

The Influence of First Language (L1) on Second Language (L2) Learning

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ABSTRACT: The influence of first language (L1) on second language (L2) has been a key issue in the field of applied linguistics. Learners of English as a second language are faced with challenges when learning the target language. A lot of research has been carried out over past several decades to investigate the influence of L1 on L2 learning. In this paper we will show that there have been theories on L1 influence on L2. However, it is important to understand the prominent revolutionary schools of thought – Behaviourists to the modern theories of second language learning. These theories have continued to show the influence of L1 on L2 learning, the different views of L1 influence on L2 and how they have changed over time. Again, the paper reviews some of the major studies that have investigated the influence of L1 on L2 learning. The paper concludes that the first language influences learning of second language in different aspect of linguistic features.

KEYWORDS: L1, L2, transfer, behaviourists, Universal Grammar

INTRODUCTION

First language (L1) is given various names such as native language, mother tongue or indigenous language. It is the language acquired from birth (Clark, 2009; Miller et al., 2014; Lin 2014; Saville-Troike, 2007). The first language is the language that a child picks from the environment where he or she was born. On the other hand, second language is the language that is acquired after the first language has been learned (Gass and Selinker, 2008; Spada and Lightbown, 2010; Ortega 2009). By implication every person has a first language called mother tongue (MT) or native language (NL) which second language researchers have argued over time on the effects of the first language on the second language (L2) learning (Jarvis, 2000). There have been debates over time on whether the first language actually influences second language learning (Jarvis, 2000). This paper therefore aims to investigate the influence of L1 on L2 learning with focus on empirical studies and deductions from key theories of second language learning from behaviourists to modern.

The influence of first language on second language learning.

Over the years the effect of L1 on L2 has been extensively studied in the field of second language acquisition. As Phakiti & Plonsky (2018) point out that L1 Influence on L2 learning is fascinating, yet a complex phenomenon. A full investigation of the effect of L1 on L2 is observed on different linguistic features (Ellis, 2015; Gas et al., 2013; Jarvis, 2005). The influence of the first language on second language learning is evident in a variety of linguistic features such as morphology, syntax, lexis, phonology and semantics (Lin, 2014; Odlin, 2003). Researchers in the past years have shown interest in the field of second language, noting specifically, the influence of the first language on those learning the second language (Odlin, 1989, Bhela, 1999; Odlin, 2003, Gas & Selinker, 2008, Saville-Troike, 2007, Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Although, there have been debate over time on whether the first language actually influences second language learning (Jarvis, 2000). Empirical studies continue to show the influence of L1 on L2. The influence may be seen in children learning a second language or in adults, this shows that a child or adult learning a second language is likely to transfer the thought of the first language before transferring to the second language. Learners tend to transfer the forms, meaning and culture of their first language to the target language when attempting to speak or write. The transfer learners make can be positive or negative (Selinker 1983). Positive transfer is when L1 knowledge facilitates learning of the L2. Negative transfer is when L1 knowledge negatively impact L2 learning. Again, Odlin (1989) points out that when negative transfer occurs, we can examine learners from different native language and compare them to find the influence of L1 on L2 learning. It is important to investigate the learners native language since they are from different linguistic backgrounds, and therefore compare them to find the influence of L1 on L2 learning empirically.

Phonological Influence of First Language in Second Language Learning

The phonological influence of first language on second language cannot be undermined. At the phonological level, there is a great difference in the realization of the consonant and the vowel sounds by Nigerian Speakers of English as a second language as compared to the native speakers of English (Buba & Kaigama, 2015). This occurs because most learners of second language tend

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to rely on the prior linguistic features of their first language to produce some sounds in learning the second language. For this reason second language speakers of English (from Nigeria for example) have a number of difficulties in pronouncing some utterances and sounds in English (Jowitt, 1991).

In addition, these difficulties arise mainly from interference patterns of their native language on the sound system of English. Learners of a second language are influenced by their native language whenever they communicate in the target language. This influence at the phonological level affects L2 learning with regards to speaking. In the Tiv language (another Nigerian language), consonant sounds like /l/ are used interchangeably with /r/ (Eziafa, Theophilus & Nworah, 2015). Hence, the English word 'road' is pronounced as 'load'. These phonological occurrences are inherent in the native speakers' language as a result of the native sound system acquired in the early days of language learning. There are other various studies supporting this findings as seen in Brown (2000), where Japanese learners of English constantly interchanging /θ/ and /s/ for /s/ in their L1 phonemes when communicating in L2.

