Transfer/Cross-linguistic influence

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Historical overview

The general consensus in the 1950s and 60s was that learners’ errors could be predicted by comparing and contrasting the grammars of their L1 and of the target language; where there were differences, there was likely to be error. This belief was rooted in a behaviourist theory of language learning whereby learning was equated with ‘habit forming’: the habits of the L1 were believed to be ‘transferred’, and regarded as ‘interfering with’ the newly-acquired habits of the L2.

The 1970s saw a reaction against this view. The new orthodoxy was that the L2 was learned in the same way as the L1, and independently of it; learners followed their own ‘internal syllabus’. The vast majority of errors were explained in developmental terms, rather than as a result of L1 transfer. Learners’ errors were similar to those of children learning their L1.

Current thinking

It is now generally accepted that transfer does occur, but is a far more complex phenomenon than hitherto believed. It is not the only reason for error, nor does it always lead to error.

1 It can be facilitative, in areas where the two languages are identical (‘positive transfer’).

2 It can result in avoidance, where a structure does not exist in the L1. For example, Chinese and Japanese do not have relative clauses, so Chinese and Japanese learners of English use these less often than learners whose languages do have relative clauses.

3 It can lead to different rates of development:
   - either delay, when learners whose L1 contains a particular form spend longer at that stage of development than L1 learners or learners whose L1 does not contain that form. For example, Spanish negation is realized by ‘no’ + verb. Children learning English as L1 use ‘no + verb’ form for negation before they learn ‘auxiliary + not’ form; many foreign learners appear to go through this stage, but Spanish learners tend to stay there longer.
   - or acceleration; for example, learners whose L1 has articles and reflexive pronouns learn these forms faster than learners in whose L1 they do not exist.
4 It can lead to different routes of acquisition, e.g. as Chinese does not have articles, Chinese learners go through a stage of using demonstrative pronouns.

5 It can result in overproduction, e.g. over-use of Latinate cognate words by speakers of Romance languages.

**Occurrence of transfer**

To what extent does it occur? This appears to depend on various factors:

- **setting**: it probably occurs more in classrooms than in naturalistic settings, because of the lack of opportunities for input and interaction outside class.
- **proficiency**: it is usually considered to decline with proficiency (though some researchers disagree, saying that it just manifests itself differently at higher levels).
- **style**: there is more evidence for transfer in ‘careful’, monitored style than in unmonitored, spontaneous speech.
- **learner-type**: ‘risk-taking’, meaning-oriented learners appear less prone to transfer than form-focused learners; learners with a positive attitude to the L2 are less prone than learners with a negative attitude.

**When?**

Transfer occurs:

- consciously, as a deliberate communication strategy, where there is a gap in the learner’s knowledge.
- unconsciously, either because the correct form is not known or because, although it has been learned, it has not been completely automatized.

**Why?**

Some possible reasons are:

- **interlanguage**: the learner’s interim grammar of the L2 is not fixed and rigid like the L1, but ‘permeable’.
- in all learning situations, previous knowledge is a starting point for acquiring new knowledge; and in a language-learning situation, this means previously-learnt languages.
- there may be affective considerations, such as fear of loss of identity if the L2 is learnt too well; or the feeling that the L2 lacks prestige.

**What?**

Transfer may occur at all levels:

- **phonology** (‘foreign accent’).
- **syntax** (word for word translation, e.g. ‘I like very much Edinburgh’ could be a transfer of French word order into English).
- **lexis** (e.g. ‘false cognates’, if the learner incorrectly assumes that an L2 word has the same meaning as a similar L1 word; for instance, a Spanish speaker may use ‘embarrassed’ to mean ‘pregnant’, ‘embarazada’ being the Spanish word).
- **pragmatics** (e.g. inappropriate over-formality or under-formality).
- **morphology** seems to be less affected than other areas.

**Perceived language distance**

If two languages are perceived as close, transfer (both positive and negative) is more likely to occur. For example, research in Finland, where Finnish and Swedish are both official languages, suggests that L1 Swedish learners of English more readily transfer from their mother...
tongue, while L1 Finnish learners more readily transfer from Swedish, which they perceive as closer to English.

**Implications for teaching**

1. Transfer can be positive as well as negative: teachers can capitalize on any similarities between L1 and L2.

2. Consciousness-raising can be valuable: teachers can explicitly point out or elicit awareness of differences between L1 and L2.

3. Translation may be useful:
   - of sentences (either authentic or specially constructed) illustrating specific points and anticipating particular transfer errors.
   - of whole texts containing a variety of potential transfer errors.

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**Further reading**

**General books**


Useful chapters and sections of more general books can be found in:


**Collections of research papers**


**For classroom teaching**


**The author**

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