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Research Article

The perspectives of Turkish EFL learners on the differences and similarities between Turkish (L1) and English (L2) languages

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Abstract

Pedagogically, the issue of similarities and/or differences between the mother tongue and the foreign language is one of the interesting areas of second/foreign language acquisition and learning. Therefore, this study aims at exploring in which way the Turkish language (L1) influences the English language (L2) learning through the perspectives of EFL undergraduate Turkish students, whereby the main focus is on the extent of the possible effects of the Turkish language (L1) on English learning (L2). A qualitative approach was employed, including 15 male and female students from Karabuk University studying in the first year of the English Department whose mother tongue is Turkish. The majority of the findings showed negative transfer from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English), including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and thinking in the mother tongue (Turkish), whereas the positive aspects involved only two aspects, namely similar alphabets, and vocabulary (cognates). These findings can be employed pedagogically for second language learning/acquisition through enhancing the positive aspects and overcoming the negative ones.

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Introduction

Language transfer, which can refer to the first language (L1) interference, cross-meaning, and linguistic interference, is defined by Oldin (1989, p. 27) as the result of "similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired". The effect of L1 transfer in the acquisition/learning of L2 has always been the subject of controversy in the field of L2 learning and bilingual education, whereby the cross-linguistic influence is a widely discussed theme in the literature (Erarslan & Hol, 2014; Mede et al., 2014; Yan, 2010; Yildiz, 2016). Differences between languages could result in challenges in L2 learning particularly in the way learners conceptualize experience since they believe that no variations exist across languages (Alonso, 2002). For instance, Subandowo (2017) argues that the effect of mother tongue on students' pronunciation is highly dominant due to the differences of sounds between their mother tongue and English. Similarly, Jomaa and Bidin (2017) revealed that differences between Arabic and English in terms of vocabulary, sounds, grammar, and writing systems have their negative transfer on EFL doctoral students in writing their Ph.D. theses. However, though the subject of linguistic transfer has received lots of emphasis and attention, linguistic studies are still debating on whether the linguistic transfer of L1 knowledge has constructive or destructive effects on acquiring and learning a second/foreign language (Nedelkoska, 2021). In other words, various prevailing theories have controversial thoughts about the role of L1 effects on L2 learning (Yan, 2010). Therefore, this study aims at exploring the possible transfer from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English) through the perspectives of EFL Turkish students, focusing mainly on the differences and similarities between these two languages.

Literature Review

The mother tongue has an important impact on second language acquisition and learning. This aspect has been argued by researchers and linguistics for many years. The effect of the mother tongue on a second language can include pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary of the language. These points affect the second language in writing, reading, or speaking. In the process of second language acquisition and learning, several theories have been trying to explain how L1 can be a factor that may influence the second language. In the following, the role of L1 on the acquisition of L2 is discussed through the perspectives of Contrastive Analysis (CA), Contrastive Rhetoric (CR), Creative Construction (CC), and Constructive Underlying Proficiency (CUP), thus providing an understanding of the L1 transfer and new pedagogical implications (Yan, 2010). On the one hand, some theories, namely Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) state that L1 negatively influences L2. The contrastive analysis implies the psychological and linguistic aspects. The first is based on the Behaviorist Learning Theory which suggests that the interfering elements formulate a difficulty in L2 learning. The second aspect, namely the linguistic one is based on structuralist linguistics which focuses on the differences between languages. In his explanation of the Contrastive Analysis, James (1980) argues that L1 transfer occurs negatively and definitely as well as learning difficulties could be predicted based on the linguistic differences between the two languages. This degree of difficulty in learning depends basically on the similarities and differences of linguistic patterns between the two languages. However, this view has been

proved to be so simple based on the teaching experience and empirical studies which have revealed that differences in the two languages are not necessarily leading to learning difficulties in the two languages.

The other theory that is called Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) presents a cross-cultural view on the aspect of the negative transfer focusing mainly on the similarities and differences between the two languages. Based on Grabe and Kaplan (1989), differences in the cultural conventions and knowledge of the native language and L2 negatively affect how L2 writers organize the written discourse in the second language. Besides, CR assumes that writers composing in different languages produce different rhetorical patterns because of their respective L1 cultural modes of thinking. In brief, CR emphasizes mainly the textual features between two languages and helps L2 learners overcome L1 interference in L2 writing.

