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Role of First Language in Second Language Development

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### Role of First Language in Second Language Development

First language (L1) has always been a significant discussed area in second language (L2) development theories and research, especially in pedagogy of any additional language. This paper addresses the role of L1 in L2 development. I will first discuss the linguistic and cognitive role of L1 in L2 development drawing on relevant literature that addresses language development. Second, I will attempt to explain the pedagogical implications for classroom practices considering the roles, which L1 plays in L2 development. I will conclude with the ideas of criticism that come from the insights of L2 development research and theories.

### Cognitive and Linguistic Functions of L1 in L2 Development

#### Behaviorist Perspective

The first and foremost role that L1 plays and for what L1 is mostly discussed in L2 development is language *transfer*, both *positive transfer* and *negative transfer*. Koda (1993) explores the transferred L1 strategies in L2 sentence comprehension and finds that “reading skills transferred from L1 interact with L2 specific linguistic features in shaping cognitive strategies for L2 processing” (p. 497). While similarities between L1 and L2 facilitates learning that is called *positive transfer*, differences between L1 and L2 cause *interference* errors due to *negative transfer* (Ellis, 1997, p. 51). Nonetheless, cross-linguistic research reveals that it is not the most diverse areas between a learner's L1 and L2 which cause the greatest learning problems but “rather those areas which share considerable similarity” (Pica, 1984, p. 695). Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) suggests that comparing L1 and L2 features is beneficial in examining L2 learners’ *transfer* errors (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, “today contrastive analysis is only one of many uncertain variables which one must re-evaluate in second language teaching. No longer does it seem to be as important as it once was” (Wardhaugh, 1970, p. 129).

Thus, since language *transfer* and, therefore, CAH is based on *behaviorism* that considers language learning as transferring habit formation, these ideas do not appear influential in L2 development theories.

### **Innatist Perspective**

By contrast, both Chomsky and Krashen consider innate ability and view L2 acquisition as similar to L1 acquisition. Krashen's Monitor theory explains language learning as the comprehension of linguistic input and interaction with the input through innate guided processes. Treating the influences of L1 nominal on L2 development, Monitor Theory suggests that all acquisition is followed by universal internal procedures. This conception implies that all learners follow similar paths in L2 development; use similar strategies in L2 development and commit same errors in the process of L2 development regardless of their L1 backgrounds. In this respect, Larsen-Freeman (1974) examines the influence of L1 background in terms of *developmental sequences* in acquiring grammatical morphemes and concludes, "language background does not seem to radically influence the way in which learners order English morphemes" (as cited in VanPatten & Williams, 2015, p. 30). Therefore, there are two premises: L2 development is independent of the influence of L1, and L2 follows similar *developmental sequences* of L1.

### **Contemporary Views**

The knowledge of one or more languages contributes in learning any additional languages (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 205). L2 learners who have strong linguistic backgrounds in their L1, overcomes frustrating experiences in their L2 development. Apart from regulating psychological activities, L1 helps to externalize thoughts in L2 (Antón & Dicamilla, 1999). Considering Chomsky's idea of universal grammar, which implies that all languages have some common principles, it appears that an L2 learner with his/her L1 competency is able to

efficiently draw on the linguistic patterns of L1 in identifying the complexities of any additional language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 57). Apart from developing *metalinguistic awareness*, the meaning making strategies of L1 mediate in L2 development as “it uses the semantics of the native language as its foundation” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 169). Regarding cognitive functions of L1, John and Horner (1971) state the following:

When the school attempts to teach a second language before the child has developed adequate cognitive skills in his native language, the child may become a "non-lingual" whose functioning in both his native and second languages develops in only limited ways. (p. 191)

Moreover, Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, and Lee (2014) opine, “students’ acquire most of their conceptual and academic knowledge and skills through the native language, which provides the foundation for completing academic tasks” (p. 33). Therefore, L1 influences psychological and linguistic readiness for L2 learning as well as affects students’ academic success.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

L1 has implications for interactive tasks and cognitive tasks in L2 classes. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory can explain the role of L1 for interactive tasks and cognitive tasks, which argues that learning processes depend on social interactions: interpersonal (or “*interpsychological*”) and intrapersonal (or “*intrapsychological*”).

From an interpersonal point of view, L1 is very important because it is “a child’s first primary tool for social interaction” (Echevarria & Graves, 2011, p. 40) and it regulates communication moves in collaborative interaction. Thus, the usage of L1 has significance in interactive activities to assist communication in form of both peer scaffolding and teacher scaffolding to facilitate L2 development. Suggesting the usage of L1 in interpersonal

communicative tasks (i.e. pair and group work) in L2 classes, Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) recommend, “teachers should not prohibit the use of some L1 altogether in group and pair work but should acknowledge that the use of the L1 may be a normal psychological process that allows learners to initiate and sustain verbal interaction” (p. 768). L1 assists the beginning learner to access the language and communication universals that allow the learners to determine the communicative intention of the speaker, even when he/she lacks comprehension of the words uttered. “The L1 thus functions as a prior system allowing the learner some participation in foreign-language discourse activity, even before it can function as a source of transfer” (Giacobbe, 1992, p. 233). Antón and Dicamilla (1999) examine the use of L1 in the collaborative interactions of adult native English speakers who learn Spanish. They conclude that L1 “enables learners to construct effective collaborative dialogue in the completion of meaning-based language tasks by performing three important functions: construction of scaffolded help, establishment of intersubjectivity, and use of private speech” (p. 245). Therefore, L1 should be used in L2 learning processes through interpersonal communication.

