



Examining the Influence of the First Language on Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language (L2): A Linguistic Interference Perspective

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Abstract

The first language influences learning English as a second language (L2). This influential role depends mainly on contextual factors such as classroom setting, pedagogical practices and L1 and L2 exposure levels. This denotes that the first language becomes beneficial to the learning of L2 when the contextual factors work in favour of both languages. Several findings in the literature indicate that the first language plays an influential role in English second language learning. The persuasion can be either positive or negative depending on the level of L2 exposure. This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design to examine the influence of the first language on teaching and learning the English language through a linguistic interference perspective. The researchers employed non-participatory observations, and semi-structured interviews as data collection instruments and qualitative content analysis served as a method of data analysis. The findings indicate that the learners' first language interferes with learning English as a second language and causes hindrances to their academic success. Thus, a subtractive bilingual education is strongly recommended for English to be extensively exposed to learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English language is recognized as a means of communication across the globe. It is also considered the language of teaching and learning in many Anglophone countries, including South Africa. In the South African context, English language proficiency is a prerequisite for educational success and socio-economic advancement; thus, one must be proficient in English (Turaeva, 2020). For this reason, the majority of scholars are divided concerning whether knowledge of the first language is beneficial in learning the English language. Some believe that knowledge of the first language is not beneficial to learning the second language. It causes

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distractions and confusion, resulting in the poor acquisition of the second language; hence, they recommend the idea of English only from the word go.

On the contrary, other scholars acknowledge the importance of the mother tongue in learning English as a second language. The scholars believe that positive transfer of first language knowledge becomes beneficial to learning English as L2, especially when the L2 is extensively exposed. However, these scholars acknowledge that limited exposure to L2 leads to the negative transfer of L1 knowledge, which results in interference; however, they emphasize the idea that the first language plays an essential role in the acquisition and learning of English as L2 (Derakhshan & Karimi 2015). In essence, the level of language exposure determines the outcome of the influence of mother tongue knowledge.

The idea of the link between the L1 and L2 knowledge was further explained by Hayati (1998), who highlights the essential similarities and differences between first and second languages. The author, in this context, stresses that the level of differences between the two languages indicates the level of challenges to be faced in the process of learning the second language. At the same time, the number of similarities in both L1 and L2 signifies the simplicity, if not the easiness, in the process of learning the L2. In other words, when the structure of the first and second languages differ, there will be greater chances for the learners to experience difficulties if not negative transfer of knowledge, resulting in interference. First language interference is an underlying factor that negatively influences the learners' second-language learning.

According to Chokwe (2016), most South African students experience challenges in the process of learning the English language. The author argues that the struggle derives from their educational foundation since the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) shows that South African learners underscored in English reading as compared to the learners of other countries. Therefore, the learners must be exposed extensively to L2 for meaningful language skills development. Hence, this study intends to examine English lessons focusing on the interactions between the teachers and the learners and how language is used to determine first-language interference.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

linguistic interdependence model derived by Cummins (1978) serves as a guiding theoretical lens for this study. The theorist reveals the association between the first and second languages (L1 and L2). The argument is that proficiency in the first language can be beneficial in attaining proficiency in the second language. In other words, the L1 knowledge and skills can positively influence the development of L2 proficiency. Nonetheless, the positive knowledge transfer

between the L1 and L2 is determined by the broader exposure of L2 in learning. This means that if the L2 is not extensively exposed, the L1 knowledge transfer becomes negative and results in language interference (Cummins 1981). Thus, this study intends to determine the influence of L1 on teaching and learning L2 through a language interference perspective.

According to Michael and Gollan (2005), language interference occurs due to limited exposure to L2 in learning the L2. Also, Turaeva (2020) argues that the appearance of errors in speaking and writing can notice language interference. These errors occur when the L1 grammatical elements interfere with the target language's grammatical elements, L2, in this context. Thus, the researchers will use this theoretical lens to determine the influence of L1 on L2 teaching and learning through the lens of language interference. In this regard, this theory will guide the researcher in terms of determining the level of L2 exposure through non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews to conclude the phenomenon being studied.

2.1. First language as a source in Learning L2

Various scholars have different views concerning the interference of the first language when teaching English as a second or additional language. According to Cummins (1981), the interference of the first language is, in two ways, beneficial and detrimental, depending on the level of motivation and exposure while learning L2. This conveys that if L2 exposure is extensive, the transfer of first language knowledge becomes beneficial to the learning of L2; however, if the L2 exposure is limited, then the transfer of knowledge leads to negative outcomes that cause confusion and interference. The beneficial part of the transfer of first language knowledge is also recognized by Collier and Thomas (2007), who believe that the first language serves as a source in teaching and learning L2. The authors continue that a dual language program is beneficial to both native and non-native speakers of English to acquire English proficiency which results in academic success.

Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) point out that language interference is caused by the resemblances and alterations of L1 and L2; for example, if there are more similarities between the two languages, therefore, the errors become less, which results in a positive transfer of knowledge; however, if the differences are more, then greater errors occur which is known as interference. The authors acknowledge that the learners mainly experience negative transfer of knowledge known as interference due to several factors such the limited knowledge about the language knowledge in both L1 and L2, lack of proficiency in L2 and other related contextual factors. In other words, these authors accept that L1 not only causes errors if not interference

in L2, but it can also be beneficial, especially when certain needs such as extensive exposure to L2 are met.

2.2. First language as a barrier in learning L2

The above scholars, Cummins (1981); Collier and Thomas (2007); Derakhshan and Karimi (2015), diverge from other scholars as they acknowledge the significant part of the first language in the learning of L2. Some scholars believe that teaching a second language or additional language along with the first language inhibits the process of mastering the L2 knowledge. According to Tokuhama (2003), bilingual, if not multilingual, education hinders the acquisition and the learning of L2 as the author accentuates the idea of teaching and learning through L2 as early as possible.

Similarly, Mede (2014) argues that first-language knowledge can cause distraction in acquiring and learning a second language. This distraction can be referred to as a negative transfer which results in language errors. According to Turaeva (2020), in the learning process of a second language, learners frequently produce words or utterances in speech and writing that are grammatically incorrect according to the grammatical rules of the second language. Brown (2000) outlines the errors that are interlingual and intralingual errors. The interlingual error, also known as transfer error, refers to an error that can be traced back to the first language of interference. Insufficient knowledge or information in the second language causes this type of error. Another type of error that occurs because of language interference is the intralingual error, which occurs because of limited, if not extensive, exposure to the target language. Hence, there is a need for extensive exposure to L2 for positive first language knowledge transfer. Nevertheless, this study is concerned with the influence of L1 on teaching and learning L2 through the perspective of language interference.

In addition, Littlewood (1984) points out that the interference stems from the fact that learners use what they already know about a language as self-assistance in a new language. This means they use their native language knowledge to learn L2. In other words, having been taught a second language through your first language may negatively affect learners eventually. This is in line with Hassan (2011), who found that Arabic students find it difficult to learn the English language, of which the underlying problem was the interference of the first language. Additionally, Oluwole (2008) indicates that first-language interference has a major impact on the students' mediocre performance in the English language. This interference causes by a lack of L2 exposure attached to contextual factors such as the poor method of teaching, lack of

textbooks, language background and lack of professional growth and development of teachers, which all contribute to students' poor performance in the English language.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to give detailed information about how learners learn a second language with the interference of their first language. This research approach helped to understand underlying reasons, opinions and motivations and helped the researcher to describe the nature of the situation and discover new meanings (Dulock, 1993). A purposive sampling procedure was further adopted to select grade 12 learners from three secondary schools under circuit X in the Limpopo Province. This sampling technique is a non-probability sampling in which the participants are selected based on the judgement of the researcher (Creswell 2012).

More importantly, non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews served as data collection instruments to examine English lessons focusing on the interactions between the teachers and the learners and how language is used to determine first-language interference. The researchers observed the lessons without participating in maintaining focus on both the lessons and the observation checklist to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Kumar 2014). The study further utilized the semi-structured interviews to obtain detailed information through an interview protocol schedule coupled with probe questions such as 'give reason to your answer.' According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), interview protocol is a scheduled question that the researcher asks the respondents during the interview and notes down the answers and the follow-up questions.

In addition, the researchers collected data from three selected schools under circuit X in the Limpopo province. The three schools in this study can be considered secondary schools A, B, and C. In each school, the researcher interviewed ten learners (solely grade 12's) and observed only 1 English lesson. The collected data was further analyzed through qualitative content analysis (QCA), which is a method of analysis to identify, analyze and report patterns of meaning across the findings that provide answers to the study's objectives

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The collected data is presented and analyzed based on the intentions of the study. Data from the observations will be presented first, followed by the interview data consecutively.

4.1. Observation data

The following data is based on the observations conducted in the three selected secondary schools. The data will be presented and analyzed sequentially.

4.2. The language of teaching and learning and classroom participation

The researchers once attended English lessons at the selected secondary schools A, B, and C for observation purposes. The aim was to determine the language(s) used for teaching and learning the English subject and to determine the classroom participation level. This will assist the researchers in determining the level of L2 exposure, as the interdependence theory maintains that language interference is determined by L2 exposure (Cummins 1981).