On the other hand, some theories advocate the positive transfer of L1 in learning L2. One of these theories is the Common Underlying Proficiencies (CUP). According to Cummins (1983), L1 and L2 proficiencies overlap with the common sector. In other words, although L1 and L2 are separated proficiencies, they essentially overlap and share specific universal principles and limitations that are common to all natural languages. This theory reveals that second language learners (SLLs) can express their language proficiencies in two distinct modes: the native language and the second language. Besides, L1 skills, knowledge, and concepts can be transferred to L2 easily. The CUP model implies that cognitive/academic proficiency exists across languages, thereby following the transfer of literacy-related skills across languages. The most obvious element of CUP is probably the conceptual knowledge which implies that the subject matter knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, reading strategies, and writing composition skills developed through L1 become available to L2 when having enough motivation and exposure. The other element of CUP is the common experience. A third element was proposed by Francis (2000) which implies the actual linguistic knowledge, including possibly the comprehension competencies, the discourse competencies, the formal schemata, and the organizational skills.

For Carson (1990), the three principal elements of the Common Underlying abilities are (1) the cognitive processes in L1 and L2, (2) the shared structures in L1 and L2, and (3) the mechanism that enables the process and structure to transfer across languages. CUP has been developed by Carson by proposing the threshold level as a necessary element for positive L1 transfer in the following summary: a) a common underlying proficiency with a threshold level of language proficiency exists that allows skills to transfer. b) an underlying proficiency with a threshold level of language proficiency and cognitive restructuring exists that allows skills to transfer. c) separate language systems with a cognitive separation of language skills exist. He added that transfer can occur when two previously separated but structurally similar language routines come together. Another party of theories has adopted a neutral attitude towards the influence of L1 on L2 represented by the Creative Construction (CC) theory. In their study, Faerch and Kasper (1987) claim that L1 acquisition and L2 learning progress develop similarly because of the innate mental mechanisms employed universally by L2 learners. Therefore, L2 learning is unaffected by L1 transfer. Another study by Dulay and Burt (1972) implies that L2 is facilitated by UG (Universal Grammar), whereby L1 plays no role.

Practically, in their study, Jomaa and Bidin (2017) showed that EFL Arab doctoral students face a challenge associated with thinking in the mother tongue (Arabic) while writing in English, thereby leading them to commit mistakes in their English writing. In the Turkish context, Erarslan and Hol (2014) showed in their quantitative study that Turkish students who attended English courses have a challenge in vocabulary use due to a lack of vocabulary equivalence particularly for the compound nouns used in Turkish. This reveals the negative transfer from Turkish to English. The results related to the lexical interference revealed that the Turkish learners not only transfer the Turkish meaning into English directly but also match an irrelevant target word with an irrelevant word group, due to their inability to recall the standard use of English while speaking (Yildiz, 2016). Another study was conducted by Erkaya (2012) which showed that the word choice represents the most challenging aspect for EFL Turkish students based on the analysis of 17 English essays written by 17 Turkish students. Regarding the grammatical L1 interferences, the differences between Turkish and English languages in terms of grammar and the lack of some English grammatical structures and forms in Turkish could be considered as the main reason for interference (Yildiz, 2016). However, the majority of these studies are limited to textual analyses of students' writings or quantitative studies. Therefore, this study aims at exploring the possible influences of the Turkish language on the English language based on EFL Turkish students' perspectives. The aim of the present study is not to make generalizations; rather, it seeks to fully understand in which way the mother tongue of Turkish students affects them in learning English as a second language to address the following research question:

To what extent does your mother tongue (Turkish) affect your L2 (English) language learning, and in which way?

Method

Research design

An exploratory qualitative approach was employed in this study. The purposeful sampling included interviewing 15 male and female EFL Turkish students in the first year of the English Department at Karabuk University. Based on Creswell (2012), in qualitative studies, the sampling and the site are identified purposefully to obtain a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon under the study.

