

## A Study of Language and Pragmatic Transfer

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**Abstract:** Second language acquisition seems to be influenced by language transfer. This transfer is sometimes helpful and in some cases it can lead to unacceptable language in the second language. A sentence not only needs to be grammatically acceptable in the second language, but also it should be pragmatically acceptable. In the present study, first the term transfer has been defined and later pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics has been also considered. Interlanguage pragmatics is a concept that views the acquisition of appropriate speech behavior norms mostly from a point of view from L1 standards to L2 standards, and pays special attention to pragmatic transfer. Later implications of the study have been presented for syllabus designers and teachers.

**Key words:** language acquisition, transfer, pragmatic transfer, interlanguage

### Introduction

Second language acquisition, particularly in adult cases seems to be mostly influenced by L1 transfer, individual differences, and social-communicative contexts of learning, among other factors (Van Patten & Benati, 2010, p.90).

One of the fields which have gained some attention is lexical semantics and its connection with syntax. Researchers are concerned with the semantic and syntactic characteristics of transfer of L1 verbs and the way through which this transfer influences SLA (Van Patten & Benati, 2010, p.148).

### Language Transfer

The concept of transfer in second language acquisition can be followed back to the Contrastive Analysis approach (Lado, 1957; cited in Kuo, & Anderson, 2008), which tried to illustrate second language development on the basis of the commonalities and differences between the first language and the second language. Although the development of researches on cross-language transfer was mostly influenced by comparative linguistics and behaviorism, but contemporary research has tried to view second language learners

as fulfilling a more active role in making use of knowledge and experience achieved from one language in the learning of another language. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis clearly illustrates this shift (1981; cited in Kuo & Anderson, 2008):

To the extent that instruction in a certain language is effective in promoting proficiency in that language, transfer of this proficiency to another language will occur, provided there is adequate exposure to that other language (either in the school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn that language (p. 56).

During the past, the importance of language transfer has been considered many times. In the 1950s, due to the dominance of behaviorism in psychology and structuralism in linguistics transfer was considered as the most important element which influenced second language learning (Arranz, 2005). In the 1960s, there was a change in view and learners' errors were no longer regarded as "evidence of language transfer but as that of a creative construction process" (Odlin, 1989, p. ix). Therefore, the role of language transfer was reduced, and it was mentioned that "some researchers virtually denied the existence of

language transfer in their enthusiasm for universalist explanations" (Odlin, 1989, p. ix). In 1970s, studies on morpheme and acquisition order started and language transfer came into question (Van Patten, & Benati, 2010). However, in the 1980s, language transfer achieved its importance in second language acquisition research once again (Arranz, 2005), and at the same time, scholars proposed that transfer was restricted by universal characteristics of language (such as markedness). After 1980s although behaviorism was mostly rejected by SLA specialists, transfer was revived as a major element of SLA, especially by those who had a linguistic perspective on acquisition, besides those who had a processing perspective. However, transfer stays restricted under Processability Theory (Van Patten, & Benati, 2010).

Although transfer has been a major issue in the second-language literature for a long time there is still no general agreement on what 'transfer' really involves. Up to the time that there is no well articulated theory, many fundamental questions remain unanswered. For example there is only little information regarding what is actually transfer, when will it take place, and how do transferred knowledge hinder second language reading development, and whether transfer happens completely in the same way and extent among learners with different first languages. Therefore, it is crucial to explain the reason of the inability of the existing conceptualizations in addressing these necessary questions (Koda, 2008).

### **Definition of Language Transfer**

The term 'transfer' is usually used to refer to the influences of existing knowledge upon the learning of the new knowledge which are hence systematic. People usually confront a new condition or situation with a specific state of mind. This specific or existing state of mind is determined by cultural specific knowledge. Therefore, since individuals have various cultural backgrounds this may have an impact on their communication (Zegarac & Pennington, 2000).

