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The effects of language transfer in Turkish EFL learners

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Abstract

Language transfer is defined as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired (Odlin, 1989). The notion of transfer was raised with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) by the behaviorist psychologists. According to this view, native language (NL) affects second language and it was the source of error in production and/or reception (Gass & Selinker, 2001). The present study aims to investigate the transfer effects of Turkish (L1) learners of English (L2). Specifically, the present study examines the acquisition of word order (verb placement) in Turkish EFL learners. The participants were 19 Turkish EFL learners enrolled in a Language Preparatory Program at a private university in Turkey. Data came from picture description and grammaticality judgment tasks. The results revealed significant evidence for syntactic transfer due to different word order patterns between the two languages.

Keywords: *language transfer, contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH), word order.*

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Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the effect of native language (L1) has had a controversial background. Language transfer studies date back to the 1940's and 50's. Consequently, in order to study syntactic transfer, origins and development of general language transfer should be referred.

Odlin (1989, p. 3) defines transfer as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired. The notion of transfer was raised with the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) by the behaviorist psychologists. According to this view, native language (NL) affects L2 and it was the source of error in production and/or reception (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 72). Lado (1960) argues that if the languages are different, there would be negative transfer, because learner would have difficulty in production of language. When languages are similar, there would be positive transfer (also known as facilitation), because target language would be facilitated by NL (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 67). Yi (2012) mentioned in his report that through careful comparison of NL and target language (TL), the difficulties in TL acquisition could be predicted however, it was proved to be unable to fulfill what it had claimed to do.

Through the end of the 1960s, behaviorism fell into disfavor. As Sharwood (1990) noted language learning cannot be seen as just a matter of "linguistic hiccups" from native to target language. In the 1970s, a series of studies called the morpheme order studies had an important effect in the field of SLA. Due to Chomsky's UG (Universal Grammar) theory, and these morpheme studies conducted by Dulay and Burt (1978), the role of language transfer in the process of second language acquisition was considered to be trivial. From 1980s up to date, the last period of language transfer study is marked by the introduction of multidisciplinary perspectives into the field of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) research and consequently the understanding toward the language transfer phenomenon has been deepened.

The term language transfer was closely related to the behaviorist view and started to be discussed as inadequate because, language transfer cannot totally be explained just by habit formation that is those interested in SLA were not supporters of whole sale acceptance or rejection of the role of native language (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 137). Because of all these reasons, Sharwood, Smith and Kellerman (1986) put forward a new term: 'crosslinguistic influence' allowing to covering such facts like "avoidance", "interference", "borrowing" and L2 related aspects of language loss and art of learning.

Word Order

In the present study, it is proposed that adult Turkish learners might experience certain difficulties while acquiring the word order patterns (verb placement) in English that causes transfer errors because of the differences in the syntactic structure of the two languages.

Turkish Word Order

In Turkish, the verb is usually at the end of the sentence. Therefore, the basic word order is SOV (subject-object-verb). Taylan (1984) states that Turkish has been classified as a rather rigid SOV (subject-object-verb) language and we can to a great extent predict the constituent order in certain constructions. However, this word order is not obligatory. According to Hoffman (1992), the arguments of a verb in Turkish as well as other “free” word order languages do not have to occur in a “fixed” word order. In a similar fashion, Taylan (1984) emphasizes that the sentences structure in the language differs from the canonical SOV order. In Turkish, sentences might have different pragmatic and discourse dependent conditions (Taylan, 1984) as shown below:

1) a.	Ahmet	yumurta-yi	yedi (SOV)
	S	O	V
	Ahmet	the egg	ate
b.	Yumurta- yi	Ahmet	yedi (OSV)
	O	S	V
	the egg	Ahmet	ate

English Word Order

In English, the verb usually comes after the subject. So the basic word order is SVO (subject-verb-object). On the contrary of Turkish word order English word order is strict and quite inflexible. Consider the English sentence in (1):

- 1) The cows eat the grass.

Native speakers of English use various cues to determine that the cows is the subject of the sentence and that the grasses the object (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 222). If the word order is changed as in (2):

- 2) The grass eats the cows.

Here, English speakers are surprised; because of the strict SVO structure. In such a case, different languages resolve the conflict in different ways. English uses word order and agreement as primary determinants.

