

Preliminary Reviews to Interference of Second Language Learning caused by First Language and Culture

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Introduction

Interference is one of the reasons why students have difficulty in learning a 2nd language. There are many different causes for interference and a couple of reasons have been thoroughly researched. One of the reasons is because of a student's native or first language (or L1) (Bhela, 1999; Fewell, 2010; Galasso, 2002; Lim, 2010). Another reason for the interference is based on cultural background or norms of the student. This paper will examine several different literature reviews about how a student's first language (L1) or cultural background and norms can cause interference in learning a second language.

First Language Interference

The literature reviews by Galasso (2002), Fewell (2010), Ravetta & Brunn(1995), Bhela (1999), and Zhang (2009) represent the viewpoint that first language (L1) is the cause for interference from gaining fluency in a second language (L2).

In a research paper by Galasso (2002), he tried to find out how much a student's first language (L1) prepared a structure of how to learn a language which could interfere in learning a second language (L2). Galasso used subjects whose L1 was Spanish and their L2 was English for his research and talked about an important concept known as Universal Grammar (UG). The concept of UG is very important because, according to Galasso, Universal Grammar constrains the specific formulation of the entire range of all possible grammatical constructions for human language (Galasso, 2002). He maintained that although UG is so universal that anyone learning a second language can do so without interference.

A person's L1 would cause interference because how they learn their L1 serves as a basis for learning an L2. This is an important point because in Linguistics, language is universal. By understanding the basic paradigm used in all languages (grammar, nouns, verbs, adjective, adverbs, etc.), humans should be able to learn any language. The problem with this point, though, is that when a person learns a L1, they develop a learning strategy that may not be applicable in learning an L2.

Galasso started the study with the intention to test an ESL method known as *The Sheltered Initiation Language Learning (SILL)* which is the creation of Zev Bar-Lev. The concept of SILL was that L2 students seem to work best in learning a foreign language (L2) when confronted with a series of carefully arranged (or generically modified) grammatical benchmarks. In the research study, Galasso conducted a six month observational trial study which was conducted in a classroom setting with the sole aid of daily diary notation (Galasso, 2002). Based on the methodology Galasso used, the study was considered to be a qualitative research methodology. As for the research subjects, 20 students were chosen and the students either did not have any English language ability or they had very little English ability. The students chosen were all from elementary school to high school aged. Research regarding SILL was conducted to find out if a student's L1 learning style or method of learning interfered with the learning of L2.

After doing the research, Galasso came to the conclusion that the concept of a person's L1 learning style or parameters did cause some difficulty for L2 learners. These difficulties, or interference, are from the parameters of how a person learned their L1. Because learning an L1 is very difficult, special constructs are made by the student. Unfortunately, in some cases, the constructs cannot be used again in learning an L2.

L1 interference was also discussed in terms of strategies in helping to learn an L2. In a paper by Norman Fewell, the concept of language learning strategy is discussed. Strategies learned and used will allow the ability to directly manipulate

and manage workable language components for improved language learning efficiency (Fewell, 2010, p. 159). Because of this, the strategies a person uses to learn a second language can help them to achieve a level of fluency. These strategies are developed from the initial strategies used in learning their first language. The six strategies that can be used are as followed:

- Memory (Remembering Effectively)
- Cognitive (Using Mental Processes)
- Compensation (Compensating for Missing Knowledge)
- Metacognitive (Organizing and Evaluating)
- Affective (Managing Emotions)
- Social (Learning with Others)

(Fewell, 2010, p.163)

What is very interesting to note is that these strategies are somewhat based on the concept of Learning style and Multiple Intelligences, which was formulated by Howard Gardner of Harvard University (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The concept of multiple intelligences is based on nine distinct learning styles:

Linguistic Intelligence – They use words effectively. These learners have highly developed auditory skills and often think in words),

Logical-Mathematical Intelligence – They learn by reasoning and calculating. They think conceptually, abstractly and are able to see and explore patterns and relationships.

Visual-Spatial Intelligence – They think in terms of physical space, as do architects and sailors.

Musical Intelligence – They show sensitivity to rhythm and sound.

Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence – They use the body effectively, like a dancer or a surgeon.

Intrapersonal Intelligence – They have an understanding of one's own interests, goals.

Interpersonal Intelligence – They understand through interacting with others.

Naturalistic Intelligence – They demonstrate expertise in the recognition and classification of numerous species – the flora and fauna – of the environment.

(Lane, 2000, p. 3)

Fewell wanted to find out which language learning strategies (LLS) benefitted a language learner and which LLS was detrimental to students.

