

EFFECTS OF MOTHER LANGUAGE TRANSFER ON SECOND
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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EFFECTS OF MOTHER LANGUAGE TRANSFER ON SECOND
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ii

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Abstract

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ACQUISITION

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Richard Garrett

Mother tongue plays a very important role in the process of second language acquisition. Researchers have proposed many theories on mother language transfer, second language acquisition and the relationship between first language acquisition and second language acquisition. This paper reviews the theoretical bases of language transfer and second language acquisition, focusing on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Interlanguage Theory. The paper concludes with some suggestions on second language teaching strategies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE	i
TITLE PAGE	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	
Definitions of Terms	
Purpose of the Study	
Significance of the Study	
Delimitation of the Study	
Methodology	
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE	3
The Definition of Language Transfer	
Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis	
Interlanguage Theory	
Problems Second Language Teaching	
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	14
REFERENCES	

Chapter I Introduction

According to Zeliha Yazıcı and his team (2010), Mother tongue plays a very important role in our life when we study a foreign language. In the process of learning a foreign language, we are affected by our mother tongue more or less. We should pay attention to those effects and study them, whether they are good or bad. Then we can acquire a foreign language efficiently.

Statement of the Problem

When learning a foreign language, many students don't understand the thinking pattern of a foreign language. The students lack the knowledge of the similarities and differences between their mother tongue and second language which they are learning. Maybe some sentences or essays are simple, but they still don't understand the cognitive learning process. So the problem to be addressed is, can we find an effective way for second language acquisition? Is the mother tongue really helpful for second language acquisition?

Definition of Terms

“Transfer” is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired (Terence Odlin, 1989, p. 27).

“Second language acquisition” is the subconscious or conscious processes by which a language other than the mother tongue is learnt in a natural or a tutored setting (Rod Ellis, 1986, p. 6).

Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to find an efficient way to acquire another language with the help of the mother tongue.

Significance of the Study

Language transfer means that learners' habits of using their mother tongue will influence their ability to acquire a second language directly. The study on language transfer will help instructors or learners to define the key points and difficulties in the process of teaching or learning a second language.

Delimitation of the Study

Literature research will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and JSTOR as the primary sources. Key search topics include "language transfer," "negative transfer," "positive transfer," "mother tongue," and "second language acquisition".

Methodology

My paper will focus on how mother language transfer affects second language acquisition and what should be done to reduce the influence of the negative transfer during the language learning or language teaching process. The findings of the researches will be summarized.

Chapter II Literature Review

Second language acquisition is always a heated topic in the academic field. So what is second language acquisition? Before we define the second language acquisition, we need to figure out what the difference is between acquisition and learning. According to Stephen Krashen (1981), acquisition is the spontaneous process of “meaningful interaction in...natural communication” and “is based on what we have “picked up” through active communication”, while learning is the conscious process of obtaining ““formal” knowledge of the second language” (p. 2). Rod Ellis (1986) summarized Krashen’s theory and defined second language acquisition as “the subconscious or conscious processes by which a language other than the mother tongue is learnt in a natural or a tutored setting” (p. 6).

Mother tongue, or first language, plays a very important role in second language learning. And the precondition of people learning a second language is based on if “they have acquired their mother tongue” (Rod Ellis, 1986, p. 6). In the process of second language learning, “learners were strongly influenced by their L1 (first language)” (Rod Ellis, 1994, p. 43). So the study on first language transfer has always been a popular topic in second language acquisition research.

1. The Definition of Language Transfer

The study of language transfer begins with the work of American linguists, especially Charles Fries and Robert Lado, in the 1940s and 1950s (Terence Odlin, 1989, p. 6). The term “transfer” was first put forward by Lado (1957) in *Linguistics*

across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teacher. Lado (1957) ascribes the difficulties of learning a second language to the differences between the mother tongue and the target language. He thought learners' errors and difficulties can be predicted by comparing the similarities and differences between the two languages.

As for language transfer, Odlin (1989) defines it in his book *Language Transfer*: "Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p. 27).

