

## THE ROLE OF L1 IN SLA

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There are two opposing views about the role of the first language in second language acquisition. According to one school of thought, our first language (henceforth L1), like our previous knowledge which is quite intimately involved in the acquisition of new knowledge, certainly has an all-important role in second language acquisition (henceforth SLA).

The other view is that the role of the mother tongue is negative. The L1 gets in the way or interferes with the learning of the second language (henceforth L2), such that features of the L1 are transferred into the L2. The learners are always involved in a "restructuring process" (Corder 1978a), overcoming the effects of L1, approximately ever closer to native-speaker speech.

The change in the psychological orientation towards the first and second language acquisition has given rise to a new trend which looks at the language of learners and involves empirical investigations of SLA. The impact of these studies upon the general notions of the role of L1 is visible now. This school deems it necessary:

..... to abandon the notion of interference as a  
natural and inevitable phenomenon in L2  
acquisition.

(Felix, 1980b:107)

To fully appreciate these stances on the role of L1, it is important to view the whole issue in its historical perspective which involves tracing its origin in behaviouristic learning theory,

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Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, and the subsequent reactions of mentalists. In this essay, I shall further discuss the recent developments which seem to assign an important role to L1 in SLA.

Behaviourism focused in surface linguistic structures and greatly emphasized the notions of habit formation and interference from the learners' L1.

Lado (1957) claimed:

... that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture – both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives.

Errors were to be avoided at any cost; if allowed to occur too frequently, they were feared to result in developing bad habits. Since correct habit formation was the pivotal point, errors were regarded by the proponents of this approach as:

... an insidious fifth column which, if allowed to happen too often, could bring about the downfall of the whole language learning process.

(Riddell, 1990)

The solution was, therefore, to predict errors where they might occur and prevent them from occurring at all. Descriptive linguists formulated the need for contrastive analysis (henceforth CA) through observation such as:

The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the

language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.

(Fries, 1945)

Lado (1957) presented the proposition:

The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them.

So, we see that the CA hypothesis seems to claim that the potential negative transfers from learners' L1 onto the L2 acquisition can be predicted by juxtaposing descriptions of the comparable systems and subsystems of the two languages. Information about the contrasts thus identified can be incorporated into pedagogic materials and imparted to SL/FL teachers to ensure that this potential L1 interference can be deactivated and the incidence of errors arising from this source minimized (Fisiak, ed., 1981).

Van Buren (1974) shows his skepticism about some of the assumptions which underlie Lado's and Fries' statements quoted above. He poses questions: Firstly, what do we mean by 'a scientific description of the language'? Secondly, what exactly is involved in the process of comparing two or more languages? And, lastly, how 'to locate the best structural description of the language involved' given in the plurality of grammatical models? Van Buren maintains:

It is logically impossible to engage in CA without postulating 'linguistic universals' or 'common categories' of one sort or another since more generally, it is logically impossible to

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compare any two entities without using the same frame of reference.

He shows his dismay over the state that structural linguists who champion the cause of CA fail to acknowledge the logical necessity of common categories.

By the early 1970s, the CA hypothesis was under attack from different quarters. With the rise of cognitive psychology and a new sort of linguistics which emerged as a result of Chomsky's (1959) attack on Skinner's stimulus-response conditioning paradigm to explain language acquisition, the attitude to learners' errors underwent a radical change. These were viewed as a rich, potential source of information about learners' progress. Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974a), through their empirical researchers, spotted various types of errors according to their psycholinguistic origins and claimed that most of the errors produced by child L2 learners were developmental and not because of L1 interference. Dulay *et al.* (1982) showed their strong doubts about the predictive power of CA. They asserted, quite rightly, that some items of high interlingual contrastivity were easily learnt while those of no contrastivity posed problems to the learners. They maintained that L1 background has little influence on L2 learners' judgments of grammatical correctness in the second language, and most of the errors that reflect L1 are those that involve word order, rather than morphology.

