Mother Tongue Syntactical Influence in a ESL Class

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Abstract

This study seeks to find out the syntactical influence of the L1 (Tamil) grammar that the students of Tamil schools use interchangeably in their daily writing of L2, namely English. Many extensive researches have been carried out to study first language interference and its effect on second language learners. It has been said that the transfer of mother tongue (native) language is one of the major sources for L2 learners to make mistakes in their writing (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Meanwhile Ellis (1997) refers to interference as 'transfer' which he defines as being "the influence that the learner's exerts over the acquisition of an L2" This study followed a mixture of qualitative and quantitative survey research design, the purpose of which is to find out the influence of L1 linguistic items in the writing of English (L2), among 96 standard 5 students of a selected Tamil school in Malaysia. The research revealed that the use of wrong syntactical order was quite rampant in the analysis of the samples' L2 writing. It has been stated in the Literature of this study that the Tamil language and the English language have different syntactical order. From the data collected, we could observe that 21.9% or approximately 21 subjects had used the syntactical structure of the Tamil language in their L2 writing. The 21 students made a total of 27 errors in their sentences.

Key Words: mother tongue, influence, syntactical, interference.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the interference of L1 grammatical rules in the writing of L2 with specific reference to the interference of Tamil (L1) in English (L2). This study seeks to find out the syntactical influence of the L1 grammar that the students of Tamil schools use in their daily writing of L2, namely English. How does a child create the mental construct that is language? Children are not borned with a fully formed grammar in their heads or with all the 'rules' of social and communicative intercourse. Linguistic knowledge develops in stages. Chomsky (1950) first resorted to this concept of Universal Grammar because he believes that children cannot learn their first language so quickly and effortlessly without the help of some inborn talents. Syntax is the study of the principles and rules for constructing sentences. In addition to referring to the discipline, the term *syntax* is also used to refer directly to the rules and principles that govern the sentence structure of any individual language. Modern research in syntax attempts to describe languages in terms of such rules.

There are a number of theoretical approaches to the discipline of syntax. Linguists like Noam Chomsky see syntax as a branch of biology, since they conceive of syntax as the study of linguistic knowledge as embodied in the human mind. Meanwhile, Gerald Gazdar (1985) takes a more Platonistic view, since they regard syntax to be the study of an abstract formal system Syntax is the grammatical arrangement of words in a sentence. It concerns both word order and agreement in the relationship between words. Syntax is primarily concerned with structure of sentences. The issue of first language (L1) interference has had a long history in the second language studies. Many extensive researches have been carried out to study first language interference and its effect on second language learners. It has been said that the transfer of mother tongue (native) language is one of the major sources for L2 learners to make mistakes in their writing (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Meanwhile Ellis (1997) refers to interference as 'transfer' which he defines as being "the influence that the learner's exerts over the acquisition of an L2"

Research Questions

1. What are the types of L1 syntactical influence that take place in L2 writing?
2. Whether the transfer of L1 is positive or negative.

Research Methodology

This study will follow a mixture of qualitative and quantitative survey research design, the purpose of which is to find out the syntactical influence of mother tongue in the writing of English (L2), among the standard 5 students of a selected school. It further seeks to uncover the types of 'transfer' that takes place in the process of writing, whether negative or positive. The instruments utilized in this research are questionnaires (sample), analysis of pupils' writings from exercise books and workbooks. Data were also collected from interview questions from selected sample.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire for this research contains a list of questions in Tamil (L1) pertaining to the students' perception in the writing of English. The purpose of this questionnaire is to identify the kind of cognition that takes place in the students' thinking before they start writing. This questionnaire contains 3 questions in Tamil and all the questions were explained by the researcher to the students. This was to ensure that any limitation of their reading ability did not mask the answers. Students were asked to write the answers in Tamil in order to obtain good and genuine responses. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher and the class teacher. This questionnaire was the first to be given to the students, followed by the worksheets the following week. The students were given approximately 30 minutes to answer all the questions. The class teacher and the researcher went around the classroom, assisting students who had problems in answering the questions in the questionnaire.