In contrast, the negative impact of L1 on L2 learners goes beyond the phonological aspect and research shows more emphasis is led on this aspect as compared to writing. A study conducted by Fan and Yongbing (2014), to further investigate the negative impact of L1 on L2 involved Chinese students undertaking a pronunciation and writing test. On the course of this study it was discovered that the students replaced the word /s/ for /θ/ which not only affected their pronunciation but was also evident in their writing of words associated with this phonemes. For example writing 'thick' in place of 'sick'. To add, a phenomenon is represented in past studies which suggest that there is a correlational influence of L1 on L2 phonological competence seen in (Durgunoglu et al., 1993; Gottardo et al., 2001). The study in (Gottardo et al., 2001) is limited due to a lack of reliability; data set restrictions and the use of receptive vocabulary were used in the study rather than full vocabulary. A conclusion may be drawn to support the claim that when the phonological skills of both L1 and L2 correlate, reading in L2 is easier for the learner. However, where there is no correlation between the languages, especially in languages with different orthography, learners may experience difficulties in reading in the second language. For instance, English and Nigerian languages are two distinct languages which do not correlate. This may pose a problem for the learner in using the first language to read in the second language.

The orthography of a first language may influence second language learning.

Hamada & Koda (2008) observed the influence of the first language (L1) orthographic experiences on decoding and semantic information retention of new words in second language. Their participants were 18 Chinese students and 17 Korean Students with English as their L2. The experiment was conducted in the United States of America. Also, the material used for the experiment was two types of pseudowords, "regular" and "irregular. Their assumptions were that congruity in the L1 and L2 orthographic experiences determines L2 decoding proficiency, which later affects semantic information encoding and retention. The proficiency of the students was measured by a **pseudoword** naming task with phonologically regular and irregular conditions. The pseudowords were paired with pictures and students learned their meaning. However, successive recollection tasks revealed that the Korean group had improved overall retention; however, there was greater deficiency with irregular pseudowords. Their findings suggest that L1 orthographic distances influences L2 word learning. The authors, however, stressed that in order for transfer skills to be practical in the new language, there must be some adjustment to the requirement of the L2.

First language influence on listening and reading comprehension of second language learning.

In listening and reading comprehension, the first language may influence second language learning. Learners of L2 employ the knowledge of the L1 to listen, and for reading comprehension. Edele & Stanat (2016) conducted a study on the role of first language listening comprehension in second language Reading comprehension. Their subjects were from two different nationalities from Turkey and Russia. The sample was 509 Russian 9th grade students with Russia as their L1, and 662 Turkish 9th grade students with Turkey as their L1. The study was conducted in Germany to investigate whether listening comprehension is a "predictor" of language minority students' reading comprehension in L2. The result reveals that listening comprehension from L1 affects reading comprehension in L2 despite students communicate in the L1 at home with no formal teaching in the L1. Contrastively, a study conducted by Jiang (2011) found no transfer of L1 reading comprehension on L2.

Thus, transfer of the first language listening comprehension may affect the reading comprehension in L2, as a result of the existing knowledge of the first language. Learners of L2 rely on listening in the L1 thereby transferring to reading in the second language. However, that in the above study if learners' L1 is at a high-level proficiency, then he or she has a better chance of higher proficiency in L2 learning, because the transfer from the knowledge of the first language to the second learning makes learning easier and quicker (Littlewood, 2006). However, when there is variation in the two languages, the learner may encounter difficulty in learning and achieving the high proficiency in L2 learning. However, the level of high proficiency may be possible when the two languages are closely related (for example, Dutch and English), but when the languages are not related it is less likely for the L1 speaker to have high proficiency in L2 (for example, Chinese and English).

The semantic influence of first language on second language learning.

Semantic influence is the transfer of meaning from the first language to the second language or transfer of meaning from the second language to the third language (Odlin, 2005). There is little research in the field of second language research on semantic conceptual

transfer (Jarvis 2000; Jarvis and Odlin 2000). Therefore, there are few studies on the semantic influence of L1 on L2 learning. A study in Jiang (2000, 2004) examined the semantic transfer in second language learning with a model of his work (2000). His participants were 15 bilingual Korean-English students, 5 females and 10 males, and 15 English Native speakers. Among the native English speakers one was an undergraduate and the others were graduate students. The methodology used was the same in (Jiang, 2000) where the ESL Korean students were presented with a list of random English words pairs that were related or not related in meaning. The instruction given to the learners was for the learners to judge speedily and correctly as possible whether there is any relationship in meaning between each pair of the randomly listed English word. The pair of English words that were related served as “critical stimuli”. Also, the materials use was adopted from other study (Jiang, 2000). Furthermore, the procedure that was administered was that the students were tested individually. In each of the session of the test, participants often start with tutoring, before practice then test. The findings of the study show that there is a semantic transfer effects in the adult L2 vocabulary learning. The author further states that, children learnt new words and the concept and meaning in their first language at the same time. Thus, word form and meaning is already registered in their L1 and therefore cannot be separated. With the word form and meaning already in the L1, when children and adult see a word in their L1, it is easier for them to identify the meaning of the word. But, for the adult L2 learner, the acquisition of the vocabulary in the L2 will require the knowledge of the L1 for easy learning.

