

Learning and Transfer Strategies in the Paradigm of Second Language Context

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Abstract: This article discusses the learning and transfer strategies used in the SLA context in written documents. A mixed method research was conducted to investigate the learning and transfer strategies used and the contributing factors. Among the transfer strategies investigated in this study are substitution, literal translation, alter structure and misinterpretation while the learning strategies of simplification are misinformation, replacement, addition, misordering and deletion strategies of morphology and syntax. This study triangulated the data from document analysis, interviews and questionnaire to evaluate the contributing factors and effects of learning and transfer strategies in the ESL context.

Keywords: interlanguage, learning strategies, transfer strategies and contributing factors.

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a significant difference how native learners write English and how writers learning English language as a second language or target language write. This is because learners have more than one language at their disposal for composing as compared to native learners or English as a second language learners. Therefore they may use both first and second language for cognitive operations when they are composing in the second language. Since, they have more than one language in hand, it brings more problems and learners tend to switch those languages interactively, therefore causing some confusion in the structure and meaning. Usually when writing in the target language (L2), second language learners tend to rely on their native language (L1) structures to produce a meaningful response. If the structures of the two languages are distinctly different, then one could expect a relatively high frequency of errors in L2, thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2 (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Behaviourists acknowledged that second language learning involves the creation of a new set of habits and habit formation. The failure to gain the new habits of the second language was thought to be related to first language interference (Littlewood, 2002). Many behaviourists argue that L1 interference is a major problem for L2 learners. This situation is dominant in L2 learner's productive and receptive skills which are greatly influenced by not merely by L1 patterns but also includes the factor of how great the similarities or differences between L1 and L2 languages are. For instance, if L1 and L2 are similar in features and characteristics, then the interference is not as great and prominent. As most of the strategies are similar in L1 and L2 therefore L2 learners may be able to transfer from L1 to L2 writing. Furthermore in L2 writing, transfer is considered a strategy. Consequently L2 writers make use of their L1 transfer and learning strategies when writing in L2. Therefore errors occur when learners inappropriately transfer some features of L1 in their L2 writing. Learners who have good mastery of L2 are able to apply good transfer strategies in L1 (Beare, 2000). However, if the command of the language is inadequate, they are unable to use L1 in L2 writing effectively. This is an unconscious process and results in negative transfer. This is one issue this study would like to investigate.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

It was stated that many Malaysian college students are poor in English language (Lilian, 2008). Even after learning the language for more than 10 years, they are still not able to speak or write in English language. She adds that the standard

of English language proficiency of Malaysian students in tertiary colleges has declined. This perceived decline is an issue that has sparked off heated debates among scholars in Malaysia. A research was conducted to examine why Malaysian students do not seem to be able to attain reasonable English language literacy even after going through eleven years of learning that language in schools (Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Nor Hasimah Mat Awal & Kesumati Abu Bakar, 2008). These researchers believe that the teaching of the English language should focus on learner's proficiency and competence and less focus on grammar. It has been observed that when Malaysian students make the transition from secondary schools to university, they are expected to have acquired all critical and literacy skills to meet the academic demands of university. A recent study carried out proved that students face difficulty to shift from school learning culture to university learning culture (Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007) and lack the convention of academic writing needed to write well in an academic discipline. Undergraduates are found to refer to their first language system when writing in English and use direct translation to compose English language texts (Nabiah, 2007). Writing is a basic skill that needs to be mastered by all students in the Malaysian English Language curriculum (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000). Despite learning English for many years, many of these students remain weak in the English language, especially in their writing skills (Rashidah, 2005). The situation is even crucial among ESL pre-service teachers from vernacular schools especially with regards to the writing skill. The ESL pre-service teachers from vernacular schools have more than one language at their disposal, thus they would have difficulties in mastering and acquiring many languages. The situation would be even greater if the roots of the languages are different. Therefore this study would aim to:

- a) investigate the learning and transfer strategies used in their interlanguage system
- b) investigate the contributing factors of learning and transfer strategies used by pre-service teachers in their interlanguage system

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

The main aim of this study is to investigate the interference factors of L1 in L2 sentence patterns of ESL pre-service teachers writing thus it is a process of inquiry and an investigation, the aim of which is to understand the issues of L1 interference in L2. Besides the mentioned inquiry, this study would also investigate the learning and transfer strategies used by ESL pre-service teachers in their interlanguage system. This study would also investigate the contributing factors of both the learning and transfer strategies used in the interlanguage system. As the aim of the research question is to investigate the problems, the adoption of a mixed method approach which focussed in investigating was appropriate with the research objectives. In this study the researcher does not aim to make generalization but to provide contextual findings of a phenomena.

