

# Constraints on Transfer Errors

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As the understanding of first language transfer goes forward, the error resulted from first language is widely considered as an unavoidable phenomenon in second language learning. This paper is to analyze some major constraints on first language transfer, including markedness, learners' language proficiency level, psychotypology, and formal instruction. The purpose is to seek solutions to reduce first language transfer errors.

*Keywords:* transfer errors, constraints, solutions

## Introduction

In the process of second language learning, the language errors made by foreign language learners are often related to many factors, and the influence of the learners' mother tongue is one of them. Such type of errors is named as transfer errors. Mother tongue transfer errors are an obstacle to achieving fluency in the target language. But how to reduce or eliminate transfer errors largely depends on the proper understanding of the causes of transfer errors.

First of all, errors are inevitable in language learning because learning and teaching need to go through a period of time. It is impossible for teachers to teach all available materials to students at the same time, and for learners to accept all materials at the same time (Corder, 1983, p. 283). Secondly, not only second language learners make errors, but native speakers make errors. Children make errors in learning their mother tongue as well. However, errors made by children or native adult speakers are not of the same nature as those made by second language learners. Children's errors can be temporary language situation problems in the process of learning their mother tongue. The errors made by native adult speakers can be out of slip of tongue, which is defined by Corder as "errors in implementation". However, the errors made by second language learners in many cases can be attributed to the lack of the correct rules or expressions in the target language, that is, the defective form problems.

Mother tongue transfer refers to the phenomenon that the characteristics of learners' mother tongue are transferred into the second language in the process of target language learning, commonly in phoneme, grammar, vocabulary, and way of thinking. Language learners, when in need of knowledge and skills in the target language in communication, they resort to their mother tongue consciously or subconsciously to make up for the defects in expressing in the target language. As it is impossible for the two languages to be consistent in every language level, errors come up. In the circumstances where the two languages are similar in certain aspect, learners may mistakenly take the two languages identical and replace the unknown item in the target language by the counterpart in their mother language; therefore, approximation leads to transfer errors.

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Of course, language transfer does not always lead to errors. First language transfer may be manifested as simplification, avoidance or excessive use of second language forms. Nowadays, it is generally accepted that the transfer of the first language is not negative; rather, it reveals the authentic learning state of language learners. But under what circumstances will transfer lead to errors?

### **Constraints on Language Transfer**

#### **Markedness**

The definition of markedness was originally used to refer to an opposite pair of speech phonemes. The phoneme with certain characteristics is marked while the other without is unmarked. The term later was applied by Jakobson in 1974 and then in Chomsky's generative phonetics.

So far, the terms "marked" and "unmarked" have a broader meaning. The former refers to those more complex and less commonly used linguistic factors while the latter refers to those more basic, typical, and commonly used linguistic factors.

Markedness has now been used to help decide that the circumstances transfer may occur in the process of second language learning. The following are widely accepted views:

(1) Generally the marked form or rule of the first language will not be transferred to the target language unless the counterpart in the target language is vague.

(2) When the counterpart in the target language is more marked, the marked form in the first language is likely to transfer.

Echman investigated the transfer among English learners who studied German and Germany learners who studied English. His research focused on phoneme pairs with relative pronunciation characteristics, such as /T/ and /D/. In English, there are three phonemic contrastive positions: the consonant at the beginning of a word, the consonant in the middle of a word, and the consonant at the end of a word. However, in German, the positions can be either the beginning or middle of a word. That is, phonemes at the end of a word are more marked than those at other positions. Echman's survey revealed that it was easy for English learners to come to learn that the phoneme did not have pronunciation at the end of a word, while Germany learners have difficulties in learning that the phonemes have pronunciation at the end of a word. When both the location in the first language and that in the target language are marked, transfer is not likely to come up; when the location of the first language is unmarked while that in the target language is marked, transfer is likely to occur (Echman, 1997, pp. 332-323).

Markedness is a new way to explain transfer phenomena in target language learning; therefore, it has been taken into consideration in practical learning and teaching problem solving. On the other hand, it should be noted that there has not yet sufficient support for the decisive role of markedness in language transfer, and further evidence is needed.

#### **Psychotypology**

The term "psychotypology" was initiated by Kellerman in 1977 to refer to language learners' perceptions of language. Language learners keep certain psychological distance between their mother language and the target language to assume the extent of similarities and differences between the two languages. It is believed that if the native language and the target language are essentially identical, the native language will become a driving force, and learners are more likely to acquire a second language at a faster rate. This view suggests the

causal relationship between the similarity of linguistic factors and the convenience of language acquisition. Kellerman had an experiment in 1977, showing the effect of perceived linguistic distance on language transfer. He compared the possibility of Dutch learners transferring their mother tongue to English and German respectively and found that Dutch learners of English and German tend to transfer in learning German as they thought German and Dutch closer, while refused to transfer in English learning as they took English remote from Dutch.

A series of experiments in Finland have also proved the effect of perceived language distance on their second language learning. The subjects of the experiments were all Finns who learned English. Some of them were Finns who spoke Swedish. They believed that English and Swedish belong to the same language family and shared the same culture. The others spoke Finnish and held different views. It turned out that Finnish native speakers avoided transfer to English while Swedish native speakers tended to transfer in learning English.

It should be noted that language learners' perception of language distance is not fixed; instead, it may change with the continuous expansion of learners' knowledge of the target language. As a result, learners will redefine the perceived language distance. Therefore, language transfer occurring at a certain time may not occur in the later period of language learning, and vice versa. In this sense, learners' target language proficiency level is closely related to language transfer as well.