Morphological influence of first language on second language learning.

The first language may influence second language learning at the phonological level. This is seen the case of L2 learners in Nigeria when learning English as a second language. Jowitt (1991) investigated some morphological influences of the first language on the second language learning in Nigeria. For example, sentences such as, I am seeing, I am hearing, I am smelling. These words are translated from the L1 when learning the L2. In British English, the correct order of the sentences is I can see, I can here, I can smell. The Learners transfer the morphological process of their first language into the English language.

Similarly, a study by De Angelis and Selinker (2001) shows evidence of morphological transfer in two adult multilinguals that were resident in England. The first participant was a 50 year old Canadian woman who speaks three languages: English, Spanish and Italian. The second participant was a 45 year old British with two interlanguages (Spanish and Italian). The experiment, conducted at the University of London implored interview in Italian, the woman was asked questions on her general experience. Also, lists of English words were read aloud to her and she was asked whether she was conversant with the words. She was to answer “yes or no”. Subsequently, the woman was asked to translate the English words she was earlier given in the interview to Italian. The second participant was interviewed by the same Italian who interviewed the first participants. He was requested to watch the Italian news on RaiUno on daily bases to prepare for oral report for the next day. Their findings suggest that there is indication of the presence of lexical and morphological transfer from the first language.

In a similar vein, Ramirez et al (2011) conducted a study on the “morphological awareness and word reading in English language learners”. Their participants were 260 grade 4 and grade 7 school children from 22 schools in Canada. The Spanish speaking English language learners were 89 which consist of 39 grade 4 and 50 grade 7 children, while Chinese-speaking English language learners were 77 which consist of 36 grade 4 and 41 grade 7 children. The other group was a group of monolingual English-speaking children. Their findings suggest the influence of first language structure in the development of morphological consciousness in second language and also the morphological awareness to word reading among monolinguals learning English as a second language.

First language writing influence on second language learning

Bennui (2008) investigated the influence of first language on writing on the second language. His subjects were 28 third year English Minor students who have registered for the writing course at the Thaksin University. The students were involved in writing paragraph. The finding of the study was in three aspects: The first one was that the students literary translate words from Thai into English words and the use of Thai words. Secondly, the English vocabulary such as, get/receive, serious, book, meet, use, true, close, change, alone, make and cost were translated from Thai. Thirdly, at the syntactic level, Thai grammatical order was use, such as tense, subject-verb agreement. The author identifies that transfer from the first language to the second language poses a negative influence in learning.

Again, L1 influence L2 second language writing. It is as a result of the presence of the L1 in the learner. Thus, Derakhshan & Karimi (2015) on the interference of first language and second language acquisition suggest that research has shown that L1 has a major influence on L2 learning. For example, Bhela (1999), (Karim and Nassaji, 2013) Ringborn (1987) as cited in Derakhshan & Karimi, suggest that in writing, learners of L2 use the knowledge of syntax acquired in the L1 to fill the gaps in their L2 writing. The syntactical structures acquired from the first language aid in writing in the L1. However, the application of this syntactical structures acquired in the first language may be negative or positive. This however, may pose a problem where the two languages do not share the same syntactic feature. A negative transfer is likely to occur when the learner writes in the first language and the interpretation would be different because the first language may have a different meaning of what has been transferred. Mahmoud (2002) explored the errors Sudanese university students make in writing English. He found that Arabic-speaking students of English transfer linguistic features from L1 to L2 writing. He further argues that the transfer is as a result of the available knowledge of L1 which directly influence L2 writing.

Examining different theories of second language acquisition

Over the years, views have evolved and theories have emerged with respect to language learning as well as how other factors influence second language acquisition. Research has (Mitchell et al 2013; VanPatten and Williams, 2015). However, some of the theories will be examined under different headings.

BEHAVIOURISTS THEORY

Behaviourism is a theory that emerged in the 1950s with Skinner (1957) as the major proponent of the theory as cited in (Mitchell et al, 2013). The environment is central for language learning; therefore, language is acquired through the process of imitation, practice, reinforcement and habit formation (Spada and Lightbown, 2010).

In the view of the behaviourist theory, the process in which children learn words is by associating sounds with objects, and occurrences in their environment. This further explains why when a child cries and is being cuddled by the caregiver, the child will always cry whenever s/he needs the attention of the caregiver (VanPatten and Williams, 2015). In addition, behaviourists are of the belief that L1 interferes with L2 acquisition, this belief is according to Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) (Ellis, 2009). This hypothesis states that the layout of L1 influence L2, CAH rests on the assumption that in acquiring L2 the learner identifies elements of L2 similar to L1 and such elements are easily understood and learnt. On the other hand, elements different from L1 are difficult to comprehend (Ellis, 2012). Another assumption is that L2 learners transfer the features of L1 to L2 utterances, during the learning process when there is an association between the two structures a positive transfer occurs while when no association is made a negative transfer occurs (Mitchell et al., 2013).

