ROLE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE IN ELT : FACTORS AFFECTING TRANSFER

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Introduction

Empirical data show that language transfer (LT), in language learning, is probably the most prevalent process overall, if not with intermediate and advanced learners, certainly with beginners. The existence of such a language behaviour cannot be denied by any scholar involved in the field of language learning and teaching.

Transfer from the native language (NL) to the target language (TL) may occur resulting from various reasons, and its intensity may change from one situation to another. It asserts itself in all, phonological, semantic, grammatical and orthographic elements. Below, we will deal with these elements referring to elicited empirical data from language learners of different nationalities.

Phonological Transfer

Teachers teaching phonetics in the classroom make their best to get learners to produce the sounds desired. While doing so, they may observe that some learners do not seem to have much difficulty producing some sounds, and yet find it rather difficult with some other sounds. The difficulty is such that teachers may often prove of little help assisting students to surmount it. Early diagnosis and treatment are of crucial importance here.

Our observations and previous studies suggest that quite a significant number of pure vowels and almost all diphthongs and triphthongs in English cause major problems for Turkish learners of English, and they are all prone to be replaced with Turkish-sounding short vowels. A similar sound replacement holds true of the /w/ phoneme in English. The non-existence of this sound in word-initial position of Turkish lexical items leads Turkish learners of English to replace it with /v/ in this word position. In a comparative/contrastive study, one will probably notice that there are so many other dissimilarities between the Turkish and the English sound systems, and that such differences will assert themselves in TL production of language learners depending on

[1] See Bada, E. (1993).

their knowledge of TL level. Since consonant clusters do not exist in Turkish, for instance, learners may even be noticed to epenthesise such clusters with sounds, making the word sound more like an item in their NL.

Due to the very restricted occurrence of the [sh] sound in Japanese, Japanese learners of English are rather prone to replace this sound with [s] in their English production. Hinds (1986) states that "it has been indicated in the linguistic journal Gengo by the editorial board that there is a shift in pronunciation among young females in which the fricative preceding /i/ remains [s] rather than [sh]". Given the fact that the [sh] sound occurs only before /i/, and in all other word environments realised as [s], the Japanese learner of English will tend to produce the English [sh] as [s].

Similarly, it is, for example, very common with Arabic learners of English to produce the /p/ sound in English as /b/. In such a situation, the first and simplest explanation that comes to mind is that the sound /p/ does not exist in Arabic, and that the learner simply replaces this sound with the phonologically closest sound, /b/, in his NL, Arabic.

Semantic Transfer

This type of transfer, if not as prevalent as phonological transfer, still has a wide range of occurrence in TL learning. In this type of transfer TL learners, relying on word resemblances in NL, give way to semantic transfer from the NL to the TL, in many cases leading to misunderstanding of the desired meaning. Let us have a look at the following sentences. They were elicited from various learners of English in spontaneous situations.

1. I went to a *library* to buy a book. (French)
2. Joe is very *interesting*. (Turkish)
3. I will *control* if he is there. (German)
4. He is a *formal* friend. (Spanish)
5. Are you *mad?* (Arabic)
6. She is *wearing* her coat. (Japanese)

It is very obvious that the employment of the word *library* in sentence (1) is an outcome of a semantic transfer. *Librairie* in French means *bookshop* in English and not *library*. Not finding the right word to express meaning, the learner, apparently, being

[2] In a study we conducted with Turkish students learning English as a foreign language, we have found out that Turkish students, who were then at a non-beginner level, epenthesised some consonantal clusters provided for them in a set of words.

[3] For elaboration on these sounds, see Nasr, R.T. (1963); and al-Ani, S.H. (1970).

'lured' by the phonological resemblance of the two words, used the word she thought would pass for *bookshop*.

The word *interesting* in English displays a positive connotation to the native speaker of English. Turkish learners of English usually perceive the word as used in Turkish, *enteresan*, to mean *strange, weird, eccentric*. Thus, such a usage of the word *interesting* in English in sentence (2) clearly reflects a process of semantic transfer from Turkish to English production.

In sentence (3), resemblances in the phonological nature of the words *kontrollieren* in German and *control* in English leads the German learner of English to transfer this verb to his English production. In this sentence, again, we face a process of semantic transfer from the NL to the TL. Similarly, the word *formal* in sentence (4) reflects a similar process of transfer as previous sentences. *Formal* in Spanish, which means *reliable* in English, proves to be 'unreliable' to Spanish learners of English. The learner, being attracted by exact orthographic identicality and phonological resemblance, does not hesitate to employ the word in her English production.

The process that causes semantic transfer in sentence (5) is different from the ones in the previous sentences. The word *mejnuun* in Arabic has two meanings in English: *mad* and *crazy* (The fact, though, is that these words differ more in connotation than denotation). The speaker, not being able to differentiate between the two, employs the more frequently used counterpart, *mad* in his utterance, of course, leading to a semantic transfer from his NL to the TL.