Besides, Dörnyei (2007, p.243) states "qualitative research is iterative, using a nonlinear, zigzag" pattern: we move back and forth between data collection, data analysis and data interpretation, depending on the emergent results". However, due to the spread of the global pandemic Corona virus (Covid 19), it was not possible to interview the participants individually face-to-face. Therefore, the students were sent an email including the following question: to what extent does your mother tongue (Turkish) affect your L2 (English) learning, and in which way?

## Data collection and analysis procedures

The participants were sent an email that explains the instructions for responding to the question. Those who would like to participate in the study wrote a statement that allows the researcher to analyze their response for academic purposes only. Besides, since the English department encompasses students from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, only

Turkish students whose mother tongue is Turkish were included in the study to avoid any results that may belong to speakers of other languages. The students were given two weeks to respond to the question. The emphasis was on the content, whereas grammatical errors were not considered and this part of the instructions was sent to the students to motivate them to express themselves freely without being handicapped by their weakness in English writing skills. A hand analysis, mind mapping, and visual mapping were employed as analysis strategies to explore thematically the participants' replies to the question. The thematic analysis was based on coding the main ideas mentioned by the participants and regrouping these codes to form main and sub-themes. To support these codes, quotations from the participants' replies were employed to explain the themes further. To achieve trustworthiness (reliability, credibility, and validity), in the present study, member checking was utilized by sending the analysis to three participants to make sure that the analysis represents their ideas and opinions towards the similarities and differences between the two languages.

Findings

The findings of students' answers showed two types of effects: negative transfer and positive transfer. The findings related to the negative transfer formed the majority of the findings, including four major themes with sub-themes, whereas the positive transfer from L1 to L2 constituted the minority of the findings, involving only two aspects. Figure 1 shows the findings related to the possible effects of the mother tongue (Turkish) on L2 (English).
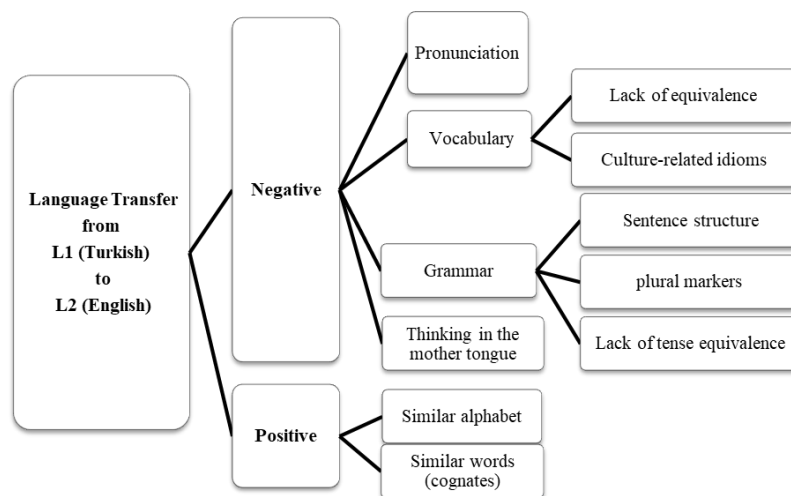
Figure 2. Language transfer from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English)

Negative language transfer

The negative language transfer included four major themes, namely pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and thinking in the other tongue.

Theme 1: Pronunciation

Although the Turkish language has almost similar alphabets to English, the sound system, particularly the vowel sounds in Turkish are more in number and are completely different in their pronunciation from the English language. These include specifically vowel sounds O, Ö, U,Ü İ, I, E, A which can affect the pronunciation in English negatively, thereby leading to a difficulty in pronouncing, reading, and misunderstanding on the part of the listener. For instance,

Participant 1 reports that L1 affects her L2 negatively due to vowel sounds and spelling:

My native language is Turkish and my opinion is L1 could effect negatively on L2 writing. The reason why I think like this is; Turkish language has some sounds that English does not have. These sounds are ' i, ö, ü, ç, ş and ğ '. While writing in English, Turkish people may have a difficulty in vowel sounds. (Participant 1)

The difference in the vowel sounds between Turkish and English has its effects on reading and pronouncing as stated by one of the participants since Turkish is read and pronounced as it is written, whereas the English language is read and pronounced in a way that is different from the writing system. As a result, a difficulty arises in pronouncing, reading, and writing. In this regard, Participant 2 adds:

Lastly Turkish is pronounced as it is written. English is read according to certain rules. (Participant 2)

Another participant added that pronunciation forms a major problem for him in learning English.