The method that Fewell used in determining which LLSs were more useful was by using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Fewell used the SILL to evaluate a variety of data to determine patterns of LLS use among two groups of learners with the administration of a Japanese translated version of the SILL questionnaire, a computerized English proficiency test, and a brief background questionnaire (Fewell, 2010). He chose a sample group of first year Japanese college students enrolled in an English course at a university in Okinawa, Japan. All students completed six years of mandatory English education, and the test subjects consisted of 29 students who were English majors and 27 who were Business majors. Of the 56 students, 35 were female and 21 were male (Fewell, 2010, p.163). Upon completing the tests, the top 25% and the bottom 25% were interviewed twice, and the data was analyzed.

The results of the research pointed out to very noticeable similarities of patterns in the utilization of LLS shared by the high proficiency learners (those in the top 25%), and the low proficiency learners (those in the bottom 25%). Because of the patterns, the usage of a suitable LLS is an influential variable related to success or failure in learning a second language (Fewell, 2010). It can be deduced that LLS is indirectly related to how the person learned their first language because they are using the same strategies in first and second language.

Observations in L1 interference in learning an L2 were also documented. In

the paper by Marcia Kent Ravetta and Michael Brunn (1995), the researchers focused on an observation of native Spanish speaking student in a classroom. The student was learning English by being in a regular curriculum classroom of regular English speakers and students who could speak Spanish. The researchers observed at how the student interacted with the non-Spanish speaking students and then native Spanish speaking student who can speak English. The researchers wanted to observe the student's interactions with both sets of students and to find out which techniques the student used to communicate and be understood. One of the techniques that they wanted to observe is the technique of code-switching.

The method the researchers used was the direct observation of one student. The student is a seven-year-old girl in a mainstreamed first and second split classroom at Ivan K. Pravda Elementary School located in a large metropolitan city in the Southwest United States (Ravetta & Brunn, 1995). In the classroom there were 27 students: 20 boys and 7 girls, 12 first graders and 15 second graders. The teacher teaching the students was a Euro-American woman who had a Master's Degree in ESL and ten years of experience as an elementary school teacher (Ravetta & Brunn, 1995, p.1). The researchers observed the student for approximately 25 hours in the classroom, library, and school playground. The researcher was a participant observer, and the researchers sometimes interacted with the teacher and other students. They documented what they observed in field notes and summarized their findings each week. Later, they videotaped part of their observations (Ravetta & Brunn, 1995, p.1). The researchers used a qualitative research methodology, because they were using only one research subject for their research, and their data was based on field notes and observations.

The results of the research actually concluded that the acquisition of the student's second language, English, was a process that had many different parts in which socialization had a major role. The concept of code-switching was highly implemented to transfer knowledge and background information learned in the

students new experiences. The concept of code-switching from Spanish to English somehow reflected the ease in which the student was able to understand English. The research that was done could show that non-native English speaking students could adapt well in an English spoken classroom, but it depended on if the teacher teaching the classroom had a pedagogy that would benefit the native and non-native English speaking students.

There were also studies on how L1 directly contributed to interference in learning an L2. The case study done by Baljit Bhela directly researched how native language interference affected learning of a second language. In Bhela's case study, she focused on answering several questions:

- Are there differences and/or similarities between syntactic structures of L1 and L2 in a written task in each of the cases?
 - What are the instances where the syntactic structure of L1 is used in L2, causing an error?
 - What are the instances where the absence of a syntactic structure in L1 creates a difficulty for the learner in L2?
- What is the effect of each of the noted areas of difficulty on interpretation of meaning by a native speaker of English?
- What is the learner's knowledge of the syntactic structure of L1, which causes difficulty in L2?
- What is the learner's knowledge of the syntactic structure of L2?

(Bhela, 1999, p. 24)

The researcher reflected on previous research on this concept of native language interference and cites research done by: Dulay et al. (1982), Ellis (1997), Carroll, (1964), Albert and Obler (1978), Larson-Freeman and Long (1991), Beebe (1988), Beardsmore (1982), Selinker, (1971), Blum-Kulka and Levenston (1978), Faerch and Kasper (1983), Bialystock, (1990), Dordick (1996), and

Dechert (1983). Bhela focused on all of these case studies to find L1 interference on L2 in regards to syntactic structures on writing in second language learners. Bhela tried to find more information of the concept in their research.