This difficulty is known as interference and there is need for reinforcement when interference takes place, this is because some errors can become permanent and resistant to change when not corrected immediately. For instance, interference may occur when an English speaker of German pronounces the word Volkswagen, In the German Phonemes /w/ represents /v/ while in English it is unchanged. According to the behaviourist theory L2 learning will mean disregarding the habits already formed in the L1 in order to learn the new language (Ellis, 2012). For this to be effective there is need for corrective feedback, because this corrects wrong habit formation that impedes the output of the L2 learner due to the direct relationship between inputs and output which is crucial for language acquisition.

UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR

Universal Grammar is a theory of language learning that emerged after the behaviourists theory (Mitchell, 2013). The proponent of this theory is Chomsky (1959) as cited in Mitchell et al (2013). Chomsky's Universal Grammar came as a result of his criticism of Skinner (1957). However, Chomsky criticised the behaviourists' theory on the bases that children do not learn language by imitation from the environment (Mitchell et al, 2013). He argues that the environment does not shape the learning of the child as claimed by the behaviourists' theory. Chomsky proposed that children are born with an innate faculty which supports language acquisition. Language device is known as language acquisition device (LAD) which was later known as Universal Grammar.

In Chomsky's view, human beings are born with a Universal Grammar which enables them to acquire language. The human brain is wired in such a way that language is learned as a result of the wired device in the brain. The LAD aids in learning language explain why children do not learn language from imitation in the environment where they are born into. In the 1960s, UG was not strong as regarding the influence of L1 on L2 learning. Universal Grammar was more concerned with the way children acquire language without imitating parents or caregivers in the environment where they are born.

Views on the influence of first language on second language acquisition

There have been varying views on the presence of the L1 in those learning L2 (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2007). The works of Weinreich (1953) & Lado, (1957) as cited in (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2007) were the premise which other researchers in the field build their findings upon. The studies they carried out were on the errors found among L2 learners as a result of their first language. Lado (1957) in his Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis claimed that errors that learners make in their L2 are as a result of the influence from their L1. However, Lado has been criticised on the bases that the errors identified in the first language did not correspond with the L2 in the experiment. Some researchers have argued that L1 has little influence on L2 learning as it was based on the behaviourists' theory which view L1 transfer on L2 transfer as a significant error in L2 learning, because first language has been intensely embedded in the learner.

In another view of the presence of the L1 on L2, early study by Dulay and Burt (1973) as cited in Mitchell et al., (2013) this study was to investigate errors in children learning second language on morphemes. They argued in their findings that the errors found in children learning second language morpheme is 3% of the influence of their first language. That the errors occur as a result of the developmental stage of the children and not "habit formation" as claimed by the behaviourists' theory. The authors concluded that the influence of first language in children learning a second language was weak. Similarly, in another study on morphemes by Dulay et al. (1982) to advance their study on morphemes, they had a larger class of students from different first language backgrounds. And their findings were that the children follow the same acquisition process of the 13 English grammar morphemes, despite their

different environment. Their conclusion was that first language influence has little impact on second language learning. These studies are in response to the behaviourists' theory of second language acquisition which view the errors produce by the second language learners as the influence of the first language. The findings of the study suggest that L1 has minimal impact on L2 learning. From the behaviourists periods where the influence of the first language on second language learning was seen as a strong force (Ellis, 2008), the L1 was viewed as a great influence on the L2 because the behaviourists view second language learning as the imitation of the first language.

In the 1980s, there was a shift concerning the influence of the first language on second language learning. Different researchers explore the different ways in which the first language influences the second language (Ellis, 2008). Some researchers based their hypothesis on the phonological influence of the first language on the second learning. Others based their hypothesis on the grammatical influence of the first language on the second language. Also, some look at the area of vocabulary, how the vocabulary of the first language has influence on second language learning. Another area is in the area of discourse, where some studies have shown that first language influences second language learning in the area of discourse. Even in word recognition and comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Many studies on the influence of the L1 on the L2 learning have been carried out. The studies have shown a level of influences from the different linguistic features such as phonological, morphological, syntactical and in reading comprehension and writing. Different views on the influence of the L1 on the L2 learning emerged from the point of view of the behaviourists to the modern theories of L2 learning. It is thus established that the L1 might affect the L2 learning because learners tend to use the linguistic repertoire acquired from the first language in learning the second language. The L1 may influence L2 learning either positively or negatively. Therefore, one may conclude that the L1 influences learning of the L2 in different aspect of linguistic features.

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