In the Turkish language, pronunciation is the same as how it is written. However, in English there is a different situation for pronunciation. Therefore, some Turkish people use the same technique as Turkish pronunciation while they are reading English words. These differences cause incorrect pronunciation in English words. So, our mother tongue affects our second language negatively. (Participant 3)

The difference between Turkish and English in terms of pronunciation has its negative effects not only on pronunciation and reading but also on spelling and writing in English, thus affecting the EFL Turkish learners' writing performance negatively.

First of all, language is a really important thing for writing. Especially, spelling plays a remarkable role in writing. I generally make spelling mistakes while writing because, in my language, a word is written as read. Nevertheless, it is different in the English language. Therefore, I am confused about spelling the English words because of my first language. (Participant 4)

Theme 2: Vocabulary

Vocabulary use in English also forms a challenge for EFL Turkish learners because of several aspects. First, lack of equivalence for the Turkish vocabulary in English is a real problem.

Lack of equivalence

One of the negative effects of Turkish on English is the lack of vocabulary equivalence; Turkish students cannot find equivalence for Turkish vocabulary in English. Therefore, they use English words with a close meaning, thereby resulting in communicating a different meaning.

Sometimes, when we use a word in Turkish, and we want to translate it to English, it can be a problem because of its meaning in different languages. These different meanings can cause some disagreements between two-people who use different two languages. For instance, one word can mean a slang word in another language. (Participant 3)

Another participant added that lack of vocabulary equivalence represents a challenge for him in using the English language.

On the other hand, not knowing the language sufficiently may have negative effects in a second language. For example, you have a thought in your mind, but you do not know what the exact equivalent of that idea is in your language. So, you have to use another word with a close meaning. Then, if you cannot find a word that fully meets this word in English. The idea in your mind will be eroded. As a result, you may not be able to express yourself fully to another person. This is also a negative reflection. (Participant 5)

Participant 6 added that lack of vocabulary equivalence forms a problem when translating from Turkish to English; therefore, he is forced to choose another word with a close meaning.

Another situation is, sometimes there is not specific meaning or a word in second language. When you try to translate a word from your native language to second language, you can't find it. Every language has them own culture, so it may not possible sometimes. However, you can find and put your sentence word that the closest meaning. (Participant 6)

Participant 7 also mentioned that lack of vocabulary equivalence in English is a challenging aspect, and using another word will convey a meaningless message.

The last negative impact is some words in Turkish doesn't have exact meaning in English. This poses a problem because when I write an essay, its semantic value changes according to my mother tongue and the English language. The essay can be seen unmeaning in English but this is not true for Turkish. (Participant 7)

Culture-related vocabulary

Another negative effect of language transfer (L1) from Turkish to English is related to culture-related words. According to some participants, some words in Turkish have a specific meaning related to their own culture. Therefore, they cannot be used in English, and no vocabulary equivalence exists in English.

Finally, every culture and language has its idiom and proverbs. Therefore, using them can be trouble for me. Since, I can't understand totally what this proverb tells about. To brief, different cultures think different so, it isn't possible to overlook all languages. (Participant 4)

Finding the right vocabulary in English is a challenge for EFL Turkish students due to the effect of their own culture. The Turkish and Western cultures are different; some vocabulary is associated with its own culture, so a difficulty arises in finding a word that expresses the meaning based on the Western culture.

The other negative impact is the culture of my mother tongue (Turkish) and the culture of the English language. For example, when I want to write an essay about a topic, I think with my own language and this brings to think with my own culture. Language includes its own culture inside that is means words have meanings related to culture. So, because of the differences in of the cultures I can't explain myself. **(Participant 7)**

Theme 3: Grammar

Another negative influence of L1 (Turkish) on L2 (English) is represented by grammar. Three minor themes are associated with grammar, including sentence structure, plural markers, and lack of tense equivalence.