Previous studies on language transfer

Research in L1 and L2 acquisition has demonstrated that there might be cross-linguistic influence in the process of L2 acquisition. For example, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994) conducted a study in relation to the acquisition of German by adult Korean and Turkish learners. They suggested that L2 acquisition initially involves the L1 transfer of a final headedness of a bare VP based on the evidence from Turkish and Korean learners of German lexical projections being guided by the L1 while functional ones by UG. According

to the findings of the study, L1 Turkish transfer in EFL context might be responsible for the verb placement errors considering the fact that both German matrix clauses and English have similar headedness properties, i.e. both exhibit head-initial phrase structure.

Another research study by Blom and Polisenska (2006) focused on the issue of critical age effects and their question was whether there is support for the claim that adult acquisition of grammar differs from child acquisition of grammar. In this study, linguistic variables were verb placement, verbal inflection and use of dummy auxiliaries, which contribute to the meaning of the utterance and are present to make the sentence finite. The results showed that with respect to verb placement and the use of dummy auxiliaries, child patterns differ from adult patterns. Moreover, child L1 and child L2 learners show a similar drop of dummy auxiliaries over time. For “verbal inflection”, the hypothesis was partially confirmed. Child L2 learners show the same error pattern as child L1 learners whereas adult L2 learners make other mistakes. With respect to domain-specificity there was not support for Schwartz’s (2003) hypothesis: It was found that there were differences between both child groups on the one hand and the adult group on the other in syntactic (verb placement) as well as morphological (verbal inflection) variables.

Onar (2008) investigated the type of ‘language transfer’ or ‘cross-linguistic influence’ in English word order acquisition of Turkish - Dutch bilinguals living in the Netherlands. Specifically, they looked for what type of word order transfer Turkish - Dutch bilinguals make in acquisition of English as an L3 and whether they transfer from their L1 or their L2. According to the findings, the Turkish - Dutch bilinguals make use of their L2 Dutch rules rather than their L1 Turkish in their English word order acquisition. It has also been found out that Turkish monolinguals are influenced by their L1 Turkish less than Turkish - Dutch bilinguals are affected by their L1 Turkish.

A similar study was conducted by Mede (2011) on the acquisition of word order in adult Serbo-Croatian-Turkish bilinguals. The results showed that there was some syntactic transfer in terms of word order (verb placement). To exemplify, in declarative utterances, the participants did not place the “verb” sentence-finally because of the differences in the syntactic structure of the two languages which led to transfer errors and with respect to non-declarative utterances, the participants had problems in placing the “verb” sentence-finally in all utterances. Examining the overall results, it can be concluded that the syntactic differences between Serbo-Croatian (SVO) and Turkish (SOV) lead to transfer errors both in declarative and non-declarative utterances, which confirms that the basic word order patterns are susceptible to interference between languages.

Verhagen (2011) conducted a study on the acquisition of verb placement by Moroccan and Turkish L2 learners of Dutch. In other words, the acquisition of verb placement in negated sentences in L2 was examined. In Moroccan Arabic finite verbs occur in initial or second position; whereas in Turkish they occur at the end of the sentence. Previous study has shown that this difference shapes word order preferences of Moroccan and Turkish learners of Dutch in production: Moroccan learners typically place verbs in sentence medial position, while Turkish learners typically put them in the final position

(Jansen, Lalleman & Muysken, 1981). These patterns have been argued to result from L1 based processing differences: even though Moroccan learners focus their attention on the middle part of a sentence to find a verb, Turkish learners look for the verb in final position. Verhagen (2011) mentions that this finding provides further support for the idea that the typological characteristics of the L1 may influence L2 processing.

In an article by Yi (2012), seven categories of factors on language transfer were investigated suggesting that the linguistic differences between L1 and L2 will bring difficulties in acquisition of L2 and that the markedness theory is useful for our understanding of L1 transfer phenomenon. In terms of psycholinguistic factors, he mentions that Ellis (1994) has suggested, current definitions of the term "transfer" allow psycholinguistic L1 effects, thus any discussion of L1 transfer without addressing the psychological aspect if it is incomplete. As for the developmental factors Yi states that whereas some researchers have suggested that transfer is more associated with early stages of L2 acquisition, others have argued that learners may need to reach a certain stage of development before transfer of some L1 properties become possible.

Another research conducted by Bannai (2013) focused on L2 knowledge of verb placement by Japanese learners of English (JLEs). The researcher stated that the results are interpreted to indicate the possibility that JLEs can learn the overt word order facts, but never end up with the same grammatical representation of V-raising parameter as native speakers. This supports the hypotheses arguing for impairment of grammatical features in second language acquisition.