Transfer has been one of the important theoretical concepts in second-language research for a long time. Although it is central, however, there is little agreement on transfer constituents, especially because the view regarding second language learning (what is learner and how it is learned) has been constantly changing. For example, traditionally learners' dependence on first language knowledge has been viewed as transfer. As an example Krashen (1983; cited in Koda, 2008), considers transfer as the result of the learner's retreat on old knowledge, or the rules of first-language, at the time when new knowledge is not yet developed at a sufficient amount. Gass and Selinker (1983; cited in Koda, 2008) mention a similar, but somehow more elegant, view: "the learner is transferring prior linguistic knowledge resulting in IL (interlanguage) forms which, when compared by the researchers to the target language norms, can be termed 'positive,' 'negative,' or 'neutral' " (p. 70). Odlin (1989) reinforces the general elegance of this notion by stating, "transfer is the influence from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p. 27). Two major assumptions can be deduced from these views. First, linguistic knowledge is transferred, and is understood in a set of rules. Second, when the learner depends on first language knowledge this in turn causes an insufficient grasp of second-language rules. Therefore, it can be deduced from these notions that transfer comes to an end at the time second-language linguistic knowledge has improved and, it can be criticized that when the learner gains sufficient proficiency, first-language knowledge will not play any role in describing second language learning individual differences (Koda, 2008).

Some other conceptualizations regarding transfer have also been mentioned. Recent combinations of research on second-language literacy development suggest wider definitions of transfer (Riches & Genesee, 2006; cited in Koda,

2008). For example, transfer is regarded as the ability to develop new language and literacy skills through reliance on the acquired resources which have been already achieved (Genesee *et al.*, 2006). In the same manner, prior experience is considered stored knowledge, skills, and abilities that becomes available in the case of learning literacy in a new language (Riches & Genesee, 2006; cited in Koda, 2008). In these later conceptualizations, the focus has moved from viewing first language as negative or positive influence to determining the available resources to learners of second-language at the time of learning a new language and literacy skills in that language (Koda, 2008).

Transfer can take place at any level: linguistic, discoursal, strategic, and pragmatic. Some studies (e.g., Cenoz, 2003; Flege, 1987) mention that transfer can occur bi-directionally, that is from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1. Investigations in the area of transfer in the use of both L1 and L2 have showed backward transfer in some levels of language structure: phonology (Flege, 1987; Flege & Eeftig, 1987), lexical-semantics (Caskey-Sirmons & Hickson, 1977; Pavlenko & Jarvis, 2002), sentence processing (Su, 2001), pragmatics (Valdes, & Pino, 1981). However, we do not still have enough knowledge regarding L2 influence on L1 in comparison to what we know of transfer from L1 to L2 in adult second language acquisition (Su, 2004).

Besides, there are also situations which also seem to inhibit transfer (Ellis, 2005). However, opposite to child first language acquisition, child L2-acquisition is subject to L1-transfer (Ionin, 2008). Child L2 learners' performance can be partly attributed to L1 transfer. Based on the data gather from experimental tasks and not naturalistic production adult L2 learners' performance on aspect is also believed to be influenced by L1 transfer (Ionin, 2008). Ellis (2008) pays attention to consciousness and ability to put together and combine all the things that we know.

### **Substratum Transfer vs. Borrowing Transfer**

As mentioned earlier, two different types of transfer have been recognized. The first case, in which the speakers' native or dominant language influences the other, has been labeled as "stratum transfer" (Odlin, 1989, p. 169), on the contrary when the native language is influenced by the other language it is called "borrowing transfer" (Odlin, 1989, p. 165). It seems as if most of us have experienced borrowing transfer, for example the times when we have had a word at the tip of our tongues and only the L2 will come out. Since it happens a lot any further example would seem useless. Although, it does not hinder communication in ordinary situations, borrowing transfer exists without any doubt, and professional translators are completely aware of it (Arranz, 2005).

### **Evidence of Transfer**

During the process of language acquisition those cues which are attainable and reliable and have conflict validity will be acquired earlier than the ones which do not have the same characteristics. Moreover, the Competition Model states at the beginning stages of acquisition L2 learners will transfer the indicated strengths of their L1 to the L2 (Van Patten, & Benati, 2010).

Concerning sentence processing skills transfer, there does not exist much research. However, growing evidence shows that L1 sentence processing skills interact with the development of L2 language processing skills and also shape them (Fender, 2001). Therefore, paying attention to the structural properties of a language is of utmost importance, for these finally form the underlying processing skills. Since in Arabic and English head comes first, one would expect both languages in need of similar sentence processing skills (Fender, 2008).

### **Pragmatics**

Pragmatics refers to the study of the "interaction of grammar with the CONTEXT of use" (Chierchia,

1999, p.civ). Pragmatics considers sentences in both the extralinguistic situation and the discourse in which they are part of it. For example, indexical and demonstratives (such as "You", "there", "later" etc.) that have fixed meanings in grammar but can refer to different items in different contexts can be considered as one characteristic of pragmatics. One of the other important areas of pragmatics is the study of presupposition (things which are taken for granted in articulating a sentence) (Chierchia, 1999).