And now we are in the era of error analysis. This approach was error-tolerant and this attitude resulted in the development of the theory of student 'interlanguage'. It was the form of language used by learners which was regarded as a separate linguistic system resulting from learners' attempted production of a target language norm (Selinker, 1972). The term was coined by Selinker:

..... in the belief that the language learners' language was a sort of hybrid between his L1 and the target language.

(Corder, 1981)

Corder (1973) used the terms 'idiosyncratic dialect' or 'transitional dialect', implying that it is dialect:

... whose rules share characteristics of two social dialects of languages.

Nesmer (1971) termed it an 'approximative system', and defined it as:

... the deviant linguistic system actually employed by the learner attempting to utilize the target language.

In other words, according to Riddell (1990), interlanguage was:

... a partway house situated between the first language of the learner and the foreign language.

The proponents of this theory quite justifiably asserted that it was systematic, and in its system the learner error was important. So, these works, and the work of Richards (1974) showed that some of errors of L2 learners exhibited L1 interference or transfer, and many others were neutral to this factor – a considerable shift from CA theory.

However this behaviouristic notion was not entirely rejected by mentalists; it was given an important place among many cognitive factors active in the SLA process:

I consider the following to be processes central to second-language learning: first, language transfer; second, transfer of training; third, strategies of second-language learning; fourth,

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strategies of second language communication;  
and fifth, over generalization of TL (target  
language) linguistic material.

(Selinker, 1972)

Dulay and Burt (1980) acknowledged that:

..... valid evidence from existing adult and child  
studies shows that a portion of L2 goofs do  
reflect L1 structures.

It is important to note that there was a significant revival of CA in the early 1980s. James (1980) examined the psycholinguistic base of this hypothesis. He challenged the validity of the some of the criticism that had been leveled against CA and appears to have dispelled some misunderstandings, e.g. the assumption that the L1 interference was the main cause of L2 learning difficulty. CA 'assumed a more positively optimistic tone' when the potentials for positive L1 transfer were given more attention by scholars like Ringbom (1987, cited in James, 1990). CA has also been revitalized by widening its perspective beyond the sentence. So, now, new domains like contrastive pragmatics are flourishing, which involves the identification of cross-cultural differences in speech acts realizations, and conversational routines to obtain insights concerning how the L1 influences TL communicative competence. This development is hoped to be of great practical use in SLA classrooms.

It is now realized that language transfer is indeed a real and central phenomenon that must be considered in any full account of the L2 acquisition process (Gass and Selinker, eds., 1983:7). Researchers have once again begun to focus their attention on language transfer:

..... realizing that the baby had been mercilessly  
thrown out with the bathwater.

(Gass and Selinker, 1983)

Corder (1983) stresses the need for redefining the terms 'transfer' and 'interference'. He thinks that they are both technical terms in a particular theory of learning and they may constrain one's freedom of thinking about the particular topic, i.e. the role of L1 in SLA. Even more compelling a reason, according to him, is that there may be features which were never recognized as transfer and yet are due to L1 influence, e.g. avoidance.

Odlin's (1989) work in this regard is quite prestigious. He makes his observations about what transfer is not:

- (I) It is not simply a consequence of habit-formation
- (II) It is not simply interference
- (III) It is not simply a falling back on the native language, etc...

Obviously, Odlin views the matter in a new perspective.

Gass (1984) raised an important question: how to determine when language transfer has occurred. She says that there are many instances of what can be considered language transfer but which can also be explained differently and quite reasonably so. There might be a form used by a student which looks like a form in his L1. One would feel impelled to explain it as transfer. However, if we see the same elements in the speech of learners, whose L1 does not have the same form, then we must question transfer as the only explanation. The fact that L2 productions are L1-like does not necessarily mean that transfer as a process has taken place. She suggests that a direct comparison be made between speakers of a language with the pattern in question, and

speakers of a language without the pattern, in order to show language transfer.