Finally, in his research, Bentzen (2013) investigated the cross-linguistic influence and structural overlap affecting English verb placement in bilingual acquisition. The participants were young bilingual and monolingual children, but the real data came from a balanced Norwegian-English bilingual girl, Emma, aged 2, who shows the features of cross-linguistic influence by transferring V2 from Norwegian into English. Thus, the results of this study suggested that cross-linguistic influence in bilingual language acquisition is facilitated in situations where a superficial structural overlap between the two languages is. She partially add temporarily "borrows" full V2 from Norwegian as a "relief strategy" (Müller, 1998) at a stage when the complete pattern of English verb placement is not yet acquired.

Despite recognition that language learners may transfer their native language to the target language, only limited research in this area exists in comparing Turkish-English word order (verb placement). To add to this research, the present study attempts to examine the possible transfer effects of L1 (Turkish) over the verb placement of TL (English) in adult learners.

Methodology

As it is stated above, this study aims to investigate the possible L1 effects on verb placement in L2 learners. It might show negative or positive effects in verb placement from a point of view of Contrastive Analysis (CAH) giving systematic study of a pair of

languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities between the first and second languages (Rustipa, 2011).

According to Fisiak (1981), contrastive Analysis and error analysis should not be thought separately by teachers. This connection can be used to explain certain errors and mistakes. Students who try to learn a second language have some stages, which include errors mostly, that is, after getting rules consciously or subconsciously, they are going to make mistakes or errors. It is certain that the rate of errors or mistakes depends on a lot of variables such as their age, critical period, social background, and differences or similarities between the first and second language. To find out whether there is contrastive influence or not, the present study has a purpose to focus on the L2 learners to analyze their positive and negative transfers of L1 in their interlanguage processes, which is specifically based on verb placement issue.

One of the controversial subjects in the field of L2 learning is the role of L1 transfer when learning a second language (Yan, 2010). It has long been noted that the linguistic differences between L1 and L2 will affect the acquisition of L2, both positively and negatively (Yi, 2012). Because of the word order differences in Turkish, which is commonly considered to be SOV and in English, which is mostly SVO, Turkish students have difficulties in word order when acquiring English as a second language. For example;

- 2) a. Simon computer played.
 S O V
 b. Simon bilgisayar oynadı.
 S O V
- 3) a. Simon very changed.
 S ADV V
 b. 'Simon çok değişti'
 S ADV V

The two examples above (2a and 3a) are taken from portfolio quiz done by a private university in Turkey. The sentence 1b and 2b are the translations of the first sentences in Turkish. Another example from another student who took the same portfolio exam is:

- 4) a. Simon cinema likes.
 S O V
 b. 'Simon sinemayı sever'
 S O V

Again 4a is another sentence uttered by a prep student and 4b is the Turkish translation of 4a. In the examples, we can see that a student made a verb placement mistake. Adopting L1 transfer theory as an initial working hypothesis, it is predicted that the possible reason of these mistakes is L1 transfer. As a result this is a study of verb order transfer from L1 to L2 made by adult learners of English.

Specifically, the following research question was addressed in this study:

- 1) Do the differences between Turkish (L1) and English (L2) word order lead to transfer of verb placement in adult Turkish EFL learners?

Settings and Participants

This study was conducted at the preparatory program of a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. Specifically, 13 male and 6 female students at the beginner level of proficiency participated in the study. The student age range was between 17 and 26.

Procedure

For the purposes of this study, a Grammaticality Judgment Task (GJT) was first administered to find out whether effect of L1 transfer is present in verb placement errors of Turkish EFL learners (Appendix A). As stated by McDaniel and Cairns (1996), a GJT can be used for the research in almost any area of syntax. They explain that a sentence is presented to the subject in a GJT and how it sounds is asked. In this study, the option ‘Does this sentence sound good or bad?’ was used. In the task, there were 20 sentences in total. 10 of them were grammatically correct and 10 of them included verb placement mistakes. Students listened to the sentences read by the teacher and wrote down whether it sounded correct or incorrect to them.