IV. PARTICIPANTS

The sample represents 60 students from a teaching education institution who are currently pursuing the Degree Program. A total of 7 males and 53 females were selected randomly for this study. Like all Malaysian students, all the students started learning English language as a second language in a formal setting with formal instructions. The subjects are homogeneous in terms of their linguistic, academic level, ability and field of study. The subjects are trained to be future primary school teachers. The subjects lived in an exclusively Malay speaking community and had learnt English as a second language during their primary and secondary school in a formal setting.

V. INSTRUMENTATION

To gain a comprehensive insight of the research, the triangulation type of design would be used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative analyses will be conducted in two phases, firstly to analyze the total occurrence of strategies and identification of patterns of syntax for evidence of interference. Qualitative data would be collected to support description and interpretation which would include systematic coding of interview and patterns emerging from document analysis. However, to substantiate and consolidate the findings, the raw data would be analyzed using the quantitative mode. Three types of instruments would be employed which comprises of a questionnaire, an interview and document analysis. Therefore this study employed the mixed method design using the data source triangulation to provide a more comprehensive descriptive study

Questionnaire:

A questionnaire survey was necessary in this study as it helps the researcher to gather relevant information regarding aspects of themes related to contributing factors which complement the phenomena. The 30 items in the questionnaire were based on constructs of the conceptual theory framework of SLA Threshold which is designed for this study. The first section consists of items to collect data on the types of errors, the second section to collect data on the causes of errors and finally the third section is to collect data on the application of grammar. The items were designed to be eclectic and to cover a range of aspects of learning language in the ESL context in general. A descriptive statistic of questionnaire items would be carried out to determine the statistic score of mean, median mode and standard deviation for each of the 30 items in the questionnaire under three sections, types of errors, causes of errors and application of grammar (Refer to Table 1). The items would then be re-classified to themes to assimilate constructs of second language acquisition, interlanguage, learning and transfer strategies, application of grammar and similarities and dissimilarities of languages based on the innate Four Threshold SLA Model used as a conceptual framework.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of questionnaire items Part A-Types of errors

Descriptive statistics of questionnaire items-Types of Errors

PART	N	ITEM NO	ITEM	MEAN± SD	MEDIAN (IQR)	MODE
A	60	1	I usually add “ed” to form past tense verbs	4.42±0.50	4.00 (1.00)	4.00
		2	I am confused with the irregular form of past tense verbs.	4.98±0.13	5.00 (0.00)	5.00

Descriptive statistics of questionnaire items-Causes of Errors

PART	N	ITEM NO	ITEM	MEAN± SD	MEDIAN (IQR)	MODE
B	60	1	I am confused with the rules of grammar between L1 and L2.	4.57±0.59	5.00 (1.00)	5.00
		2	I am confident with the rules of grammar of L2.	4.55±0.59	5.00 (1.00)	5.00

Descriptive statistics of questionnaire items -Application of Grammar

PART	N	ITEM NO	ITEM	MEAN± SD	MEDIAN (IQR)	MODE
C	60	1	Studying grammar formally is essential for mastering grammar.	3.95±1.21	4.00 (2.50)	5.00
		2	The study of grammar helps in learning L2.	4.53±0.75	5.00 (1.00)	5.00

Document Analysis:

Data will be collected from two types of written documents comprising of a narrative form and an informal letter. The documents would then be analyzed to generate the constructs of second language acquisition, interlanguage, learning and transfer strategies, similarities and dissimilarities of languages and application of grammar based on the innate Four Threshold SLA Model used as a conceptual framework.

Interview:

A semi-structured interview would be conducted to investigate the phenomena not directly observable (Fielding & Thomas, 2011). The interview would be conducted to gather in-depth information regarding the learning strategies, second language acquisition and learning, interlanguage, similarities and/or dissimilarities of languages and methodology of teaching and learning of grammar. The interview would be conducted following a seven step procedure: schematizing, design, interview, transcribe, analyse, verify and finally report (Mavasti, 2004). The interview would be transcribed to generalize the themes.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument:

A pilot study was conducted and the questionnaire was pilot run with ten respondents who are representatives from the focus group observation. The internal reliability of each themes was tested using Cronback α coefficient.

VI. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE AND ANALYSIS

Three research data collection methods were used namely, questionnaire, interview and document analysis. Since this study will be an in-depth research, these methods will help validate the findings through triangulation. The findings from the data collected will be converged to form one phenomenon (Bryman, 2001) that of interference of L1 (Tamil) in L2 (English) and to answer the research objectives. This study would employ the method recommended by Ellis (2008) which aims to carry out a comprehensive comparative study on the usage of both L1 and L2 in the written component.