According to different criteria, the transfer can be categorized differently. Sarah Thomason and Terrence Kaufman (1988) distinguished the effects of cross-linguistic influence by the terms of borrowing transfer and substratum transfer. Borrowing transfer refers to "the influence a second language has on a previously acquired language (which is typically one's native language)" (Terence Odlin, 1989, p. 12). While substratum transfer is "the type of cross-linguistic influence investigated in most studies of second language acquisition; such transfer involves the influence of a second language (typically, the native language of a learner) on the acquisition of a target language" (Terence Odlin, 1989, p. 12). Odlin (1989) points out positive transfer and negative transfer based on the similarities and differences between mother tongue and target language. Positive transfer refers to "any facilitating effects on acquisition due to the influence of cross-linguistic similarities, and positive transfer results in a convergence of behaviors of native and non-native speakers of a language" (Terence Odlin, 1989, p.168). Negative transfer refers to "cross-linguistic

influences resulting in errors, overproduction, underproduction, miscomprehension, and other effects that constitute a divergence between the behavior of native and non-native speakers of a language” (Terence Odlin, 1989, p.167).

2. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

Behaviorist psychology provided a prerequisite for the early second language acquisition research. The main tenets of behaviorist learning theory is that language is a human behavior, not a thinking phenomenon, and the development of language is described as cultivation of a series of habits. Two key notions of the behaviorist learning theory are habit and error. As John Watson (1924) argued, language acquisition is the process of language habits formed by conditioning. According to Burrhus Skinner (1957), this whole process is stimuli producing responses. Ellis (1986) summarized their theories and defined a habit as “the association of a particular response with a particular stimulus” (p, 20). Ellis (1986) argued, “children were supposed to build up a knowledge of the patterns or habits that constituted the language they were trying to learn. It was also believed the SLA could proceed in a similar way” (p,21). The reason why second language learners make errors is because “old habits get in the way of learning new habits” (p, 21). First language will interfere with the acquiring of second language. “Interference was the result of what was called proactive inhibition” (p, 22). If the learner wants to cultivate new habits, he has to overcome the proactive inhibition.

Charles Fries (1945) thought that learners' native language strongly influences their second language learning, and the form and structure of native language will influence their language learning unconsciously, especially for those beginners of second language. He believes that learning through the contrastive analysis between the native language and a second language is the most efficient way to acquire a second language. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was formulated by Lado (1957). He said: "Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple to him, and those elements that are different will be difficult" (p.2). According to Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, he thought the similarities between the mother tongue and the target language always produce the positive transfer. On the contrary, the negative transfer comes from the differences between two languages. The more differences between the two languages, the bigger interferences among them will be.

There are different forms of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. According to Ronald Wardhaugh (1970), Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis classifies into two categories: strong form and weak form. Ellis (1986) said, "The strong form claims that all L2 errors can be predicted by identifying the differences between the target language and the learner's first language" (p, 23). Lado's theory was called strong form of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. Lee (1968) points out, the difficulties and errors of learning a second language may all come from the interference of the mother tongue. While Ellis believed that "the weak form of the hypothesis claims only to be diagnostic" (p, 24). In other words, the weak form of hypothesis focuses

more on error analysis instead of the prediction. Ellis (1986) argued, the role of first language is less important for the weak form than the strong form of the hypothesis in the process of second language acquisition.

Ellis (1986) pointed out, the procedure of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is: description, selection, comparison, and prediction. The strongest form of the hypothesis is that all second language errors could be predicted by the differences between the learner's first language and second language.

However, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is not always popular in second language acquisition research. As Ellis (1994) mentioned, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis "had its heyday in the 1960s, but gradually fell out of favour in the 1970s" (p. 308). The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis suffered intense criticism in early 1970s. Ellis (1986) notes, the criticisms were mainly three types. The first criticisms of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis were the doubts about the capacity of predicting errors by Contrastive. The second criticisms referred to the practicability of comparing languages, and the last ones are the criticisms about whether Contrastive Analysis related to language teaching.

3. Interlanguage Theory

Because there exists inherent shortage of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis theoretically and practically, the linguists have shifted their focus from the similarities and differences between two languages to language learners themselves. The interlanguage, coined by Larry Selinker (1972), refers to "the systematic knowledge

of an L2 which is independent of both these learner's L1 and the target language” (Rod Ellis, 1994, p.710). Selinker (1972) thought, it's an independent language system that the second language learners mastered in a particular period of learning. This language system, i.e. interlanguage, is different from either their native language or the second language.