Bhela designed the research and stated that the study was not an experimental intervention (Bhela, 1999, p. 24). In the research, Bhela had four participants in the study – a Spanish speaking 21 year old female, a Vietnamese-speaking 39 year old female, a Cambodian-speaking 50 year old female, and an Italian-speaking 65 year old male (Bhela, 1999, p. 25). The researcher had the subjects write a story about 2 sets of pictures that were shown. There was no time limit but the subjects had to write the story in a logical sequence in relation to the pictures that were shown to them. Then, the subjects were asked to write the same story, but in their own native language. After they had finished, they were to write the story in English, for a second time. The task was done in an open environment, and the subjects were allowed to interact with each other, if they wished (Bhela, 1999, p.25). After the subjects finished their writing task, they were interviewed, separately, and were video-taped. In the interview, they were asked to discuss their usage of specific L1 and L2 grammatical structures when they found an error. Then, they were able to correct their errors they made in the text that was written in the L2. Bhela then consulted with native language experts to analyze the subject's English texts, and interpret for semantic and syntactic acceptability. Their goal was to ascertain if the L2 text had to be syntactically correct in meaning to be understood at a second language proficiency.

The results of Bhela's case study noted that there was interference of L1 on L2 and the effects directly correspond to syntactic structure of the L1. Many of the subjects used their L1 structures in their writing to make the appropriate responses in their L2 writing texts. Although the reasoning was not deduced in the case study, it is possible that the interference was a learned phenomenon. If they learned some English at a younger age, the methodology of learning languages at

that time was through the concept of Grammar-Translation method of language instruction. In the Grammar-Translation method of instruction, students would see the new language and translate it to their own native language. Using this method, there would be many cases where the translation to the native language would not match the original text or language. And by translating the translated text back into the text in the original language, it would look even more different from the original text. In regards to Bhela's case study, even though the researcher noted that it was not an experimental intervention, the case study would have been more valid and reliable if there were more subjects in the study.

L1 interference was even presented at a convention for professionals in the field of language teaching. At a convention for the Chinese Language Teachers Association of Greater New York, Sheri Zhang, a professor at the University of Ottawa, presented a research article about a learners' mother tongue in Chinese language acquisition. The researcher chose to investigate Chinese language learners who have an English or Japanese language & cultural background, and to witness if the learner's L1 is an important factor in how to develop teaching material for a mixed group of students. The study that the researcher studied would help to benefit Chinese teachers who teach Mandarin Chinese in the classroom. In their research, Zhang focused primarily on two aspects of L1-L2 relationship: positive transfer of knowledge from L1 in the process of learning L2, and negative transfer, or interference (Zhang, 2009).

The method Zhang used was to collect data in a longitudinal study in Japan and North America between the years of 2003 to 2008. The data was from the works and informal interviews with Japanese and non-Asian students. The researcher examined L2 learner errors and presented information at the convention to show how some of the errors the students had been related to their L1.

From the results of the study, Zhang was in agreement with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature and other researchers that L1 is an important factor in

L2 acquisition, either as being constructive or interfering with language and culture of the target language (Zhang, 2009). For example, the Japanese kana (written language) for the days of the week is very similar to the Chinese characters for the elements such as: gold, wood, water, fire, and earth. Japanese speakers are able to learn Chinese more quickly because Japanese writing (Kanji) has its roots from Chinese characters.

Interference from Culture

The next group of literature reviews comes from researchers and authors who stand by the assumption that cultural interference is the cause for difficulties in learning a second language. Cultural interference is not as widely researched as L1 interference, and it should be noted that some the reviews are not necessarily researched, formally.

In a website by Reana Kyprianides of the University of Michigan, the author wrote several webpages that discuss about Socio-cultural competence in English as a Second Language (ESL) Education citing several research articles and works of other authors. The author connects language and culture in their notes. The author states that language and culture are closely tied to one another and have a profound influence on both verbal and non-verbal communication (Kyprianides, n.d.). The author points out four components of socio-cultural competence: social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness factors, cultural factors, and non-verbal-communicative factors (Celce-Marcia, Dorneyi, & Thurred, 1995). The cultural characteristics are very important because they put in context to what was spoken by students. The author gives examples, such as forms of non-verbal communication, such as body language, eye contact, and use of personal space are an integral part of the American culture, whose norms are implicitly understood and are often not discussed (Kyprianides, n.d.). What is very important to note is that in other cultures, the meaning of the non-verbal communication has a

different meaning in their own culture.

The author then goes into discussing how history and culture of the United States are often referenced in speech or text that people from other countries might not understand. For example, the expression “9-11” refers to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, but for someone who just moved to the United States, they might not easily understand the expression right away because they didn’t match the expression with the historical events (Kyprianides, n.d.).

One of the valid arguments that the author discusses is that argument regarding the schema theory of reading, which the author cites through Crawford. The author talks about Schemata, which is acquired information from previous life or learning experiences that is then stored as mental structures. This schemata is the reason why some non-native speakers have an inability to fully comprehend a text of conversation (Vegas Puente, 1997 and Crawford, 1998). This reason is a theory, and the theory has contributed to a better comprehension of foreign language instruction in general (Kyprianides, n.d.).