According to the observation findings from secondary school A, the researchers found that in a grade 12 class of forty-one learners, the teacher uses both English and first language (Sepedi) for teaching purposes. However, the first language was dominant compared to the English language; for example, the teacher was reading the English story in the book, explaining the study through Sepedi but asked the questions in English. The teacher further expected the learners to give responses in the English language. The intervention of the first language for a better understanding of the content of the story compromised the level of L2 exposure. Although the learners maintained participation; however, it was difficult for them to express themselves in the English language due to the limited L2 exposure. These findings align with Turaeva (2020), who affirms that inadequate exposure to L2 results in the negative transfer of L1 knowledge and leads to consistent grammatical errors in the target language, L2.

In secondary school B, the grade 12 learners were thirty-nine and the teacher used mostly English as a language of teaching with a little touch of the first language (Sepedi). The teacher used Sepedi solely to explain difficult English words that are hard to understand. In this regard, the learners were privileged to get enough L2 exposure, unlike those in secondary school A. The learners understood the content and managed to perform well in classroom participation. Thus, these findings show that extensive exposure to L2 makes L1 knowledge beneficial to L2 learning. This validates the argument of Thomas and Collier (2000), who stress that the first language becomes more beneficial to the learning of L2 when the L2 language is extensively exposed.

The researchers further observed an English class of thirty-seven learners in secondary school C. The teacher in this class taught the English subject in both Sepedi and English. The interaction between the learners and the teacher was unsatisfactory because learners had a limited understanding of the subject matter; for example, the learners were confused and whispered to one another, trying to figure out the message the teacher was trying to convey. The participation rate was limited as the learners seemed to have limited English proficiency. In this context, the L1 knowledge interferes with the L2 learning due to inadequate exposure

to L2. This accord with Derakhshan and Karimi (2015), who point out that limited exposure to L2 knowledge results in interference which later causes confusion and a negative knowledge transfer.

4.3. The level of L2 exposure in the classroom

The observations show that the level of L2 exposure in the classroom was limited in the two secondary schools, A and C of which the knowledge of L1 was negatively transferred and led to language interference. The use of the first language in the classroom disadvantaged the learning of L2. The first language was used more often than the L2 during the lessons of which the learners did not get the enough opportunity for adequate L2 exposure. The findings concur with Eltom (2017), who indicates that most of the students in Sudan experience grammatical rules challenges in L2 learning due to first language interference. These errors become more visible in speaking and writing.

In contrast, secondary school B maintained a high level of L2 exposure compared to secondary schools A and C. The teacher in this context used English mainly and a bit of the first language where there is a need. The learners in this context could express themselves in English and maintained satisfactory classroom participation. In other words, the level of L2 exposure was successfully sustained, which led to the positive transfer of L1 knowledge, not interference. This is supported by Cummins (1981) under the theory of linguistic interference, which emphasizes that adequate L2 exposure results in a positive transfer of L1 knowledge.

4.4. Interviews data:

The data below was collected at secondary schools A, B and C. Ten learners from each school were interviewed voluntarily based on the intentions of the study. The researchers formulated the interview questions focusing on the language(s) used during English lessons in a classroom to determine first language interference. Also, to determine what is challenging in English grammar, determine first language interference. Below are the generated themes from the interview responses:

The influence of L1 on teaching and learning the L2

The researchers asked the learners questions to determine the influence of L1 on teaching and learning the L2. The learners' responses from secondary school A indicate that teachers use English and Sepedi to teach English subjects. The Sepedi language is the first language used for code-mixing and switching purposes. The teachers play around with the two languages, English and Sepedi, to make the English content more understandable.

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Equally, secondary school B learners have also interviewed, and the findings indicate that English subject is taught in the English language only. The English lessons are strictly taught in English and the learners are expected to interact with the teacher using the English language during the lessons. Although the learners had enough exposure to L2; however, they are still experiencing the L2 grammatical challenges such as difficulties in sentence construction.

Equally important, the learners from secondary school C indicate that the English subject is taught in both English and Sepedi in most cases. Although these learners acknowledge the significance of using the L1 for content simplicity purposes, they feel like the L1 is delaying their learning and practising the L2. The learners mention that they confuse grammatical norms of L1 and L2 at some point as they do not get enough L2 exposure. Therefore, the findings from the three schools show that the L1 knowledge negatively influences the teaching and learning of the L2.

