The Influence of Mother-Tongue Interference on English as A Foreign Language

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Article Info

Abstract

English is becoming increasingly crucial in our contemporary society as a vital part of human connection. Language is utilized as a tool for expressing one's thoughts, ideas and feelings. Mother tongue is learned since birth. A learner encounters mother tongue influence while learning or speaking a foreign language or target language. Mother tongue influence (MTI) is the impact of the usage of our mother tongue on the second language which affects a person's thought process in a sense that he thinks in mother tongue and expresses in English or a second language.

Numerous studies have proven that mother tongue has a pivotal role on Second Language Acquisition. The transfer of mother tongue falls into two types: positive transfer and negative transfer, when the habit of two languages are similar, positive transfer happens; in any other case it is negative transfer. Native speakers of Turkish and Persian encounter a number of problems while they are acquiring the foreign language or target language. The aim of this paper is to determine and alleviate the influence of Turkish and Persian mother tongue interference and negative transfer from the students' first language on English.

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Introduction

The use of L1 in L2 classes has always been a question of "to be or not to be." It is controversial because different theories of L2 acquisition come up with different hypotheses about the importance of L1 use in L2 classes. Some theories advocated a monolingual approach, believing that the processes of L2 and L1 learning are not equivalent, and stating that maximal exposure to L2 and the least possible exposure to L1 are critical since L1 knowledge hinders the L2 learning process. (Cook, 2001; Krashen, 1981(

Teachers' and learners' perspectives on use of L1 in L2 classes have been investigated from different countries and in various contexts as explained in detail in the literature review section below.

Review of the literature

There are many studies conducted to examine the attitudes of students and teachers towards the use of L1 in L2 teaching in different situations. Regarding the use of L1 in L2 teaching in Iran, Nazary (2008) investigated the attitudes of students at the University of Tehran towards the use of L1 in L2 education. Based on the results of this study, the authors concluded that, unlike previous studies, Iranian college students are reluctant to use L1 in L2 classrooms. This discrepancy led the authors of this article to conduct a survey in English language institutions. As a result, the teachers' attitudes would be elicited as well. Mother Tongue Interference can be seen as a transfer that affects learning in both negative and positive way. According to Mede, Tutal, Ayaz, Çalışır, and Akın (2014), second language acquisition is likely to have interlinguistic effects, which can lead to errors due to negative transfers.

Manrique (2013) asserted that mispronunciation and grammatical errors are the most common type of interference between the mother tongue and the target language. Writing has also been found to be the most difficult of the four language skills (Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013). They showed that the L1 interference categories of each writing genre differ in terms of syntactic and semantic L1 properties. In other words, in narration, the L1 interference category with a frequency count of more than 100 was the verb form, word choice, sentence structure, and article preposition, but in the descriptive writing, the type of L1 interference is the article, sentence structure. , Word choice, singular / plural form and subject and verb, respectively. In addition, according to Maros, Kim, and Salehuddin (2007), omission and misuse of forms are the two most common types of errors in all categories. Not all errors are due to native language interference, but the numerous errors identified in determiners, subject and verb matches, and the use of copulas reflect mother tongue interference.

In addition, Cartes (2005) described the subject in an extended disclosure listed some other errors such as semantic, syntactic, morphological, spelling, vocabulary mistakes and also phonological errors which are very difficult to identify in written texts. Schweers (1999) conducted a survey at the University of Puerto Rico on the use of Spanish (L1) in English (L2) classes to determine how often teachers use L1 in English classes. He reported that the majority of students supported the use of L1 in English lessons. Tang (2002) conducted a similar study in the context of China. Interviews and classroom observations were used to collect the data. The results were very similar to those of Schweers (1999) in the situation in Puerto Rico, but Tang's study added two more reasons for using L1 in the L2 classroom, effectiveness and being less time-consuming.

Another similar study was conducted by Al-Nofaie (2010) on the attitudes of students and teachers towards the use of Arabic (L1) in Saudi Arabia. The study found that students and teachers' attitudes towards using L1 in L2 instruction were positive, and students preferred to use L1 in certain situations.

