phenomenon is extensively discussed in SLA researches. Language transfer can be positive or negative. Positive transfer eases L2 learning, whereas the negative transfer hinders this learning process. Different views and theories have been attached to language transfer, some are with its use in the L2 classrooms and others are against it. However, it is wise noting that

consciously or unconsciously both teachers and learners use it with different degrees. Indeed, language transfer is inevitable in L2 learning; nevertheless, its use should be controlled by both teachers and learners.

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