Gass (1983) studied the relationship of transfer to language universals and arrived at a conclusion that the latter played the leading role in that study since they were dominant both in assigning relative orders of difficulty and in determining where language transfer occurs. Her study (relative clause formation – data collected from seventeen Indiana University students) also showed that some aspects of language are more likely to be transferred than others, e.g. elements that are perceptually salient or semantically transparent.

According to Wode (1976) interference takes place more readily when there is a 'crucial similarity measure' between the first and second languages. He claims that L1 rules can have an effect only after L2 developmental prerequisites have been met. Jackson (1981) who has compared English and Punjabi has almost similar observations. He finds that errors appear when there are some similarities and some contrasts between equivalent structures in the two languages.

Lee (1968) experienced no interference from English, his L1, when learning Chinese. He infers that it happened because the structures of two languages were very different and that similarity or dissimilarity is a potent factor in L1 interference which occurs only in certain contexts.

Kellerman (1983) thinks that L1 effects on L2 are 'elusive' and the principal reason is that 'not everything that *looks* transferable *is* transferable'. He asserts that there are definite constraints on transfer which go beyond mere similarity and dissimilarity of the language involved. These constraints ultimately involve the language learner as an active participant in the learning process and then it remains up to him to decide what



can be transferred and what can not be. According to Kellerman, the learner's perception of the nature of the L2 and the degree of markedness of an L1 structure are two interacting factors which are involved in language transfer.

Another example of new perspectives on the first language comes from Schachter's (1974) study of the production of English relative clauses by Arabic, Persian, Chinese and Japanese students. She found that, in a set of fifty compositions from each language group, Chinese and Japanese learners produced much fewer relative clauses than the Persian and Arabic students did. She hypothesized that the major syntactic differences between Chinese and Japanese on the one hand, and English on the other, i.e. position of the head noun with regard to the relative clause, a difference which does not exist between Arabic, Persian and English resulted in difficulty for the Chinese and Japanese learners, which was manifested not in errors, but in lack of use of this structure. This hypothesis is supported by similar data from Bertkau (1974), Kleinmann (1978), and Hakuta (1976), cited in Gass (1984).

Regarding the question that what is transferable, there are no two views about phonetics and phonology. The importance of transfer is evident in studies of specific pronunciation contrasts and also in research comparing the overall pronunciation accuracy of speakers of different languages. Peter Sellers, a British actor, has amused almost the whole world in his comedy role as an Indian actor in the film, 'The Party' in which he spoke English like an Indian. Odlin (1989) discerns L1 influences in syntax, semantics, lexis, discourse and other language subsystems. Transfer involving discourse, according to him, may cause misunderstandings and may also lead to L2 speech or writing that differs greatly from the discourse norms of TL.

Misunderstandings related to politeness and coherence are especially dangerous. Similarities and differences in writing systems also result in positive or negative transfer. However, he makes it clear that transfer is not the only factor involved. Typological and apparently universal factors sometimes operate independently of transfer, and sometimes operate together with it. Greenwood (1981) attributes most of learners' errors to teaching methods and materials. According to him, not only L1, but also L2 system is the cause of errors.

In short the classical notion of L1 interference and transfer is a sort of hypersensitivity and mostly a miscalculation on the part of the exponents of this theory. Sridhar (1981) justifiably claims that, "... learners' first language knowledge can serve as one of the inputs into the process of hypothesis generation". The effect of L1 is predominantly 'heuristic and facilitating' in L2 acquisition; 'it helps in the process of discovery and creation' (Corder, 1983). The first language may facilitate the developmental process of SLA by helping a learner to progress faster along the 'universal route' when the L1 is similar to the L2. Auerbach (1993:29) gives a sociopolitical rationale for the use of the L1 in ESL classroom. She says, "... starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English". Atkins (1987) suggests that to ignore the L1 in a monolingual classroom is almost certainly to teach with less than maximum efficiency. I think it is certainly the best for us to teach with maximum efficiency – we should let the first language play its positive role in SLA.