In the case of an intrapersonal communication, L1 works as a cognitive tool to externalize *inner speech* (Vygotsky, 1986) for solving complex problems (Antón & Dicamilla, 1999; Centeno-Cortés & Jiménez-Jiménez, 2004). Under this conception, it appears that the use of L1 has significance in teaching content that requires complex reasoning skills. This idea of using L1 in developing reasoning skills is supported by Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman (2015) who claim, “if the activity requires complex cognitive processing, then the best (or perhaps, only) way for the learner to engage in the activity is by ‘talking it through’ in the first (strongest) language” (p. 43). From an intrapersonal perspective, L1 helps to comprehend cognitively challenging tasks before efficiently verbalizing this comprehension in L2. Viewing L1 as a

resource in L2 classrooms, Gibbons (2015) suggests that having L2 learners discuss new concepts in their L1 “before they are introduced to them in English”, allows learners to “make use of their total language resources” (p. 30). Therefore, L1 assists and enhances L2 development, functioning concurrently as an effective device for managing cognitively demanding content (Behan, Turnbull, & Spek, 1997, p. 41). This scholarship on interpersonal and intrapersonal tasks, justifies the pedagogical significance of L1 in L2 development from the perspective of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory.

### **Critiquing L1 Influences in L2 development**

#### **Critiquing Behaviorism**

Behaviorists view L2 development as a transfer process of a set of language habits, which learners form in L1 development processes. However, if it is the case, learners from similar L1 backgrounds would commit similar errors and would produce similar language *output*. Also, similar instruction strategies would benefit learners from similar L1 background. Nevertheless, this is not true in all circumstances. Learners from different L1 backgrounds commit similar errors in same L2 learning process as well. Again, many of the errors that L2 learners make are similar to the errors children make when learning their native languages. Hence, all language errors in L2 are not caused by the differences between L1 and L2. There are learning errors in the *order of acquisition* that are common to all language learners.

#### **Critiquing Meaning-based Instructions**

Nullifying the role of L1 in L2 development, Krashen’s Monitor Theory focuses on meaning-based instructions (Johnson, 1995, p. 82). However, this theory which only emphasizes meaning without explicit instructions on language forms, will make the probability of retention of L2 learning, in this case *uptake*, vulnerable by overlooking errors. Explicit form-focused

instructions by error analysis comparing L1 and L2, is helpful for learners to some extent because it assists to develop *cross-linguistic awareness*. However, all errors cannot be assumed earlier because as Creative Construction Hypothesis (Dulay & Burt, 1975) suggests, learners are creative, and they unconsciously create new linguistic output in both L1 and L2 that they do not encounter beforehand. Furthermore, the question of L2 teachers' expertise arises in executing explicit form-focused instructions by comparing L1 and L2 linguistic features when the class consists of more than one L1 background.

### **Critiquing Quantity of L1 Use**

Even though using L1 facilitates collaborative tasks in L2 classes, excessive dependence on L1 will increase student' evading tendency of using L2, which is not effective for L2 development. If learners mostly depend on their L1 when an L2 rule is required in production that is not available in their repertoire, this dependence may increase production for the time being, but actual L2 development may not occur (Krashen, 1982). Weighing interaction in both L1 and L2, Wells (1999) suggests, "the principles on which the balance between L2 and L1 is struck also need to be enunciated and justified" (p. 253). Krashen and Terrell (1983) argue that L2 should be used instead of L1 in the L2 learning process to avoid the negative influence of L1. Therefore, emphasis should be given to developing skills in both target language and native language.

### **Conclusion**

In her poem, "I Am an Immigrant Student", Angela Carrasquillo (as cited in Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, & Lee, 2014, p. 41) writes:

I am a Spanish speaking immigrant,

Switching from "what's up?" to "¿Qué pasa brother"



Able to speak in English with my face and hands

Thinking in Spanish and drafting in English. (1-4)

The ending of this quotation justifies the role of L1 in L2 development by providing evidence that an L2 learner uses his/her L1 in the thinking processes for producing a linguistic *output* in L2. L2 development will not occur successfully without the development of L1.

Even though the role of L1 in L2 development is important, the right equilibrium of using L1 as a resource in L2 development processes is crucial. Freeman and Freeman (2009) argue, “the general public and, in fact, most educators believe that more English equals more English, when the truth is the opposite. More first-language knowledge equals more English” (p. 3). Since acquiring L1 prepares learners to learn any additional language, the research attention should be given to how effectively L1 can be used in L2 development. Additionally, as L2 learners transfer knowledge already learned in their L1 into their L2 due to *cross-linguistic influences*, Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, and Lee (2014) recommend for “using concepts and content students already know in their first language to create bridge to learning new language structures” (p. 70). Therefore, using content in L2 classrooms, which is learnt in L1, can benefit both content knowledge and language skills. However, extensive use of L1 in L2 classrooms will negatively influences L2 development.

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