Sentence structure

Turkish and English belong to two different language families. This difference in origins results in varieties in the sentence structure. In Turkish, the sentence structure is (Subject (optional)+ Object+Verb), but in English, the sentence structure is (Subject+Verb+ Object (optional)). This grammatical variation in the sentence structure of both Turkish and English languages influences negatively the English writing of EFL undergraduate Turkish students.

So, the grammatical structure of our mother language can be distinctive, entirely. (Participant 8)

It is not necessary to use a subject in every sentence we set up, write, or speak in Turkish. In English, the subject is strictly used. (Participant 2)

Other differences between Turkish and English languages represented by the grammatical structures, plural markers, and prepositions cause difficulties to EFL Turkish students in learning and using English.

Secondly, certain grammatical structures that are complicated cause those who learn the second language to make mistakes. For instance, one of the problems is plural markers and changing of some words when they are plural like children, people, women. However, in the Turkish language, we only use the plural suffix. Also, some prepositions change according to time or place. It differs from my mother tongue. Additionally, in the English language, we use subject, verb, and noun (object) respectively. But, in the Turkish language, subject, noun (object), and verb are used respectively. (Participant 4)

The other negative effect is grammatically different. According to English sentence structure, the place of a verb comes after the subject. But in my mother tongue, the verb is at the end of sentences. There are differences. For this reason, it can be confusing. (Participant 9)

Another associated aspect related to the grammar of the Turkish language and influences negatively the English writing of EFL Turkish students is the plural marker in English. In Turkish, only two plural markers are used with all nouns, whereas English has different ways for pluralization, and the most common one is adding 's' to singular nouns. Consequently, the Turkish students generalize this grammatical feature and add the plural marker 's' to all nouns, including the uncountable ones, such as 'informations'.

Lack of tense equivalence

Unlike the English language which has regular and irregular verbs, the Turkish language uses fixed suffixes with all tenses associated with the past, present, and future. Another difference is the high number of tenses in English compared to the Turkish language. Therefore, some participants mentioned that the lack of tense equivalence for the Turkish tenses affects their use of tenses in English negatively.

Another distinctive difference is the tenses. Although, Turkish has 5 tenses fundamentally, English includes 12 tenses. Some types of English tenses are not equivalent in Turkish as present perfect tenses. This tense is challenging for me like other language learning students. Additionally, tense conjugation is provided with suffixes in contrast to English. Each tense owns its structure in English. That used to make writing harder for me to grasp these tenses since some topics have no equivalent in Turkish and it has become more difficult for me to use them in writing. (Participant 10)

Theme 4: Thinking in the mother tongue

Thinking in the mother tongue (Turkish) led to having a negative transfer from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English). This concept was mentioned by several participants; this implies that the students have not reached the level of thinking in the second language. Rather, they are still thinking in the mother tongue with all its vocabulary and grammatical structures, and this entails committing mistakes in these two aspects.

Finally, thinking in mother language is effects writing skills negatively. the process of writing extended and became hard. I try to make sentences with the logic of the Turkish language structure. Because of thinking in my mother language makes completing my essays harder. (Participant 10)

For this reason, we can think of our language. To think in the mother tongue may affect the second tongue, negatively. (Participant 8)

The First negative impact is thinking with the mother tongue unavoidably even you have to write in English. When this happens, writing is getting harder than normal

because I never translate my thoughts into English. It makes me feel like meanless when translate. (Participant 7)

Positive transfer from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English)

Despite the negative transfer from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English), some participants revealed that their L1 (Turkish) helped them positively in their L2 (English) learning. These included two issues, namely similar alphabets and similar words 'cognates'.

Similar alphabets

Five participants revealed that their L1 (Turkish) helped them positively in their L2 (English) mainly because of the similarity between Turkish and English in terms of the alphabet. Although the vowel sounds are different in the two languages, the articulation of most of the consonant sounds in the two languages is similar. This facilitates learning the English alphabets, mainly consonant sounds.

Also, the fact that Turkish and English use the same alphabet, that is, a language of Latin origin, made my job easier. (Participant 11)

Referring to the positive effects of learning English while your mother tongue is Turkish is that both of these two languages share a common alphabet. Latin alphabet is used in Turkish and English languages. It makes reading and writing in English easier. (Participant 12)

Similar words 'Cognates'

Another aspect related to the positive transfer from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English) is represented by the 'cognates' which are the similar words used in the two languages in terms of spelling and meaning with a slight difference sometimes related to pronunciation and spelling.