The above findings show that the use of L1 in the teaching and learning process negatively and positively affect the learning process. The positive part is that they can function as the teacher uses the L1 to elaborate the content of the L2. It allows then to function, but it inhibits the level of competence in the L2. The negative influence was found to be the interference with the grammatical format of the L2, which results in grammatical errors. In other words, using L1 through code-mixing, switching, and Translanguaging affects the language form competence of the learners. Thus, the L2 should be given enough time for the learners to acquire both form and functional focuses of language competence. Turaeva (2020) affirms that inadequate exposure to L2 results in a negative transfer of L1 knowledge and leads to consistent grammatical errors in the target language, L2.

L1 interference and L2 proficiency

The learners in secondary school A acknowledge the significant part of using two languages. However, the approach also negatively influences the learners' English. The learners mention that using two languages results in first-language interference as they experience confusion in terms of tense, punctuation, word formation, and capitalization, and spelling errors emanating from pronunciation confusion. The learners continue that the idea of code-mixing and switching grants them a lesser chance to master English proficiency.

Moreover, the findings in secondary school B indicate that the learners were taught in English only. The learners continue to find it difficult to acquire English language proficiency due to the lack of understanding of the L2 content. The learners further mention that they experience grammatical challenges such as confusion of tense, spelling, and punctuation errors. Although

they experience grammatical challenges, however, they acknowledge the importance of being taught in two languages

The responses from the learners in secondary school C indicate that the use of first language interferes with their learning of the English language at some point because they encounter difficulties in terms of spelling, punctuation and singular–plural rules. These challenges emanate from the uncertainty caused by first language interference. The learners further mention that the simultaneous usage of the two languages results in a negative transfer of knowledge wherein they encounter grammatical errors such as spelling, punctuation, and sentence formation due to the confusion of grammatical rules.

The findings above are based on the L1 interference and the L2 proficiency. The learners acknowledge the role of L1 in learning the L2. The learner emphasizes how L1 aid them in understanding the content of the L2; however, the L1 seems to inhibit the opportunity of getting adequate exposure to the L2. The extensive exposure to the L1 over the L2 denies the learners the opportunity to obtain sufficient proficiency in the L2, for example, the learners are unable to express themselves fully in the English language in that they have to code-mixing if not switch within the conversation or even a sentence. L1 is beneficial for functional purposes, not for form focus, if not grammatical competence. Eltom (2017) argues that the L2 should be extensively exposed for the L1 knowledge to benefit L2 competence and performance.

Possible suggestions for enhancing L2 proficiency

The learners were further requested to think of possible suggestions to ease the L1 interference and enhance the L2 proficiency. The learners from secondary school A state that they suggest being taught in English only for English subjects to avoid L1 interference. The learners continue that they are not happy with the way L1 and L2 are used interchangeably during the lessons on the English subject. Thus, they suggest being taught in the English language. This is in line with Mede (2014) who argues that the first language causes distraction in acquiring and learning the second language. This distraction can be referred to as negative transfer, resulting in language errors.

The responses from the learners at secondary school B indicate that being taught in both English and Sepedi confuses grammatical rules in which spelling and tense errors remain challenging. Most of them indicate that the current language(s) that their teachers use to teach the English subject limit the acquisition of English proficiency. Therefore, they recommend being taught in English only for greater L2 knowledge exposure. Whereas the other learners

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suggest that they should be taught in English mainly; but at the same time be scaffolded through the first language, Sepedi.

The data from secondary school C show that the learners admit that although the use of first language in English lessons is helpful at some point, they suggest that they should be taught in the English language only to avoid delays in mastering English grammar and academic progression. This is supported by Tokuhama (2003), who stresses that first-language interference hinders the acquisition and learning of L2; thus, the author accentuates the idea of teaching and learning L2 extensively. Additionally, the learners also mention that their challenges in grammatical norms are emanated from the uncertainty that is caused by first-language interference. Hence. They suggest being taught in the English language only. This is confirmed by Derakhshan and Karimi (2015), who assert that the learners experience a negative transfer of knowledge known as interference due to several factors, such as the limited knowledge about the language knowledge in both L1 and L2.

5. CONCLUSION

This study intended to Examine the influence of the first language on teaching and learning English as a second language through the perspective of language interference. The findings indicate that L1 plays a key role in learning the L2 in terms of simplifying the content of the L2 that is cognitively demanding. This helps the learners to understand the content for functional purposes. Nevertheless, the L1 influence also affects the learners' L2 proficiency and competence as the use of L1 denies the learners the opportunity to be extensively exposed to L2 knowledge. This lack of L2 exposure led to various grammatical challenges in the process of learning the English language. For instance, the learners mention that they struggle with spelling, punctuation, word and sentence formation, capitalization as well as tense errors. Thus, most of the learners from the three schools recommend that the English subject should be taught through the English language for adequate L2 exposure and L2 proficiency enhancement purposes.

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