A similar situation, as in sentence (5), occurs with the word *wear* in sentence (6). The word *kiru* in Japanese is polysemic, and may mean either *put on or wear* in English. The learner, probably, unaware of the slight semantic difference between the two, employs the word *wear* to express an action in progress. Regarding why the learner did not employ *put on instead of wear*, she told the researcher in a protocol held with her that "*wear is easier to use*", and possibly is given priority in Japanese-English dictionaries when defining the word kiru.

Grammatical Transfer

If not as prevalent as the previously discussed two types of transfer, grammatical transfer constitutes an important occurrence with learners of English. As examples for grammatical transfer, we can cite the following sentences, elicited from learners of English in spontaneous situations:

1. You *have* right. (Turkish French teacher)

2. What *are* you *doing* in your free time? (Turkish)

3. But there were many *Christian* in that area. (Japanese)

4. Only these two *city* have an experience of atomic bomb (Japanese)

5. You are from Turkey? (Arabic)

6. You play football here? (Arabic)

Sentence (1), in which the speaker means 'you are right', reflects a process of grammatical transfer, though not from the speaker's NL but his TL, French. Had the speaker resorted to his NL, Turkish, he would, probably, have been able to employ a more similar structure to the one employed in the reconstructed sentence '*you are right*'. The Turkish version of the reconstructed sentence '*you are right*' is '(Sen) haklısın', and has relatively closer semantic and syntactic relation to the reconstructed sentence than does the French sentence '*Vous avez raison / Tu as raison*', which the speaker negatively transferred to his English production.

A similar process occurs in sentence (2) produced by a Turkish learner of English. We can clearly observe that the NL structure, present progressive – commonly used in Turkish for expressing habitually-performed actions – has been transferred to English. While the Turkish version of sentence (2) (when literally translated) '*Boş zamanlarında ne yapıyorsun*?' sounds perfectly correct to a native speaker of Turkish, considering its contextual relation, the English sentence, '*What are you doing in your free time*?', does not to the English language native speaker.

Japanese has actually a plural marker which distinguishes the plural noun from the singular noun. However, it does not have a marker to indicate plurality in enumerative phrases such as '*three books*'. Stemming from this lack in their language, Japanese learners of English usually tend to produce sentences as in (3) and (4) above, in which they indicate the quantity (3) and/or number (4) preceding the noun, and yet leave the noun unmarked by not adding the English plural marker -s (-es, -ies). On this basis, one can assume that irregular nouns in English may cause less difficulty for Japanese learners of English than may regular nouns.

Similarly, Turkish does not have a plural marker in enumerative phrases either. Thus, it is quite usual for a Turkish learner of English to produce sentences with NPs unmarked with the English plural marker s (es, ies) as in the sentences below:

1.There are five *student in* the class.

2.There are a lot of car on the road.

Interrogative marking in Arabic is conspicuously different from that in English. In fact, while interrogation in English requires syntactic reordering and pitch variation in the pronunciation of a sentence, Arabic, permitting the syntactic order to remain unchanged, may manage perfectly well with pitch variation only. We can observe that Arabic learners of English transfer this feature of their NL, as seen in sentences (5) and (6) above, to their English production.

Orthographic and Script Transfer

Orthographic transfer is perhaps the least prevalent type of transfer among language learners. Different spelling conventions between languages seem to constitute a major source for orthographic transfer from one language to another. Words of cognate origin can be spelt differently in languages which are (or are not) genetically related: Turkish *istasyon* for French *station* (no subsequent vowels in same syllable in words of Turkish origin); Turkish *maraton* for English *marathon* (no 'th' in same syllable in Turkish) German *aktual* for English *actual* (no 'c' in this cluster in German); Turkish *'kısım'* for Arabic 'qism' (no doubled consonants in same syllable in words of Turkish origin); Spanish *'coma'* for English *'comma'* (no doubled consonants in Spanish), etc. It is very likely that these and many other spelling conventions will have some effect on learners' orthographic productions in the TL.

Learners of languages with a different script from that of Latin tend to allow this type of transfer to occur more than those who belong to language families with Latin script. Thus, one can expect Japanese and/or Arabic learners of English to transfer some script characteristics of their NLs to English, though learners may be quite familiar with Latin script due to romanisation of the NL script.

Although Turkish learners of English do not seem to have any problem with English orthography, different writing conventions in the two languages, English and Turkish, may in some cases pose some problems for Turkish speakers. Regarding these conventions, Thompson (1990) states that although Turkish makes use of punctuation marks of Latin-script languages, it employs them in its own way. He stresses the differences of the punctuating system between the two languages, as follows:

1. A comma is usually written after the topic of a sentence, which often happens to be the subject :

2. *My father, works in a factory.