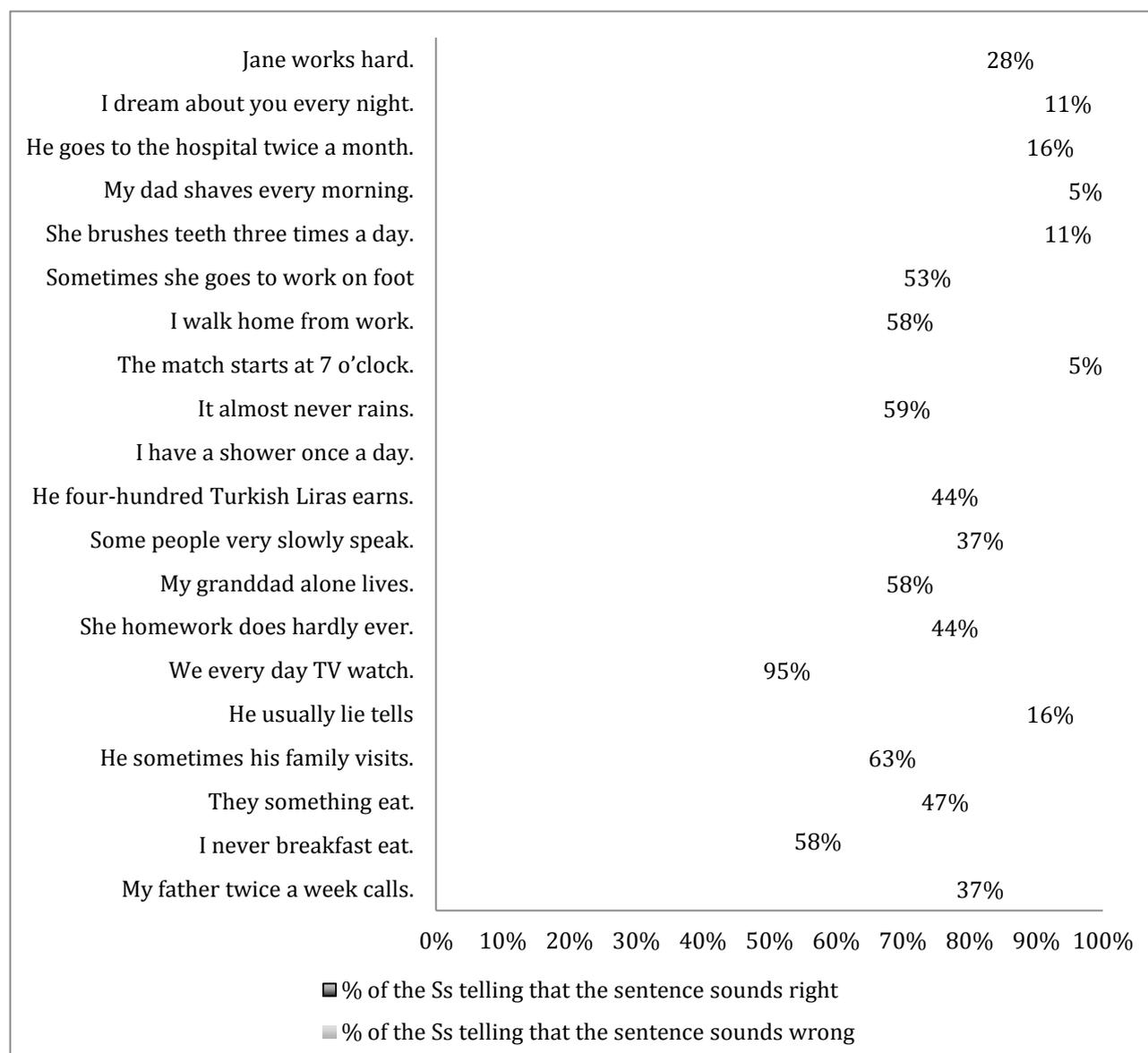
After the GJT, the students continued the preparatory program and followed the weekly identified pacing. At the end of one week period, the students were asked to complete a picture description task (Appendix B). Each student was given a picture depicting one part of a daily life of a gym teacher. To put it other way, the picture was about a daily routine of gym trainer Jenny and they were supposed to write its descriptions. This was particularly chosen because students were expected to produce sentences with action verbs. Additionally, the reason of daily life activities and simple present tense were preferred was that all students in the study were beginners and this grammatical structure was appropriate for their level. The participating students were not allowed to use present continuous or simple past tense because other grammatical items, for example “am/is/are”, “-ing” or the past form of the verbs could distract students. Third singular –s mistakes for simple present tense and the use of “-ing” were not taken into consideration. The focus was only on verb placement in positive sentences written in simple present tense.

Results

The Findings of the Grammaticality Judgment Task

As mentioned previously, the participating students were asked to rank the given 20 sentences either right or wrong based on their word order. Figure 1 summarizes the number of utterances the students chose as correct or incorrect.

Figure 1
The grammaticality judgment task



According to the data gathered, there was an evidence of L1 verb placement transfer, as shown in the sentence below.