Kim Anh (2010) investigated the attitude of Vietnamese university teachers towards using Vietnamese (L1) in English classes. The results show that wise use of L1 is essential in some English teaching situations. In this study, all participants supported the use of L1 in the classroom, stating that L1 is part of the teaching method and may play an important role in the classroom. This view of L1 is very similar to Atkinson's view of L1 as an "educational resource". (Atkinson, 1987)

In addition, they acknowledged that the interference occurred in 16 terms of grammatical errors. The grammatical interference involved word order, number, personal pronouns, genitive and possessive pronouns, it and there, past time, to be, non–finite forms, modal auxiliary verbs, active and passive, negatives, complex sentences, range and choice of vocabulary, transfer, and confusions. However, they claimed that the confusion

was caused by the students not being given easy-to-write input for them. This also happened due to the lack of student knowledge in second language. Nevertheless, there are opponents who believe that not only does it not get in the way, but it also helps learners of second language learning.

For example, Bhela (1999) pointed out that adopting the L1 structure for L2 texts is useful for second language learners while understanding the entire text.

According to Sinha, Banerjee and Shastri (2009), monolingual English courses benefit from proper use of L1, so L1 can be used in stages from beginner to upper-intermediate so L1 can be used to translate words and explain grammar especially for more mature learners and this can save time and reduce anxiety. They argued that monolingual students performed better in receptive English vocabulary, reading and writing.

However, both groups were equivalent in English grammar, phonological awareness, expressive vocabulary, and writing. This shows that despite being fluent in two languages (L1 and L2), bilinguals are not completely superior to monolinguals in terms of writing and reading skills.

Learners sometimes produce sentences that are possible target-language sentences but not preferred ones. An example is when Jean says: The big of them contained a snake. Way of reconstructing the correct sentence is 'The bigger of them contain a snake.' It is difficult to reconstruct the correct sentence because we don't know what the learner meant to say. In general L2, learners complicate adjectives, adverbs with verbs and sometimes chooses irrelevant form. (Ellis, 2011)

Transfer and overgeneralization are not distinct process. They represent aspects of the same underlying learning strategy. Both result from the fact that the learner utilized what he already knows about language. In the case of overgeneralization, it is his previous knowledge but in the case of transfer, the learner uses his previous mother tongue experience as a means of organizing the second language data. (Little Wood, 1996) At any stages of development, learners sometimes use one form and sometimes another, thus, one type of error may alternate with another. Learners ignore the actual form of the word that should be followed in a sentence. It is because they don't know the principles and they are strictly restricted to the rules what they already learnt or have been practicing in L1. (Ellis, 2011)

Some items appear to be similar, but there are cultural differences. It is often the case that proverbs and saying cannot be translated literally. When the children try for word to word translation, they give different meanings instead. The problem happens when the meaning of an item in one context is identical in both languages but where there are grammatical differences. Nouns such as 'language' which are uncountable in English but countable in some other languages also cause difficulty. (Gairns, Redman, 1996)

To investigate this subject, a lot of research was done to find the most affected skill. (Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013) Some researches claim that viewing L1 as potentially valuable learning resource instead of the only source of interference opens up greater pedagogical space and so may bear constructive implications for L2 instruction, especially in homogenous contexts where both teachers and learners share the same mother tongue and target language. (He, 2012)

Since mother tongue maintenance hinders the advancement of English language, teachers should enforce rules to ensure that mother tongue is not used in schools. Schools should provide essential resources and facilities such libraries in order to provide enabling environment for the acquisition of English in schools. (Muriungi, 2013)

It is undeniable that the interference of students' mother tongue still exists because the students are incompetent in English language. Students rely on translation method from the mother tongue in comprehension. It is stated that speaking skill appears as the most difficult skill and English is indeed crucial especially as the means of communication. (Suliman,2014)

As an Iranian English teacher who has been teaching for three years in Turkey, I have found out that the three main reasons Turkish learners have problem learning English are as follows:

1) The classical MEB(The Ministry of National Education in Turkey) technique to learn English is to focus on grammar and that English has rigid rules. They also issue numerous lists telling students to memorize them. Unfortunately, these lists give 1 maybe 2 meanings, whereas they can have many meanings in contexts. Context

is not taught which is particularly dangerous for words like 'any'. The literal translation for this is 'herhangi' however in a negative sentence it changes to ' hiç '.

Have you lived in any English speaking countries? Translates to 'İngilizce konuşulan herhangi bir ülkede yaşadınız mı?' whereas I don't have any pets translates to 'Hiç evcil hayvanım yok'. Also, as any native English speaker will tell you, there are no rigid rules in English. Almost everything is open to interpretation. The closest thing to a rule is that it must sound correct. If English were taught in context, within sentences, then the grammar would come automatically.

