

Pedagogical implications of the influence of L1 on L2 writings: A synthetic and analytic language study

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Abstract: *A speaker's primary language (L1) plays a role in the acquisition of a second language (L2), regardless of the positive or negative impact it brings. L1's influence on L2, however, is seldom examined with a synthetic versus analytic language point of view. This article examines different errors from Spanish students, who speak a synthetic language studying English, an analytic language through a variety of writing submissions. Through using this lens a majority of students sampled make not grammatical errors but rather errors involving transfer from a synthetic to analytic language. As a result, teachers should employ pedagogical methods which work to eliminate these errors by focusing on phonology, article usage and inflection, which will in turn benefit the English learning experience for L1 synthetic language speakers.*

Introduction

In the field of L2 learning, cross-linguistic influence is prominent and widely discussed, regardless of the language being learned. The majority of studies have reached a similar consensus: a speaker's primary language will have influence on any second language they learn, regardless if the influence is notable or minute. This influence can help a student while they are studying, such as recognizing similar sentence structure and masculine and feminine words. On the other hand, L1 influence can also hinder the rapidity of a student's learning ability because it may interfere with language rules that L2 possesses. Challenges arise in the classroom due to this difference. Although influence cannot be measured, there is ground where L1 and L2 can be objectively understood: by looking at language classification (synthetic or analytic) of the primary and secondary languages.

Research

Previous research regarding L1 and L2 have shown contrasting theories in regards to the influence L1 knowledge has on acquiring a second language. Hui (2010) emphasizes that the transfer from L1 to L2, while mixed, is often depicted in a negative manner due to linguistic differences between the native language and the target language. Due to this, he calls for a similarity to be discovered which will enhance efficiency and increase students' ability to learn. The ultimate goal, Hui suggests, is for the student to think in L2 without relying on L1 for assistance. However, L1 knowledge, according to Celaya Villanueva (1990), can be seen as a processing strategy when learning a second language. This type of perspective relies heavily on the student to be an active learner, thus, encouraging creative instead of mechanical thinking. Creativity, the author argues, aids students in having an increased rapid transfer and reorganization of language acquisition. Thus, L1 has helpful properties and its positive impact should not be dismissed entirely. Denying a presence of L1 when learning another language means assuming that L2 is also learned from scratch, which is not the case for most students studying a second language.

Positive and negative perspectives from these L1 and L2 theories, however, have not been extensively examined through a synthetic versus analytic language lens. Many studies have illustrated the relationship between L1 and L2, but few have examined the relationship between language classification and how it plays a role. Synthetic and analytic languages differ in two major areas: grammatical tense instruction and morpheme/word ratio. Analytic languages, such as English, rely on specific grammatical words to help express thoughts. English keeps the same verb and requires either an additional ending, such as *-ed* or a small word in front of the verb, such as *if*, to change the tense. The conjugations for the verb remain almost the same when talking about either one person or a group of people, which facilitates learning and understanding. However, when looking at a synthetic language like Spanish, the verb is completely conjugated depending on tense as well as subject. The difference between the number of small grammatical units of language, known as morphemes, is higher for Spanish than English. Thus, Spanish is classified as having a higher morpheme/word ratio, in turn holding the synthetic language classification, while English's low morpheme/word ratio gives it an analytic language classification.

When Spanish speakers learn English as a second language, verb instruction is not required, since synthetic languages cover all verb conjugations and tenses. However, since this grammatical instruction is not needed, teachers must emphasize other aspects of language such as phonology, article usage and inflection when teaching English. Focusing on these errors will benefit students in the classroom and on any future English exams.

Findings and Significance

To analyze what is needed when teaching an analytic language to synthetic language speakers, a variety of class writing submissions were pulled from students learning English as a second language from a variety of levels of the CEFR. These 25 writings were corrected and errors were recorded. From there, the errors were analyzed with the synthetic and analytic language lens and classified based on type of error. Despite the mixed proficiency levels of the students, the majority of the submissions contained similar errors.