Interviews

Frankel and Norman, (1996) believe that "Interviewing is an important way for a researcher to check the accuracy of-to verify or refute- the impressions he or she has gained through observation. Fetterman, in fact, describes interviewing as the most important data collection technique a qualitative researcher possesses. We interview people to find out from them things that we cannot directly observe." The present researcher conducted three semi-structured interviews with selected subjects to identify the development of fluency in learners, and how learners improve access to their linguistic system with time and practice.

The respective school teachers of L1 and L2 were also interviewed to identify the kinds of word order errors that the students make in their daily writing. The interview also aimed to find out the influence of the learners' L1 on their written English.

Interview 1: This interview was conducted with one L2 teacher of the sample. This interview was conducted to collect more data about the background of teaching and learning English in a Tamil school. The researcher also wanted to obtain more info pertaining to methods of teaching L2 in this school.

Interview 2: This interview was conducted with 5 selected students of the school to identify the problems that they face in the learning of English language.

Interview 3: The interview was conducted with one L1 teacher. The purpose of the interview was to identify the kind of problems the students face in the writing of L1. The interview also provided valuable insights pertaining to the students' social and cultural background.

Sample

The sample for this study comprised 96 standard 5 students from one selected Tamil school Klang Valley, Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Tamil Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia, hereafter known as SRK(T) Serdang. The school is strategically located in the campus of Universiti Putra, Malaysia.

Most of the students of the school are children of local residents who are mainly from the average income group and a small number from above average group. The school has two sessions, morning and afternoon. Tamil school students in Malaysia have to learn all 3 major languages in their primary school life, namely, Tamil language (mother tongue), Bahasa Malaysia (National language) and the English Language (second language).

Findings

Table 1: The Use of Tamil Word Order

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	75	78.1	78.1	78.1
	2	16	16.7	16.7	94.8
	3	4	4.2	4.2	99.0
	4	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	96	100.0	100.0	

In this research, the researcher found the use of wrong syntactical order was quite obvious in the analysis of the samples' writing. It has been stated in the Literature of this study that the Tamil language and the English language have different syntactical order. From the data collected, we can observe that 78.1% or approximately 75 subjects have used at least one syntactical structure of the Tamil language in their L2 writing. Some of the examples picked from the sample's writings are as follows:

"John kicks the ball."(English) is written as "John the ball kicks." (**ஜான் பந்தை உதைத்தான்**.) in Tamil. This type of error is quite glaring in the writing samples. "Where is my book?" is written as, "My book where?"(**என் புத்தகம் எங்கே**?) (as in the Tamil language structure)

More examples from the sample's writings:

அவள் வானொலி கேட்டாள்.

She radio listen.

இராமு, **கணிதம் மற்றும் ஆங்கிலம் பாடம் செய்துக்கொண்டிருக்கிறான்**.

Ramu is mathematics and English lesson doing.

குமார் கணினியில் பாடம் செய்து கொண்டிருக்கிறான்.

Kumar in computer lesson doing.

This is also strongly supported by the word order of the L1 (Tamil), whereby Tamil is a consistently head-final language. The verb comes at the end of the clause, with typical word order Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). However, Tamil also exhibits extensive scrambling (word order variation), so that, surface permutations of the SOV order are possible with different pragmatic effects.

In the Tamil language, not all sentences have subject, verb and object. It is possible to construct valid sentences that have only a verb—such as mudhiintuvittatu (***முடிந்து விட்டது***) ("completed")—or only a subject and object, without a verb, primary or auxillary such as 'atu en vīdu' (***அது என் வீடு***("That, my house").

Students who answered the interview questions have clearly said that they do direct translation from Tamil to English without looking at the sentence as 'whole' in English. This 'practice' is supported by the questionnaire answered by the selected students. This statement is further strengthened in the interview with the students. Therefore, we do understand the reason for the failure of the use of proper verb-to-be in their writing of L2.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire consisting of 3 questions was administered to 36 randomly selected students involved in this research. This was to assess their perception in the writing of L2 and the kind of cognition that took place in the students' brain before they started writing. Due to the students' inability to understand the needs of the questions the researcher explained the questions orally. This was also done so that the answers did not mask the intended findings.