2) Almost all Turkish learners struggle with tenses, simple, perfect and continuous. Simple gives it name should be the easiest but all are confused by foreign speakers trying to use their own tense rules, which are of course not the same.

Again, they need to learn English in contexts and think of it in those terms, in an English way if you like. If not, people will continue to confuse themselves.

3) The

This is one of the most important words in the English language. If it is entered to a sentence, where it doesn't belong, it can ruin whole sentence. Also, if it is absent, the same is true.

Finally, Kavaliauskiene (2009) showed different results. First all learners Learning English usually rely on their mother tongue and also the students' autonomously generated reading comprehension exercises, summary writing and back-translation activities help raise learners' awareness of differences between English and the mother tongue, and promote language development. As it can be seen, there are many articles on mother tongue interference, each revealing different aspects of the subject. Therefore, this study was conducted to clarify the problem.

This research is crystallized around the two questions below:

1) How is L1 utilized in a typical English classroom in Iran and Turkey?

2) What are English teachers and learners' attitudes towards the use of L1 in L2 classrooms?

Methodology

Research Design

The corpus of data for this study was the learners' compositions. For each participant two compositions were collected, which formed a total sample of 40 compositions. Each composition was administered at the language institution by the teacher. The participants were given two topics and were asked to write their compositions within a 20-minute class session. The selected topics were: (1) Features of a good friend, 2) How do you overcome stressful situations? In order to get more reliable data, the participants were asked to write their compositions in three paragraphs (about 100 words), and to write on their own without consulting with their friends, teacher, or researchers. Moreover, they were not told that their writings would be studied. Error analysis was used to check grammar, syntax, lexical and phonology.

Participants

The participants for Persian part in this study were randomly selected from one language institution located in Iran. Not to mention that class had 10 female students whose ages ranged from 18 to 25. The participants for Turkish part in this study were selected from an English course in Van city– Turkey. Most of them were graduated from university years ago. Not to mention that class had 8 male students and two female students whose ages ranged from 18 to 32.

Data Collection Tools

A descriptive research methodology was employed. The instrument used to collect data was classroom.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Most of the learners come from different culture and language backgrounds. The teacher should provide opportunities to expose themselves in target language by sharing their ways of thinking, which may reduce mother tongue influence. Teaching of English to learners is a challenging task. The teachers can make the learners alert that the reason for not using mother tongue is to improve their second language skill. The language classroom should provide enough opportunity to avoid the mother tongue influences.

The present study was carried out with the participants from two English language institutions. So, it might reveal more reliable results when applied in several ELT Departments with different grades and ages at various schools, language institutions and universities throughout Turkey and Iran.

Additionally, qualitative data could be gathered to ensure in-depth evaluation and crosscheck.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed some evidence about interference of the mother tongue. In addition to other researches about mother tongue interference, in a nutshell, it is possible to say that mother tongue interference in second language learning is present in almost all aspects. The biggest impact of mother tongue interference can be seen in the speaking as a language skill and grammar as a language area. In addition to its effect in second language learning, it affects the learners' performance remarkably. Results also revealed that it leads learners to making errors, especially in speaking without preparation and translating a passage into the target language. In addition, it is possible to say that learners especially have problem with determiners, sounds, sentence structures, and articles.

The major concern of this paper has been with the features of interference of L1 on L2 and its effects are on the syntactic structure of a written task undertaken by second language learners.

The learners have utilized some L1 structures to produce appropriate responses in L2, producing semantically acceptable compositions. The learners have also used L1 structures interchangeably with L2 structures, producing inappropriate L2 responses, indicating an interference of L1 on L2. These structures are used to make them understood and reflect the way they arrive at a certain usage at a specific point (Faerch & Kasper, 1983).

In utilizing the L1 structures, the learners took some risks that include guessing of similar words and they tried to utilize invented or borrowed items which are similar to the rules of L2 structure as far as their knowledge of L2 allows.

When the learners experience gaps in their L2 syntactical structures, they adjust the form of their L2 written responses by using syntactical items which are part of their L1. (Bialystok, 1990).

Students use word for word translation techniques to use English. This causes mother tongue interference. In order to quicken the tasks, children use the technique which they follow in their mother tongue. They make irregular orders in sentences and pick up irrelevant words, especially similar words in their use. Where the structures of L1 and L2 are identical, the learner's lack of comprehension of the use of L1 is also reflected as an error in L2.