3. Subordinate clauses are usually not marked off with commas:

4. *When you get home please remember to telephone me.

5. Sentences opening with the equivalent of *he said, I imagine, It's obvious* and similar expressions use a comma after the particle *ki* (=that), which gives rise to:

6. *He told that, his passport at Home Office.

7. A comma often separates two co-ordinate clauses:

8.She has a good voice, she enjoys singing.

9.Sentences opening with *çünkü* (=because, explaining what has gone before) normally stand after a full stop:

10. She was tired. *Because worked very hard.

11. Colons are used as in English, but are usually followed by capital letters. Semi-colons are little used.

12. Quoted speech is found between English-style inverted commas, between «and», or unmarked.

13. Often a quoted single word or phrase is enclosed in parenthesis – where English might underline or use bold type – is shown by capital letters or even inverted commas.

Due to the recently attained similarities between punctuation marks in their NL and English, Arabic speakers do not tend to face great difficulty in employing punctuating conventions. However, one still would notice that capitalisation is a major problem. A series of consecutive sentences with uncapitalised, initial words, and sentences beginning with 'And' or 'So' can frequently be observed among these speakers.

Non-linguistic Factors Affecting Language Transfer[5]

- Σ It is widely believed that *time and intensity of instruction* may have negative or positive impact on TL performance. Empirical data indicate that the more time devoted to instruction the less likely LT is to occur. However, contrasting views certainly do exist concerning this thesis.
- Σ The degree of involvement in the TL culture affects learners' understanding and appreciation of TL *cultural* and societal characteristics. Integration (though not assimilation) with the TL community may enable learners to distinguish between what is to be embraced and what is to be left out. Allowing for such a closeness between learners and the TL community may pave the way for learners to attain full comprehension of cultural and societal elements of the TL. Therefore, learners should be exposed to variant cultural and societal characteristics so that they come

[4] It is worth our while mentioning that such usage must not be treated in a parallel way with the less frequent, and more stylistic,

to grips with the reality that words such as *'cues'* are not always sticks in billiards, *'pots'* containers, *'toms'* tomcats, and *'cauli'* a word which does not exist in a learner

usage of 'so' and 'and' at the beginning of English sentences such as (1) and (2) taken from Ackroyd (1990:xiv):

1. So for those two days the crowds of people passed by in procession, many of them dropping flowers onto his coffin -- "among which," his son said, "were afterwards found several small rough bouquets of flowers tied up with pieces of rags."

2. And can we not see something of the national outline, too, in Charles Dickens's brisk, anxious stride across the face of the world -- a man of so much assurance and of so much doubt, of so much energy and so much turmoil?"

[5] Studies on language transfer resulting from factors related to linguistic competence are in abufndance. Corder (1981); Selinker (1972;1989;1992); and Tarone (1976; 1980;1983) ar e only a few of the many in this field.

[6]For instance, while Taylor (1975) states that "as the learner learns more about the TL, reliance on the NL will decrease", to Andersen (1983), NL transfer increases as knowledge of the second language increases. Yet, our observations and long-term experience with TL learners tell us that Taylor's view seems rest on a more solid ground.

dictionary. Learners must be made aware that such lexical items and alike may find their respectable places on the price tags for many fruits and vegetables at any greengrocer's in the UK: *cues for cucumbers, pots for potatoes, toms for tomatoes, and cauli for cauliflower*. Lack of such cultural aspects and alike is surely to give hard time to TL learners.

Σ *Personality characteristics* may affect learners' production of language in some rather interesting way. Empirical studies show that introvert learners tend to become more reticent, and thus during communication, more conscious of the language they employ. What matters most for them is correctness, and they tend to be very cautious in order not to let their NL knowledge interfere in their TL production. Those with extravert personalities, however, tend to be more communicative and function-oriented. Linguistic purity in the TL is not of great concern for them; all is fair as long as they deliver the message to their interlocutor.

Σ No doubt that *language teachers* affect the intensity of the transfer process in some ways. For instance, they may or may not intervene when they notice that the learner is relying on NL, in which case the process may to some extent be slowed down or let go with no intervention. The manner and style of intervention, however, is extremely important here, since the aim is a minimised NL transfer, and not a

breakdown in communication. Teachers may sometimes utterly ignore the existence of transfer, in which case NL-stemming fossilisation may occur. Thus, their efforts are extremely significant regarding a 'rampant' or 'minimised' LT.

Conclusion

We have seen that LT occurs in various language domains of the TL learner, and may indeed impede language learning to some extent due to the fact that characteristics of NL may not often correspond to cultural and/or linguistic elements in the TL. Can LT be avoided? Yes, it can. However, as seen above, time and intensity of instruction, degree of involvement in the TL culture, personality traits of the learner, and the teacher, all seem to play a pivotal part in its decrease or increase.

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