- a) The first step is to analyze the data from the document analysis, interview and questionnaire.
- b) The second step is to identify the sentence and morphology patterns in the document
- c) The third step classifies the errors based on taxonomy of learning and transfer strategies
- d) The fourth step explains the errors
- e) The fifth step evaluates the errors to identify the contributing factors

VII. RESULT

The document analysis is significant to investigate two aspects of the research. Firstly, the researcher identified the learning and transfer strategies from the document analysis using a pre-defined taxonomy of transfer by Odlin and learning strategies by Dulay.

Transfer Strategies- Negative Transfer:

Among the transfer strategies investigated in this study was substitution, literal translation, alter structure and misinterpretation. This study triangulated the data from document analysis, interviews and questionnaire to evaluate the contributing factors and effects of negative transfer strategies in the ESL context.

Table 2: Negative Transfer

Negative Transfer	Total-Letter	$\Sigma\%$	Total Essay	$\Sigma\%$
Substitution	0	0	0	0
Literal translation	16	50	69	39
Alter structure	14	43.75	39	22
Misinterpretation	2	6.25	68	39
TOTAL	32	100	176	100

It was noted that participants used the literal translation extensively which comprised of 50% as indicated in the Table 2. Moreover equal distribution of 39% was noticed for both literal translation and misinterpretation. However, alter structure was recorded as 22%. From the questionnaire it was extracted that the causes of literal translation was due to grammar rule application and differences of L1 and L2 therefore participants tend to memorize the grammar rules. Based on the questionnaire, it was concluded that substitution was used when there were differences of L1 and L2 grammar. Both Tamil and English languages differ in syntactic and morphological chronology therefore it was likely that participants used literal translation in most sentence structures. Based on the report from the questionnaire, all the 60 participants agreed to think in L1 before applying L2 and translate from L1 to L2 (median=5). However, there was a contrast of agreement when both L1 and L2 were used interchangeably and this showed a median = 2. This supports the view that learners switch between a range of correct and incorrect forms of sentence structure. Through triangulation it was noted that literal strategy complements the contributing factors of differences of languages and application of grammar.

Based on the record from the questionnaire, all the participants agreed being confused with the irregular form of the verbs and therefore employed the misinterpretation strategy. Likewise all the participants agreed to omit words which caused confusion. Majority of the students agreed mode-4 that they usually add 'ed' to form past tense verbs as recorded from the

result of the questionnaire survey. Learners add 'ed' to verbs as avoidance or may have failed to apply the rules in a correct manner (Rutherford). Through triangulation it was noted that misinterpretation strategy complemented contributing factors of application of grammar rules and differences of languages.

Learning Strategies- Simplification Strategy:

The learning strategies investigated in this study were divided into two main categories. The first learning strategy investigated would be simplification which would be investigated under sub-components of misinformation, replacement, addition and misordering. Misinformation strategy would further be investigated under sub-components of regularization, archi and alternating forms. The addition strategy would further be investigated under components of double marking, regularized and simple addition. The next strategy that would be investigated would be omission of syntax and morphology.

Table 3: Simplification strategies

Strategy of simplification	Total Letter	Σ %	Total Essay	Σ %
Misordering	0	0	7	2
Replacement	16	14.8	37	8.8
Addition:	21	19.5	68	16.2
Double marking	16	76.2	21	31
Regularized	4	19	38	56
Simple addition	1	4.8	9	13
Misinformation:	71	65.7	307	73
Regularized	2	2.8	0	0
Misconception	65	92	307	73
Alter structure	4	5.6	0	0
TOTAL	108	108 100%	419 419 100%	

With reference to the Table 3, the simplification strategy used was namely misordering, replacement, addition and misinformation. Among the addition strategies used were double marking, regularized and simple addition. This study employed the triangulation of data from document analysis, interviews and questionnaires to evaluate the contributing factors and effects of simplification strategies used in the interlanguage system.

In the letter, majority of the students used the misinformation strategy extensively which comprised of 65.7%. Misinformation strategy was further classified under various categories such as regularized, misconception and alters structure. Among these, misconception was the most applied strategy in the written letter. Addition and replacement strategy were used with 19.4% and 14.9% respectively. However, there was no evidence of misordering strategy in the written letter document. Addition strategy was further classified under simple addition, regularized and double marking. It was recorded that the frequently used addition strategy was double marking followed by regularized and simple addition. The pattern of distribution of simplifications strategy was similar in essay documents. The frequently used strategy of misinformation was misconception which comprised of 100%. Based on the questionnaire, almost all the items answered the simplification strategy. It was noted that misinformation strategy was used when applying the grammar rules. However, participants used misconception strategy when there were differences in the grammar rules. Based on the questionnaire, addition strategy were due to confusion of grammar rules and application, memorisation instead of learning the grammar rules and being confused with L1 and L2 grammar. Through triangulation it was noted that learning grammar complemented in construction of sentences in English and when the grammar rules was not applied correctly or inadequately learnt the tendency to make errors was frequent. All the participants agreed that grammar should be taught by rules. To avoid the errors, the simplification strategy especially the misinformation and addition strategy was applied. It was noted that all the learners used misinformation especially the misconception strategy due to interlanguage, differences of L1 and L2, confusion of grammar rules and application and memorisation of grammar rules. From the interview it was gathered that learners used addition strategy due to the factor of faulty comprehension which led to incorrect usage of grammar items. Through triangulation of data, addition strategy was found to be caused by application of grammar rules, differences of languages and interlanguage.