The L2 errors made are traceable to the learners' L1 and we can conclude that there is definite interference of L1 on L2. The most salient facts they possess about language are those of L1.

In the process of relating L2 to L1, they speculate about the similarity or difference between L2 and L1. The result is a subsumption of L2 of known categories in L1 competence and as a result, a translation process has taken place. (Seligar, 1988)

Blum-Kulka and Levenston (1983) contend that all second language learners initiate by assuming that for every word in L1 there is a single translation equivalent in L2. The assumption of word for-word translation equivalence or 'thinking in the mother tongue (L1) is the only way a learner can begin to communicate in a second language.

This has been clearly stated in this study that the second language learners have adopted their L1 structures to assist them in their L2 texts. These learners will not attain mastery of the target language as long as the process of translation equivalence is still on their mind. They also assert that mastery of the second language involves the

gradual abandonment of the translation equivalence, the internalisation of the syntactical structures in L2 independently of the L1 equivalent, and the ability to 'think in the second language'.

These learners have accumulated structures of L2 but demonstrate difficulty in organizing this knowledge into appropriate, coherent structures. There is a significant gap between the accumulation and organization of this knowledge. When writing in the target language, these learners rely on their native language structures to produce a response. Since the structures of L1 and L2 differs, there has been a high frequency of errors occurring in the target language indicating an interference of the native language on the target language.

There are several reasons why learners use the L1 when they should be using L2, the naturalness of using the L2 to do certain jobs, shyness in using the L2, or simply a lack of interest in learning the L2, or simply a lack of interest in learning the L2.(Kheirabadi,2015)

The study revealed that the learners in both countries were supportive of L2 domination in their English classes and were critical of an excessive use of L1 in the context of Iranian and Turkish institutions. The attitudinal tendency of the participants in this study proved different from the perceptions of participants in other studies carried out in other contexts.

However, the results of this study should not be construed as prescriptive, because as Ellis (2008) pointed out use of L1 in L2 classes depends on the "instructional context" . For example, Auerbach (1993) made a compelling case for the use of the learners' L1 in ESL classrooms in majority-language contexts (such as the USA), but Ellis (2008) contends that the situation is very different in foreign language contexts where learners' only exposure to the L2 may be classroom.

Another point for conclusion is the relationship between the teachers' attitudes and their classroom practice .The traces of teachers' attitudinal tendency was clearly discernible in their teaching , and this goes along with Richards' (1982) perspective that teachers' classroom practices could be viewed as reflections of their beliefs and perceptions about the nature of language and how language is taught.

The pivotal problem with the teaching approach is that both students and teachers consider English as a subject rather than a language. The teacher only focuses only on prose, poetry, essays, etc. Teachers need to be expressive while teaching poetry. For instance, if the poetry expresses sadness, the student ought to sob. This type of experience is hardly found in classroom teaching. The instructor is rushing to finish the subject. They believe that engaging in emotional and social connections with the students is a waste of

time. Language acquisition presents many challenges to students from both urban and rural area. Some children are having trouble acquiring a language since their parents are uneducated. One who hails from well-educated family will face fewer problems than those of urban area. The Educated family child is given enough care to improve the target language. On this contrary, the rural area child is given little care to learn the target language.

It is clear that a student may not know much, therefore when he wants to interact with someone else, he tries to do it right away. Then he creates his own language pattern with his existing knowledge where errors will occur. It is a common practice that L2 learners always pick up a single word for an immediate use as a substitute and forgets other different uses or its varieties.

According to the input of L1 the learner never fails to provide the same word in the L2 at another place but it might not be appropriate in the target language. (Cook, 2001) It can lead to misinterpretations or wrong idea.

The easiest and most effective solution for the main problems experienced by people trying to learn or teach English as a foreign language, is simply to teaching context using full sentences and explaining in context, for example if your students like football, use a sentence pertaining to that. Likewise with any subject that may interest them personally. If a subject is already of interest to someone, giving an example within that subject will stick in their mind much more easily. The idea that English is a language which can be memorized needs to be altered rather people need to try and speak it as soon as possible in a simple way and with practice, it will begin to come and then in a more natural way.

Last but not least, the study emphasized the determining role of a teacher in a classroom. As far as the present study is concerned, the performance of teacher could effectively utilize the least to the best of the advantage.

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