Selinker also pointed out, the biggest differences between second language acquisition and first language acquisition is that most of the second language learners' interlanguage show the fossilization in the process of language learning. He thought it's only about 5 percent can reach to the interlanguage continuum. Selinker noted, the reason why they can reach to it is because they make full use of the latent language structure.

Ellis (1994) cited Selinker (1972), listing five principal cognitive processes responsible for L2 acquisition:

1. Language transfer (some, but certainly not all, items, rules and subsystems of a learner's interlanguage may be transferred from the first language).
2. Transfer of training (some interlanguage elements may derive from the way in which the learners were taught).
3. Strategies of second language learning (Selinker talks about an “identifiable approach by the learner to the material to be learned”, 1972: 37).
4. Strategies of second language communication (“an identifiable approach by the learner to communication with native speakers of the TL”, 1972,37).

5. Overgeneralization of the target language material (some interlanguage elements are the result of a “clear overgeneralization” of target language rules and semantic features) (p.351).

Ellis (1994) thought Selinker’s list contains a lot of problems but still is valuable. He also pointed out that “interlanguage theory has shaped the development of SLA research by advancing the notion that learners process a separate mental grammar that they draw on in L2 performance” (p.354).

The language system, interlanguage, is always in a dynamic process, and each language learner shows different situation. Douglas Brown (1987) divided interlanguage development into four stages based on second language learner’s errors. The first stage is random error stage. In this stage, the learner is “only vaguely aware that there is some systematic order to a particular class of items” (p, 227). Emergent is the second stage, “the learner growing in consistency in linguistic production. The learner has begun to discern a system and to internalize certain rules. These rules may not be correct by target language standards, but they are nevertheless legitimate in the mind of the learner” (p, 228). The third stage is systematic stage. In the stage, the learner is “now able to manifest more consistency in production the second language. While those rules that are stored in the learner’s brain are still not all well-formed, they are more internally self-consistent and, of course, they more closely approximate the target language system” (p,228). The last stage is stabilization. The learner has “relatively few errors and has mastered the system to the point that fluency and

intended meanings are not problematic” (p, 229). The key to this stage is “the learner’s ability to self-correct”.

A significant symbol of interlanguage theory was that the Contrastive Analysis was replaced by Error Analysis. It’s always a traditional method for teachers to evaluate and improve their teaching method by analyzing students’ errors. Corder (1967) thought, error shows that language learners have their own “built-in-syllabus”. He also pointed out errors should be differentiated from mistakes. In Corder’s (1967) view, the significance of errors is as follows: “First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly (and in a sense this is their most important aspect) they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn” (p,167).

However, Error Analysis is not perfect, it also has many limitations. Ellis (1986) pointed out that Error Analysis can “provide only a partial picture, because it focuses on only part of the language that L2 learners produce, i.e. the idiosyncratic forms. Also because it examines language-learner language at a single point in time, it does not cast much light on the developmental route learners take. There are also practical difficulties about identifying what ‘error’ is” (p, 68).

4. Problems on Second Language Teaching

In the academic field, the first language transfer affecting second language acquisition is a popular topic. However, Najwa Hanna Halasa & Majeda Al-Manaseer (2012) point out that “language teaching experts” avoid using “the first language in classroom situation.”

According to Vivian Cook (2001), using the first language is kind of taboo in second language teaching over the last century. Halasa and Al-Manaseer (2012) cite Anton and Dicamella (1998) that they viewed “the use of L1 as a useful psychological tool in the early stages of second language learning” (p.72).

Ellis (1994) pointed that “According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, learners were strongly influenced by their L1” (p.43). So while teaching in the classroom, instructors could use L1 from a “positive and active” aspect. Halasa and Al-Manaseer (2012) argue that the role of L1 in second language learning and teaching should be envisaged.

Halasa and Al-Manaseer (2012) did an experiment on using L1 in English teaching. The categories are represented by following symbols.

1a: refers to relative clause modifying a head noun in the subject complement;

1b: refers to relative clause modifying an object;

2a: refers to using personal pronouns instead of or in addition to the relative pronouns with a preposition;

2b: refers to using personal pronouns with a preposition, as well as mixing human and nonhuman distinction (p, 77).