- 5) a. "He usually lie tells"
b. "O genelde yalan soylar"

For the sentence 5a, %84 of the students said that it sounded correct to them which could provide evidence for transfer effect from L1 (Turkish) to L2 (English).

On the other hand, %100 of the students found the sentence 6a correct without any difficulty. Even if the verb placement in sentence 6a is different from their L1, they marked it as a correct sentence.

- 6) a. "I have a shower once a day"
b. "Ben alırım dus bir kere gunde"

Other outstanding examples from the data are the sentences 7a and 8a. Specifically, %94 percent of the students detected the accuracy of the sentence 7a and incorrectness of sentence 8a.

- 7) a. "The match starts at 7 o'clock"
b. "Mac baslar yedide saat"

- 8) a. "We everyday TV watch"
b. "Biz her gun TV izleriz"

These could be resulted from the frequency of input. During that week, students encountered the sentences and phrases such as "have a shower", "brush teeth", "shave everyday", "visit family", "go to hospital/school", "match/school starts", and "watch TV" because of the content and theme of the unit which was about daily life. They may not be familiar with the phrases such as "tell lie", "speak slowly", and "earn Turkish Liras".

Based on the discussion above, it can be implied that students noted the correctness or incorrectness of the sentences including phrases that they learned as a chunk. On the other hand, they did not notice any mistakes in the sentences with unfamiliar phrases. That kind of sentences mainly sounded correct to them.

The Findings of the Picture Description Task

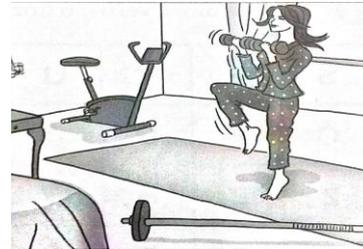
After the one week treatment, the participants were asked to look at a picture and make sentences using an action verb. The results are displayed by including some of the pictures followed by the student's sentence.

Picture 1.



"She is get up early. It is quarter past six o'clock"

Picture 2.



- (1) "She goes to gym everyday"
(2) "She is do exercise"

Picture 3.



- (1) “She is take a shower.”
 (2) “She is clean herself”

Picture 4.



- (1) “They are do exercise at 10 o’clock”

As can be seen from the sample pictures above, the students did not perform any obvious negative transfer error in terms of verb placement. However, they had a consistent tendency to add copula “be” before the main verb of the sentence and to omit “-ing”. This could be stemmed from various reasons. First of all, after GJT, students were taught Present Continuous Tense as the necessity of the syllabus of that week. So this might be one of the reasons behind the confusion among students in terms of grammatical rules because they had just finished Present Simple Tense and started to learn Present Continuous Tense. Another point to regard is that, Picture Description task was applied a week later and it was written. So it is highly probable that students had more control over the task than GJT.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the potential reasons of the errors of verb placement in English made by Turkish adult ESL learners studying in a preparatory program at a private university. As discussed in previous studies on language transfer, there is high probability of cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition (Bentzen, 2013; Mede, 2011; Onar, 2008; Mede, 2011). Based on the data gathered from the grammaticality judgment and picture description tasks, the participating students showed some traces of negative transfer particularly with the use of action verbs such as “lie tell”, “slowly speak”, and “Turkish Liras earn”. As a final note, although the results of this study are the suggestive, they provide some evidence for cross-linguistic transfer in relation to word order (verb placement) in Turkish-English adult learners at the beginning level of proficiency.

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Appendix A

Grammaticality Judgment Task Sentences

How do these sentences sound to you? Please circle the choice that is correct for you.

- | | | |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| 1) My father twice a week calls. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 2) I have a shower once a day. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 3) I never breakfast eat. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 4) They something eat. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 5) It almost never rains. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 6) The match starts at 7 o'clock. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 7) He sometimes his family visits. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 8) He usually lie tells. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 9) I walk home from work. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 10) We every day TV watch. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 11) Sometimes she goes to work on foot. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 12) She brushes teeth three times a day. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 13) My dad shaves every morning. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 14) She homework does hardly ever. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 15) He goes to the hospital twice a month. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 16) My granddad alone lives. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 17) Some people very slowly speak. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 18) He four hundreds Turkish Lira earns. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 19) I dream about you every night. | RIGHT | WRONG |
| 20) Jane works hard. | RIGHT | WRONG |

Appendix B

Picture Description Task

Pictures are taken from English File Elementary Teacher's Book (Oxenden, C., & Latham-Koenig, C., 2012 , p.255).