To conclude, misinformation strategy complemented the contributing factors of interlanguage, application of grammar rules and differences of languages. Interesting evidence was that all the items in the questionnaire show correlation with misinformation strategy. Another convergent finding was when grammar rules were learnt and applied incorrectly; learners tend to seek for alternative strategies to apply the rules. Therefore it can be concluded that simplification strategy leads to interference and the complementary factors were differences in languages, second language learning and application of grammar rules.

Deletion Strategy:

The strategy of deletion is seen from two aspects namely morphology and deletion. The strategy of deletion was prominent in morphology than in syntax for both the documents. Participants used 100% of this strategy in morphology in letters and only 1.8% in syntax for essays. Based on the questionnaire, all the participants mentioned they omitted words which caused confusion. This was also derived from the interview conducted where the interviewees agreed that they deleted the words which caused confusion. In conclusion, based on the data from the triangulation, omission strategy was due to differences in languages, second language learning and interlanguage.

VIII. FINDINGS

Based on the findings through triangulation, the transfer strategies used included simplification strategies of misinformation, replacement, addition and misordering and deletion strategies of morphology and syntax. The strategy of simplification and omission was used by L2 learners to build hypotheses of second language and this enables them to formulate various rules based on prior knowledge thus ignoring first and second language input. Simplification was a result of L2 students ignoring elements of a language for example usage of grammar and parts of speech (Light brown & Spada, 2006). When learners tend to avoid certain grammar rules for example plural, tenses and articles they used the omission strategy. When learners translated from L1 to L2 or used both L1 and L2 interchangeably they tend to use the literal translation. The misconceptions strategy was used when learner apply the rules incorrectly. In instances of forming past tense form of the verbs, the addition strategy was used. The negative transfer was a result of learner's errors (Ellis, 2008). Learners overgeneralized the rules of grammar when they learn the grammar of a language. The transfer strategies used were replacement, literal translation, alter structure and misinterpretation. Literal translation was used due to interlanguage when learners translated from L1 to L2 and used both L1 and L2 interchangeably. Learners used misinterpretation when they were confused with the application of grammar rules. Finally to avoid the problem of having too many grammar rules to memorise, learners applied the replacement strategy.

To conclude, L1 learners use various learning and transfer strategies in their interlanguage system. Among the strategies are simplification, addition, misinformation, deletion and replacement. It was concluded that learning strategies enhanced learners own learning (Brown, 2000). Ellis, refer to interference as transfer which he says is the influence in the interlanguage system. It was concluded the further apart the features of two languages, the higher the instances of incorrect formation of sentences as a result of strategies (Bateneih, 2005). The other finding was that interferences was reported as the phenomenon to all the contributing factors of interlanguage, translation, learning and application of grammar rules and finally the role of monitor in second language acquisition. According to Behaviourist theory, interference is due to the fact that learners are confused with L1 and L2 features when they have established a well set defined rule governed L1. Another finding was that due to the mismatch usage of Monitor which results in faulty learning of L2 when learners switch between correct and incorrect forms of sentence structures.

IX. SUGGESTIONS

Past researchers and studies have indicated that ESL teachers employ personal teaching methodology to teach grammar in classrooms. Teachers create their own personal ideologies to teach grammar (Borg, 2003). Therefore this study would recommend a defined methodology to teach grammar based on the findings recorded. Therefore in the ESL context, grammar rules should be taught (Nada, 2003). Among the suggestion is to design a module to include elements of Mentalist and Behaviourist theories. This study would also suggest to conduct a cross sectional study of a related research with emphasis of Contrastive Analysis. Previous studies of Error Analysis did not include Contrastive Analysis, therefore failed to identify errors and suggestions of possible pedagogical recommendation.

X. CONCLUSION

This study arrives at a conclusion that there are contributing factors of interference of L1 into L2 sentence patterns. Therefore learning and transfer strategies were used in the interlanguage system to overcome the problem. It was also concluded that when learning and transfer strategies were applied incorrectly, the tendency to form inaccurate sentence structures were prevalent as indicated in this study.

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