The results of the research are as following:

Error type	No. of errors in test 2	No. of errors in test 1
1a	48	149
1b	32	146
2a	17	100
2b	12	177
3b	31	120
total	140	692

Table1. comparison between the results of the test before and after instruction was given in L1

(Halasa & Al-Manaseer, 2012, p, 80)

According to Halasa and Al-Manaseer (2012), the aim of the research is “to validate the assumption that L1 use gives different and better results in the students’ performance” (p, 76). The table shows that appropriately using first language is a good to teach second language.

About how to deliberately and systematically use L1 in classroom, Cook (2001) gave some suggestions as following:

- To provide a short-cut for giving instructions and explanations where the cost of the L2 is too great
- To build up interlinked L1 and L2 knowledge in the students’ minds

- To carry out learning tasks through collaborative dialogue with fellow students
- To develop L2 activities such as code-switching for later real-life use (p, 418).

To sum up, first language plays an important role in second language learning.

The first language could be treated as a useful tool of teaching or learning a second language. As Cook (2001) argued, first language and second language could permanently present at the same time in language teaching. Language teachers should be aware of the importance of first language in the process of second language acquisition.

Chapter III Conclusion and Recommendations

The core of the language transfer is about how language learner's mother tongue affects his second language acquisition. Even though the topic has been researched for decades, researchers still didn't get a perfect answer that satisfied all. But as I learn more about language, language acquisition, and the role mother tongue played in second language acquisition, the importance of mother tongue cannot be denied.

Because mother language transfer plays a very important role in second language acquisition, language teachers should deepen the understanding on language transfer. They should be aware that mother tongue interference is not only reflected in language errors but also showed in some unnoticed aspects. And they should figure out various kinds of method to reduce the mother tongue interference, i.e. negative transfer, on second language learner in the process of teaching.

Meanwhile, the similarities between first language and second language, i.e. positive transfer, is also an important part of mother tongue interference. If the language teacher only focuses on negative transfer, the language learner will think that mother tongue only has negative effects on second language acquisition. It will cause a lot of pressure on the language learner.

It's not right to totally repudiate the achievement of Contrastive Analysis on language transfer. It is also wrong that some scholars thought Contrastive Analysis is no use for second language learning. We should look on Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis dialectically. For example, Contrastive Analysis can be applied into

discourse analysis to improve language learner's awareness of the differences between the first language and the second language writing patterns.

Based on the literature research I have done, my teaching strategies about taking advantage of mother language transfer are as follows.

1. Balance the differences and similarities between two languages in teaching

According to Ellis (1986), the similarities between first language and second language have positive effects on second language acquisition. So second language teacher should balance the the differences and similarities between two languages in second language teaching. No matter how big the differences between two languages are, these two languages still have similarities. It can increase language learner's confident and motivation when teacher analysis the similarities. But if teacher only focus on the differences, language learner will form a false concept that mother tongue only has negative effects on second language acquisition. And it will aggravate the strain of language learner's mental effort. Language learner will find it's very difficult to acquire target language.

2. Cultivate language learner's cross-culture awareness

Any language learning needs not only learning language system, but also learning the culture and customs which are the basis of the language. People coming from different cultural background speak different languages. Language learners will truly understand the differences between two languages across culture by comparing the differences between two different cultures. So language

teachers also should focus on the culture of the target language. Language teachers can combine the language teaching and culture teaching together. Culture teaching is a great way for language learner to understand the target language better. It also can arouse language learner's interests to target language. Teachers should encourage language learners to read a lot to enrich the cultural background and to improve reading comprehension ability.

3. Treat language learner's pragmatic errors right

Interlanguage is the essential stage of language learning. It reflects the process of language learner's language acquisition rules. Interlanguage is a changing dynamical system, and its changes show the language learner's progress of target language learning. The teacher should do the systematic research on the errors the language learner made in the language learning process.

To sum up, language transfer is a common phenomenon in the process of second language acquisition. Language transfer has not only positive effects but also negative effects on second language acquisition. The researches on language transfer and second language transfer are in order to find a better way for language teaching or learning.

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