Cultural aspects in language teaching were also reviewed. In the article by Elizabeth Peterson and Bronwyn Coltrane (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003), they discuss about culture in second language teaching. In their article, they quote from Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, and Jones that culture is an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations (Goode et al., 2000). This definition is very important because it includes language as a part of culture. So, cultural factors can inhibit fluency in learning a second language. The authors in the article even quote from Krasner that linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). In this case, Krasner is correct in that assumption, because the use of

language is very important in different situations. Formal and informal usage of a language is important depending on cultural situations. This article highlights the importance of culture in learning a second language.

Even in media that is not considered to be completely research oriented, the topic of cultural interference was mentioned. In an editorial to the Toronto Star, an anonymous writer commented on an article in the newspaper about bilingualism. The interesting point in the editorial is that they quoted from Stephen Krashen, the person considered to be the most well-known linguist in the world, and language acquisition. The writer quoted from Krashen that second language hinges on “meaningful interaction in the target language” (Krashen 1982, The Toronto Star, 2008, p. AA04). The part about the meaningful interaction is an important point, because in language learning, if there is not any meaningful interaction, a learner would have a very difficult time in understanding and using the second language. Based on previous research from above, the student’s L1 plays a significant role in achieving fluency in L2. This is an important point to discuss in trying to find out how L1 interferes with L2.

Some papers regarding cultural interference were actually discussed and presented in formal presentations. In the abstract section of a paper presented at Symbiosis Pune, 12th by Skand Shukla, the writer discusses that language is embedded in culture. This message has already been shown in several previous research articles presented. The author of this paper goes on to discuss how there are differences in how world view is seen between a westerner and an Indian (Shukla, 2011). These differences are based on subtle things such as how things are perceived. The writer also discusses how associative contexts of certain words have a different meaning in the context being used in the writer’s country, India. Also, certain words which have context in English do not have context in India because the meanings or situations are not practiced or used in the country.

It is interesting as to how the author of the paper tried to eliminate cultural

interference in learning a second language. The author proposes to develop textbooks that try to eliminate cultural points of view. This could be difficult, because just as the previous researchers have commented in the previous articles reviewed in addition to the author's own opinion, language is embedded in culture. The author then tried to show a teaching methodology that would try to eliminate the force of culture within the study of the English language. That, in itself, is a very daunting task.

Fortunately, some formal studies were done to research the view of cultural interference. In the study conducted by H.W. Kang, the researcher wanted to look at the effects of background information that is culture-specific and how students inferred their background knowledge in the L2 comprehension of the text that they were reading.

In the study, Kang asked 10 Korean adult second language readers to think out loud while they were reading a short story about another culture and then answer specific after-reading questions (Kang, 1992). Kang used a qualitative analysis of the verbal reports of the students and their answers to get data to find out what inferences the subjects used to understand the L2 text.

The results of Kang's study pointed out that the student's background knowledge and inferences from their knowledge did affect the understanding of the text that was read. Also, any culture-specific schemata on interpreting the text could be lessened if the subjects tried to use other strategies instead of the strategies related to their own culture. That is an important point to note because, for example, American or Western style schemata would not necessarily fit with Asian or Eastern style schemata.

Some books also document cultural interference. In the chapter of the book edited by Kirsten Malmkjær and John Williams, Dick Allwright discusses about a common experience in which students are inhibited to ask questions in the classroom (Allwright, 1995). In some cultures this inhibition is stronger than

others. An example of a culture in which inhibition in the classroom is especially strong is in the Japanese school system. Allwright points out an important detail that most other linguists often do not discuss or research.

What is interesting to note in the chapter by Allwright is that the author talks about how certain methodologies that were introduced during that time actually increased the concept of why contextual factors are so important in second language acquisition. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was formulated to teach that language is to help formulate social contexts in different situations. CLT is the methodology that is currently used throughout the world, and countries like Japan and Korea are using this methodology as a way to help increase language learning for their students. The Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) and English Program in Korea (EPIK) work to provide CLT to the students while teaching culture, of which is the main point.

The last review on cultural interference was mentioned in a weblog that was posted in the internet. In a blog written by a person who calls themselves multilingualmania, the author gives an interesting point of view. The author states that language interference is a myth (Multilingualmania, 2010). The author states that language error is a developmental issue, not a linguistic issue (Multilingualmania, 2010). This point of view would support the argument that L1 is not the reason for the interference of learning L2. In addition, the developmental issue is related to culture because how a student is raised is based on their culture.

Literature Review Conclusion

After completing the literature reviews, it can be noted that there were more scholarly and academic research in first language interference than cultural interference. There is not enough academic research in the concept of cultural interference in learning a second language, and more research in this field is necessary in order to truly understand how culture affects a student's learning of a

second language. Then, a more accurate measure could be used to help students achieve fluency in their L2.

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