### **Target Language Proficiency of Learners**

Among the constraints on transfer is the proficiency level of learners' target language. Language proficiency is defined in Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics as "a person's ability to use a language, including reading, writing, expression, or understanding of a language" (1985, p. 159). The related studies have supported that: (1) In the initial stage of target language learning, learners will transfer more from the first language to the target language; (2) with the increase of learners' target language proficiency level, transfer errors will gradually decrease. In other words, beginning learners are most likely to make language transfer errors, which was supported by Taylor in 1975.

In this sense, a tentative suggestion on target language learning can be that the reduction of transfer errors largely depends on the increase of learners' target language proficiency, which is also a common goal of second language teaching.

## **Input and Learning Settings in Second Language Learning**

Although transfer errors can hardly be always predicted and eliminated, to improve learners' proficiency in target language is of great help. As mentioned in Part two, the transfer is inversely proportional to the learners' target language proficiency. To help learners more proficient, language learning settings and language input are necessary.

### **Input**

The factors simultaneously playing a role in language learning include input of the target language and the internal language mechanism processing the input. However, there are different opinions on which of the two plays a more powerful role.

Krashen's "i + 1" theory emphasizes an undeniable basic principle in the process of second language learning: the choice of second language materials. Krashen put forward that "i + 1" is the best way for second language learners to make progress. "I" represents the learner's present target language level, and "1"

represents the part of language information a little beyond what the learner has mastered. "When communication is successful, that is to say, when the input language information is understood by the learner and has rich content, 'i + 1' will automatically start to work" (Krashen, 1982, p. 22).

Silence period is one of the widely cited evidence for the importance of language input. Researchers have noticed that people who learn a second language in a natural, informal language environment may not speak much in the first few months in the new language environment. During the period when they keep silent, they are building up their language competence in the target language by listening and understanding the input exposed to them. The silence phase generally lasts for several months before the learner begins to speak. When they do speak, they make less transfer errors than those made by learners in the formal language teaching environment. It is suggested that learners in the latter learning environment have to resort to their mother language when being asked to use the target language although they are at that time ignorant of the target language information. In this case, transfer errors are likely to occur. In contrast, the learners who have acquired sufficient target language information rarely have to transfer from the mother language into the target language.

### **Formal Instruction**

In addition to language input, learning environment plays an important role in the progress of second language learning. For most second language learners, the major environment for foreign language learning is classroom setting in which the teachers' pedagogical practices, such as asking questions and giving formal explanations, "do play a role in learners' second language development" (Chaudron, 1988, p. 178).

For language learners, unless they receive relevant guidance, they can hardly acquire some features of the target language independently. For example when the learner's first language possesses many less marked features than those of the target language, the learner's constructed interlanguage system may be full of transfer, including transfer errors. Even when exposed to the correct counterparts in the target language, the learner may hardly realize the existence of one in the target language indicates the other in his interlanguage is wrong; that is, positive language input exposure cannot identify and clear away the wrong counterpart in the learner's interlanguage automatically. In this sense, language input is not an ideal resort to eliminate transfer errors. Under such circumstances, formal instructions help arouse the learner's consciousness of transfer errors.

Spada (excerpted from Ellis, 1997) investigated the role of formal instructions and language input. The subjects of this investigation included 48 language learners of intermediate level of the target language. They were adult learners who had a training of intensive English for six weeks at a Canadian university. As expected, the learners who were exposed to more language input were more proficient in the target language than those who were not. However, these learners exposed to the same language input made different progress in language learning, which was largely accounted for by the different instructions they received. It can be seen that formal instructions are effective and indispensable in language improvement. Those who receive sufficient input information and proper formal instruction benefit most in their target language learning.

At present, there is consensus that language input and formal instructions are among the most effective ways of language learning. Language input with the aid of meaning comprehension is basic while formal instructions provide explanations so as the input can be better understood by learners; therefore help learners to reduce the occurrence of errors.

Although it is not entirely certain that target language learning must be accompanied by formal instruction, it is acknowledged that classroom teaching can affect learners' target language acquisition and is especially suitable for those learners who do not have an authentic target language environment.

Acknowledgeable, it is impossible to provide all the target language information or to correct all the errors in formal classroom instruction, but it is a convenient and easy access to target language. Sharwood once points out that:

Instructional strategies which draw the attention of the learners to specifically structural regularities of the language, as distinct from message content, will under certain conditions significantly increase the rate of acquisition over and above the rate expected from learners acquiring the language under natural circumstances where attention to form may be minimal and sporadic. (1985, p. 275)

Normative teaching also has its shortcomings. While providing systematic grammar and comprehensive input of linguistic information, standard teaching cannot teach all grammar rules and language materials. However, the effectiveness of standardized teaching in promoting second language learning cannot be denied. It not only provides learners with input of language information, but also provides them with the method of "helping them make necessary modifications in the expression of language" (Ellis, 1994, p. 656). Therefore, under the standard teaching, learners will learn the second language quickly and effectively. In the process of learning, as learners' second language proficiency progresses, the errors of first language transfer are gradually reduced or eliminated.

### Conclusions

Second language learning is a complex process in which numerous factors get involved and are playing the role simultaneously. Transfer, a natural phenomenon in the process of language learning, is one of them. Transfer errors are inevitable and in certain sense can help understand the characteristics of the learners' interlanguage. To provide high quality and a considerable amount of language input is basic for language learning and proper formal instruction is important as well for language learners, especially for those who do not have authentic target language environment. With the increase of learners' second language proficiency and in the environment with sufficient and high quality second language input, transfer errors will be reduced accordingly.

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