

The Role of Native Language Interference in the Acquisition of English as a Second Language

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Abstract: This paper investigates native language interference and its impact on acquiring English as a second language (ESL). It explores the major types of interference — phonological, syntactic, and lexical — while analyzing their specific manifestations in learners from different linguistic backgrounds. The paper also reviews key theoretical frameworks, such as Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Interlanguage Theory, and offers practical strategies for ESL educators. Understanding the effects of native language interference provides a foundation for developing teaching methods that minimize errors and promote language acquisition. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of further research into cross-linguistic influence and its long-term impact on language learning.

Key words: Native Language Interference, ESL, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Interlanguage, Cross-Linguistic Influence

Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a multifaceted process affected by various psychological, social, and linguistic factors. One significant aspect is the influence of a learner's native language (L1) on the process of learning English as a second language (L2). This influence, commonly referred to as native language interference or transfer, can facilitate or hinder the acquisition of L2 depending on the similarities or differences between the two languages.

Native language interference occurs when learners apply the linguistic rules and structures of their L1 to the new language they are learning, often resulting in errors in pronunciation, syntax, or vocabulary. These errors can become fossilized if not addressed early in the learning process, creating persistent language barriers. ESL educators must understand these patterns of interference to design effective teaching strategies that help learners overcome linguistic challenges. This paper explores the main types of native language interference and offers theoretical and practical insights into addressing them in the ESL classroom.

Types of Native Language Interference

Native language interference can be categorized into three primary types: phonological, syntactic, and lexical. Each type presents distinct challenges for learners and requires specific teaching interventions.

Phonological Interference: Pronunciation errors are common among ESL learners due to the influence of L1 phonology. For example, Uzbek learners may have difficulty distinguishing between English vowel sounds, such as the distinction between /i:/ and /ɪ/ in words like "seat" and "sit," since these sounds do not exist in the Uzbek sound system. Russian speakers may struggle with consonant clusters that are more complex in English, such as the initial consonant clusters in

words like "spring" or "street," leading to simplifications or sound insertions to match Russian phonotactic patterns .

In addition to specific sound differences, phonological interference can also affect intonation and stress patterns, making it challenging for learners to produce or comprehend natural-sounding English speech .

Syntactic Interference: Syntactic interference occurs when learners transfer grammatical structures from their L1 to English. One common example is word order. In English, the typical sentence structure follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) pattern. In contrast, Uzbek employs a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) order. As a result, Uzbek learners may inadvertently place verbs at the end of English sentences, leading to confusion or grammatically incorrect constructions .

Russian speakers, on the other hand, may omit articles in English sentences because Russian does not use articles in the same way English does. This can lead to errors such as "I saw cat" instead of "I saw a cat" .

Lexical Interference: Lexical interference arises when learners use vocabulary from their L1 inappropriately in English. This often occurs with "false friends" or cognates—words that look similar in both languages but have different meanings. For example, the English word "actual" is often confused with the Russian word "актуальный," which means "relevant" rather than "real" .

Lexical interference also occurs when learners translate idiomatic expressions from L1 directly into English, resulting in unnatural or confusing sentences. Such interference highlights the importance of teaching ESL learners not only individual words but also the appropriate contexts in which to use them .

Theoretical Frameworks: CAH and Interlanguage

To better understand native language interference, two key theories are particularly useful: the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Interlanguage Theory.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH): CAH was developed in the 1950s and 1960s by Robert Lado and other linguists who believed that comparing L1 and L2 structures could predict the difficulties learners would face. According to CAH, similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate learning, while differences create challenges that can lead to interference. For example, if the sound systems of L1 and L2 are similar, learners are less likely to experience phonological interference .

However, CAH has faced criticism for its deterministic approach, which assumes that all learners from a given L1 background will encounter the same difficulties. More recent research suggests that while contrastive analysis is helpful, it must be considered alongside other cognitive and social factors that influence SLA .

Interlanguage Theory: Developed by Larry Selinker in the 1970s, Interlanguage Theory suggests that learners create an interim linguistic system that incorporates elements of both L1 and L2. This "interlanguage" is dynamic and changes as learners gain more exposure to the target language. However, L1 interference can cause certain errors to fossilize, meaning they become permanent features of the learner's language production despite further instruction .

Interlanguage Theory emphasizes the importance of viewing learner errors not as failures, but as evidence of the evolving nature of SLA. By understanding how learners' interlanguage develops, teachers can better support the transition from L1 to L2 while addressing areas where interference occurs .

Practical Implications for ESL Teachers

Understanding the patterns of native language interference allows ESL educators to design more effective teaching strategies. Here are some practical approaches to mitigate the effects of interference:

Error Awareness and Correction: Teachers should explicitly point out errors caused by L1 interference and explain the differences between the two languages. For instance, phonological errors can be addressed through targeted pronunciation exercises, while syntactic issues like word order can be corrected through sentence-building activities that reinforce proper English structure .

Contrastive Grammar Lessons: Incorporating contrastive analysis into grammar lessons can help learners understand how English differs from their native language. For example, teachers can create exercises that focus on article usage in English, contrasting it with languages like Russian that lack definite and indefinite articles .

Phonological Training: Pronunciation drills and minimal pair exercises can help learners distinguish between L1 and L2 sounds. Teachers can also use technology, such as language learning apps, to provide learners with additional practice in sound recognition and production .

Lexical Development: Vocabulary lessons should go beyond teaching word meanings and include discussions about context, collocations, and idiomatic expressions. This helps learners avoid lexical interference and develop a more natural use of English vocabulary .

Conclusion

Native language interference plays a significant role in the process of learning English as a second language. By understanding the specific types of interference — phonological, syntactic, and lexical — ESL teachers can develop strategies to help learners overcome these challenges. Both CAH and Interlanguage Theory provide valuable insights into how L1 affects L2 learning, but practical classroom approaches are necessary to address these issues effectively. Future research should continue to explore the impact of native language interference across diverse linguistic backgrounds, with a focus on long-term language development and the role of cultural factors in SLA.

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