First of all, I want to talk about similar words between two languages. There are many similar words between English and Turkish. Since languages are affected by each other, it is possible to find similar forms of words. This similarity had a positive effect on me when I learned many words. (Participant 11)

As Participant 8 stated, the similarity between Turkish and English languages in terms of vocabulary helps in increasing the size of the vocabulary.

On the other hand, there can be some positive effects of the mother language on the second language. As an example, we can have a great vocabulary. We can use similar words in our studies like writings. Thus, we can enhance our vocabulary knowledge. Also, if your mother tongue and second tongue are in the same linguistic family, this condition will affect your studies, positively. (Participant 8)

As stated by the participants, the Turkish language has both positive and negative effects on learning the English language. The majority of the participant mentioned that the Turkish language has a negative influence, whereas only a few reported a positive effect of the Turkish language on learning English as a foreign language.

Discussion

This study is based on conducting interviews with 15 EFL undergraduate Turkish students studying in the first year of the English Language Department at Karabuk University. The purpose was to explore the possible influence of L1 (Turkish) on L2 (English) in their second language learning. Only students whose mother tongue is Turkish were selected purposefully to avoid any concepts that may deviate from the normal themes derived from the analyses of the data. The exploratory study with the 15 participants showed that their L1 (Turkish) can affect them positively and negatively. However, the negative aspects of L1 (Turkish) on L2 (English) are more dominant than the positive aspects. The negative effects of L1 on L2 included pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and thinking in the mother tongue, whereas the positive ones involved similar alphabets and similar words (cognates).

The findings of the current study related to lack of vocabulary equivalence as well as prepositions and tense in English are in inline with the results identified by Erarslan and Hol (2014) and Yildiz (2016). The finding related to the use of the appropriate word choice was also supported by Erkaya (2012) who mentioned that it forms the most challenging issue for EFL Turkish students. In a different study, Yildiz (2016) demonstrated that the prepositional interference errors represent the most frequently encountered error by Turkish EFL learners' speaking performances, followed by lexical and grammatical interference errors. This demonstrates the negative transfer experienced by EFL Turkish students while learning English. In the process of learning a foreign language, the cross-linguistic transfer is inevitable. In other words, in the case of L2 learning, L1 is the only source of language transfer that can be utilized by the learners to cope with the new learning environment. However, due to the high differences compared with the low ones between Turkish and English in terms of pronunciation, language structure, and cultural context, EFL Turkish students experience difficulties in learning English and this hypothesis is advocated by Lado (1957).

Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed at highlighting the differences and/or similarities between the Turkish language (L1) and the English language (L2) based on the perspectives of EFL Turkish students at Karabuk University in Turkey. Despite the positive transfer of L1, the negative transfer is dominant more than the positive transfer, thereby implying that EFL undergraduate Turkish students are faced with challenges in their L2 (English) learning. Such findings support the previous theories, mainly the Contrastive Analysis (CA) and the Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) which imply that L1 negative transfer is higher than the positive one. Consequently, these findings can be used pedagogically for teaching and learning the second language (English). First, courses designed for teaching English to EFL Turkish students can be modified and developed based on students' needs and difficulties. In other words, the findings of this study can be useful for curriculum designers by focusing on the needs of EFL Turkish students who are learning English. The content of the textbook can be organized in a way that can cope with the learners' challenges at each level. Second, teachers of the English language can direct the Turkish students appropriately in a way that supports them positively and reduces the negative transfer of their L1. Though the findings could add extra knowledge to the possible transfer from L1 to L2, this study is limited in terms of sampling and context.

Therefore, future studies can be conducted with a large sample including students from different L1 backgrounds to explore how L1 influences L2. Conducting discourse-based interviews, involving textual analyses and interviews, as advocated by Odell and Goswami (1981) Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983), and Lancaster (2016), could highlight how the L1 (Turkish) could contribute either positively or negatively to learning L2 (English). In addition, employing a quantitative research design based on the several qualitative studies related to L1 transfer involving respondents with varied L1 could probably present more insights into L1 linguistic interference in the process of L2 learning and acquisition.

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