The most common error among students of all levels was errors in word plurality, mainly in demonstrative pronouns and nouns. 80% of students found difficulty differentiating between *this* and *these*. Examples from writing samples include, “*These is a great way to learn,*” and “*If we do this things...*” The roots of this error can be traced back to phonology, which examines how sounds are similar and have patterns across different languages. During the process of learning a second language, it is very common to have errors in pronunciation. Looking specifically at English, there are 12 pure vowels and eight diphthongs in comparison to Spanish’s five vowels and five diphthongs, thus making the vowel process more complicated. When students look at these two words, the influence of the phonology of Spanish vowels causes them to read words in a different way. Therefore, *this* (*ðis*) sounds like *these* (*ði:z*) because the Spanish *i* would be pronounced *i:* rather than *i*. Since students view these words in the same way, they are likely to interchange the two based on a phonology error from their native L1 language and therefore, cause writing errors. This suggests that students know that the word should be *ði:z* as they have acquired it naturally; however, they write “this” as an error in phonemic awareness. This can also be seen when students make the error of using *womans* in place of the plural *women*. While this is an error partially based on misunderstanding the changes of nouns in plural forms, students fail to hear the vowel difference between the *a* in *woman* *ˈwʊmən* and *e* in *women* *ˈwʊmɪn* and therefore tack on the letter “s” to make the word plural. Phonology plays an important role especially in these cases since it is hard to differentiate between the pure vowels English has and the ways each vowel can be modified. In this specific example the orthoepy, or correct pronunciation for standardized English requires the vowel to change, even though they can be said in a variety of ways that are all accepted. This, in turn, causes students to forget the plural form and incorrectly add “s” because it is easier for them.

Though the aforementioned problems have been attributed as problems of plurality, general spelling is also another issue. Though at first it might appear that these errors are not attributed to L1 interference, similarly to problems of plurality, misspellings can be attributed to sounds and phonology. This might be the case in errors such as “If

pollution gets worst". In English, the difference between worse (wɔːrs) and worst (wɔːst) is only one letter. Consonant clusters in Spanish are much less frequent than those found in English. Moreover, English could be considered a language formed on the basis of consonants, while Spanish is a vowel-based language. For example, in English native speakers might colloquially remove vowels to express meaning. (Ltr, spkng, tlk) Alternatively, in Spanish speakers may eliminate vowels and still be understood. (Cuida'o, Mucha' gracia', perdi'o). Spanish speakers who are less accustomed to consonant clusters but rather vowel clusters may not hear, or rather listen for, these consonant clusters, which would cause errors to be made in their production.

Finally, students struggled with using definite and indefinite articles. Article usage, while not as common as plurality or spelling, was found to be surprisingly common among the same sample of students. Both synthetic and analytic languages require using articles in order to convey meaning. However, 56% of the students added an extra article when it was not needed. Some errors include, "The April Fool's Day" or "The alimentation..." On the other hand, a few students forgot articles entirely in their essays. Examples of these include, "You need convince children obey," as well as, "Secondly, education system should...". The influence L1 has on students making these errors is minute, but still important to note. Articles in Spanish have more of an arbitrary usage than they do in English- that is, they are used profoundly without a specific reason. However, English does not require a plethora of articles to be used unless they are there for a specific purpose. Analytic languages require a set sentence order in order for meaning to be conveyed, and articles must have a set purpose and meaning behind them when they are used. The L1 influence causes L2 English learners to do one of two things in their writings: overcompensate and add unnecessary articles in their sentences due to their L1 influence, or forego using them entirely since English has different article rules. Ultimately, this is owed to the word order flexibility each language has. As a synthetic language, Spanish's higher morpheme/word ratio allows for more articles and an increased flexibility in using them, which can prove to be a problem for those learning an analytic language like English, which has a much lower morpheme/word ratio, or less additional phonemes.

Suggested Methods to Support Findings

Implications on classroom techniques would put emphasis on continuous practice on acquisition strategies, articulatory phonetics and enunciation of consonants for spelling.

Encouraging acquisition should be an integral part of language teaching. Comprehension and literacy strategies should be taught. Moreover, autonomous listening and reading habits should be developed outside of the classroom to ensure

that students receive ample quantities of comprehensible input. This is in line with findings from Rice and Krashen (1991) which claim that spelling is a skill which is both consciously learned and acquired.

Moreover, students should be trained in phonology. This would point teachers to methodologies that work categories such as phonological awareness, beginning letter-sound matching, full phonemic awareness, and phonics patterns. This might include classroom activities such as dictations, word families games, rhyming games, alliteration games, and synonym games.

These activities can even be worked in combined skills. Reading comprehension activities can take on a focus on phonetics in various ways. One student, for example, could read aloud while another student follows along. Alternatively, students can search for words quickly by skimming a text.

References

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