Speaking in a second language requires a repertoire which is somehow different in the way it is coded, and one may encounter difficulties for either not finding words or using a pragmatic which is acceptable in the dominant language but not in the second language. For example Olshtain (1983) compared the need for apologies which is felt among native speakers of English, Hebrew, and Russian. She found that when English native speakers talked Hebrew there was the danger of sounding too apologetic, while on the contrary, Hebrew speakers while talking English may be in the danger of not sounding apologetic enough (Odlin, 2003).

### **Interlanguage Pragmatics**

Interlanguage pragmatics is defined by Kasper (1992; cited in Bou Franch, 1998) as "the branch of second language research which studies how native speakers ... understand and carry out linguistic action in a target language, and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge" (p. 1).

Van Patten and Benati (2010) mention that the origins of interlanguage can be found in three basic concepts: "(1) L1 transfer; (2) overgeneralization from L2 patterns; and (3) fossilization" (p.100). The first proponents of interlanguage believed that 95 percent of L2 learners have an interlanguage. Therefore, it was believed that although they do not have a native-like competence, it is also impossible to achieve one.

From the early 1970s, the term interlanguage has been substituted with other terms, or sometimes as a synonym for it, terms such as the developing system, approximative systems, learner language, idiosyncratic dialects, and others. The feature that all of these terms have in common is that whatever a learner knows is systematic and rule governed. It is due to this aspect that it can be regarded as a natural language. The most important figure associated with interlanguage is Larry Selinker (Van Patten, & Benati, 2010).

Pragmatics has been considered in terms of "interlanguage pragmatics". Interlanguage pragmatics is a concept that views the acquisition of appropriate speech behavior norms mostly from a point of view from L1 standards to L2 standards, and pays special attention to pragmatic transfer. The usefulness of these perspectives in gathering knowledge on how the way additional languages are developed cannot be denied, since there are different levels of linguistic competencies (Boxer, 2004).

Since the major role of pragmatics is to investigate how meaning is perceived from an utterance, interlanguage pragmatics is mostly concerned with the way non-native speakers differ from native speakers regarding the interpretation and production of speech acts in the L2. In order to distinguish the difference interlanguage pragmatic researchers try to find the range of differences between natives and non-natives regarding production and comprehension of a speech act. Based on these findings they will then move on to the distribution of these differences, use of strategies in target language, used linguistic forms for concept transmission, and politeness (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989; cited in Shaozhong, 2002). All this is related to transfer in one way or another.

### **Pragmatic Transfer**

Sociolinguistic transfer has been considered as pragmatic transfer (Wolfson, 1989; cited in Bou Franch, 1998), or even transfer of L1 sociocultural competence or cross-linguistic influence is

considered as pragmatic transfer (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss- Weltz , 1990; cited in Bou Franch, 1998). However Zegarac and Pennington(2000) define it as "the transfer of pragmatic knowledge in situations of intercultural communication" (p. 2).

Zegarac & Pennington (2000) mentions that pragmatic transfer does not only occur in a second or foreign language situation, but also it can occur whenever people even speak the same language but have various sociocultural backgrounds.

Zimmerman (2008) mentions that pragmatic transfer can be considered in three aspects: "(1) owing to the overall culture-specific text schema; (2) to the conventional integration of polite acts in this schema; and (3) to the strategic options for an appropriate realisation of the polite acts" (p.160).

Various researches in second language acquisition have been devoted to pragmatic transfer. According to their findings pragmatic transfer has been related to different factors, consisting of proficiency in the L2 or the period of residence in the community speaking the L2. The pragmatic transfer from L1 into L2 does not deny the possibility of a bi-directional interaction among the two languages. The 'Intercultural Style Hypothesis' mentions that second language can also influence speech act production in first language (Cook, 2003).

The relationship between negative transfer and proficiency is not very clear. According to second language acquisition researches performed, most pragmatic researches that have worked on interlanguage have found an opposite relationship between proficiency and negative transfer. Japanese ESL learners at intermediate level, for example, have shown higher evidence of negative transfer compared to high proficiency learners (Maeshiba, Oshinaga, Kasper, & Ross, 1996). Beside, the opposite has also been reported, for example, lower proficiency of grammar can hinder pragmatic transfer (Cohen, 1997; cited in Kasper,

& Rover, 2005), while high grammatical proficiency can cause pragmatic transfer possible (Blum-Kulka, 1982). Takahashi (1996) recognized a proficiency impact on pragmatic transferability, which was defined as how do learners who are similar perceive and recognize L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English) strategies. By the way, it was very difficult to determine the direction of the effect. However, maybe because of the connections to pragmatic misunderstanding, a great number of studies have centered on negative pragmatic transfer instead of positive. But understanding the learners' aspects of prior pragmatic knowledge that combine with L2 pragmatic practices and are transferred, or what elements work against positive transfer, and the way positive patterns change as L2 learning proceeds is also of utmost importance (Kasper & Rover, 2005).

Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) research regarding the existence of pragmatic transfer has worked on second language refusals. In this research four groups of Japanese and English native speakers filled out a discourse completion test regarding L1 situations. The results of this data showed evidence of pragmatic transfer. Although the formulas used across languages is similar, but the used order differs from language to language (Gass, & Selinker, 2008).

In another study Bu (2012) worked on the way L1 pragmatic transfer worked on the learner behavior regarding making a request at different levels of L2 proficiency. Bu mentions complicated relationships between first language pragmatic transfer and second language proficiency. Bu, further on mentions that whether pragmatic transfer decreases or increases with second language proficiency cannot be stated, for in some cases pragmatic transfer decreases with the increase of second language proficiency (for example learners use of direct strategies), while in some other no relationship can be distinguished between first language pragmatic transfer and second language proficiency regarding other request strategies. Therefore, Bu claims that high

proficiency L2 learners will less probably transfer their native language pragmatic norms for they have more control on their L2.

Besides Syahri and Kadarisman (2007) mention that speech act realizations are clearly culture-specific. They also showed that although their subjects in the study were proficient enough, they were evidently still influenced by their L1 culture- norms.

Boxer (2004) states that according to his findings, one cannot be sure that his intuitions concerning speech behavior even in his native language are acceptable and it cannot be also assumed that there is a direct transfer of even the natural speech behaviors in a L2. Therefore, Boxer states that whatever is known about language or even is taught has to be based on the results of the studies performed on authentic production. Besides, even having the knowledge concerning the standards of a speech community does not override the second language speakers' intuitive social needs. Moreover Boxer (2002) states:

"Vestiges of communication styles persist... Because of this, we cannot merely hope to 'educate' the newcomer into a new set of norms. Instead, as language teachers we can hope to study and expose learners to the most authentic set of norms, and then allow them to use those norms as they see fit in meeting their own social needs" (p.168).

### **Teacher and Learners' Role**

In the process of language learning, learners should be aware that differences concerning linguistic forms and sociocultural components will exist between their native and target language. They should also be aware of the important role of L2 pragmatic transfer, so that negative transfer will be minimized.

Bu (2011) claims that from the studies regarding pragmatic transfer two pedagogical implications can be proposed. First, when teaching speech acts, language teachers should include cross-cultural differences into their course.

In this way the learners will become aware of the differences which exist between the perceptions in their native language and target language right from the beginning. As Yu (2004) mentions in order to be able to communicate with native speakers one should not only learn grammatical forms, but also pay attention to suitable language use. Second, Syllabus designers and course book writers should include contextual information as much as possible. This is the point that according to Jiang (2006) most text books lack, although they have long lists of linguistic forms for specific linguistic function, but they may become as the cause of pragmatic transfer in learners' interlanguage. Therefore, such a shortcoming in textbooks should be corrected, and teachers should try to make use of any condition to provide context dependent information and real life information as possible.

### **Conclusion**

In the present study the way learners confront a new language was considered. Although there are researches which show that there does not seem to be any transfer taking place, but most learners experience a kind of transfer among their first and second language. For example, Fernández Fuertes, Licerias, and Álvarez de la Fuente (2008) mention that according to their findings bilingual mind should contain two separate systems, since although their subjects were confronted with two different languages, there did not seem to be any transfer from any of the two languages.

The review of literature presented clearly shows that there exists an interaction between the languages spoken by the multilingual speaker. Therefore, there exists not only a cross linguistic transfer but also a bidirectional relationship between the two languages can be seen. This transfer can have important implications for studies concerning multilingualism. If we assume that multilingual speakers' first language is affected by the second or third languages, then these speakers should possess characteristics that are different

from monolingual speakers. Besides, one can not consider multilingual competence as the total number of monolingual competences. It should be mentioned that multilinguals are confronted with various dimensions of communicative competence in different languages, and to different ways of achieving pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence in different languages. On the contrary, monolinguals do not need to use these various strategies; therefore their request directly corresponds to their experience of a single situation (Cook, 2003).

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