The answers to the questions clearly showed that the students thought and visualized things in their mother tongue before they started writing in L2. For every Tamil word, they then translated to English. This kind of perception and thinking contributed to the syntactical disorder in the L2 writing as there were significance differences between the Tamil language syntactical order and the English language syntactical order as elaborated earlier.

Examples of questions and answers given by the selected students

1. ஆங்கிலத்தில் எழுதும் முன், நீ உன் மனதில் என்ன நினைப்பாய்?

 (What do you think in your mind, before writing in English?)

 நான் தமிழில் நினைத்தப் பின் ஆங்கிலத்தில் எழுதுவேன்.

(I think in Tamil, and then I write in English)

Table 2: Breakdown of answers for Question 1

Answers	No. of Students	Percentage
I think in Tamil and then write in English	30	83.3%
I think in English without thinking in Tamil	6	16.7%

2. ஒவ்வொரு வார்த்தையாக நினைப்பாயா அல்லது ஒரு முழு வாக்கியமாக நினைப்பாயா?

 (Do you think word by word, or as a whole sentence, before writing?)

 நான் ஒவ்வொரு சொல்லாக தமிழில் நினைத்தப் பிறகு ஆங்கிலத்தில் எழுதுவேன்.

 (I will think one word by one word in Tamil and then write in English)

Table 3: Breakdown of answers for Question 2

Answers	No. of Students	Percentage
I will think one word by one word in Tamil and then write in English	32	88.8%
I will think as a whole sentence in English and write in English	4	21.2%

3. நீ வேறேதும் மொழியில் நினைப்பாயா?

 (Do you think in any other language?)

 இல்லை.

 (No)

Table 4: Breakdown of answers for Question 3

Answer	No. of Students	Percentage
Yes	33	91.6%
No	3	8.4%

Therefore, from the questionnaire answers given we can conclude that the learning of L2 in Tamil schools is seriously influenced and affected by the students' mother tongue. By and large, most of the sample gave the same answers. However, there are students who come from families whose parents are bilingual and the influence of the mother tongue is minimized. Among the L1 grammatical influences in the writing of L2, syntax seem to be the strongest.

Interview with the Selected Students

The interview with the students was conducted to get a clearer picture of the problems they faced in the writing of L2 and to understand their language background. When the students were asked to rank their language competency level, all the students placed their mother tongue first, followed by the national language and lastly the English language.

Researcher: Could you tell me which language you are very good at, followed by the not so good? (Ranking of language competence)
All: Tamil, Malay, and English.

In contrast, the students said that they found the English language easy but their limited vocabulary stopped them from using the language freely.

Researcher: How do you find learning English?

Menaka & Ganesha: Easy, we understand the language. We always get good marks in   English but sometimes we do not know what word to use.

Puvarasan & Mehnaka: We had so many problems when we were in standard 4 but we are okay now.

Discussion and Conclusion

Learning a new language can be a stressful event. Even the best-prepared teacher will encounter problems unconnected, on the surface, to grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary. In their introduction to *Language Transfer in Language Learning*, editors Susan Gass and Larry Selinker (1992) list various factors in learning a new language: "age . . . motivation, loyalty to a language, language aptitude, and attitude" (p. 4). Maniam. M (2010) also agrees that teachers cannot cancel out these factors, but they can, hope fully; lessen the uneasiness or fear felt by most language learning students. Teachers need to be alert to "transfers" and "borrowings" that students may make as they acquire the new language.

By and large, the study explicitly shows that there is a considerable amount of mother tongue syntactical order in the writing of L2 among the standard 5 students of the said Tamil school. Therefore students of Tamil schools who have to face the challenges of learning three language subjects, namely, Tamil, English and Malay, should be offered equal teaching hours with equal effort so that one language does not interfere with the other, especially in our Malaysian context. Because of this kind of complications in the early stage of language learning, Tamil school students are at a disadvantaged position in L2 learning and mastery.

It is to be hoped, however, that SLA research will soon provide some fairly more definitive answers to this question. The optimal pedagogical methodology to help the students to gradually eradicate mistakes clearly depends to a large extent on why he or she makes them.

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