

## THE ROLE OF THE L1 IN THE ACQUISITION AND USE OF THE L2: NEW PERSPECTIVES.

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"L1" in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies stands for the speaker's mother tongue or native language in contrast to any additional languages he/she may learn, which are referred to as L2, L3, L4 and so on. During the 1950s and 60s, it was assumed that the L1 influenced the acquisition of the L2, whether positively, if the L1 and L2 were similar, or negatively, if they were not. This phenomenon, which was called "transfer" or "interference" -if the transfer was negative-, has become a controversial issue in SLA research.

The notion of transfer originally belonged to Behaviourism, as we can see in the Foreword to Lado's work (Lado, 1957) where Fries writes:

Learning a second language, therefore, constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The *basic problems arise* not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special "*set*" created by the first language habits.

.....

Individuals *tend to transfer* the forms and meanings (...) of their *native language* and culture to the *foreign language* and culture.<sup>1</sup>

The view that transfer actually existed was challenged in the early 1970s. Research was carried out to show that, on the one hand, not all instances of transfer as predicted by Contrastive Analysis took place (Ravem, 1978) and, on the other, that the process of the acquisition of the L2 was very similar to that of the L1 (Dulay & Burt, 1973, 1974 and Krashen, 1981, 1982). Thus, very little scope was left for the influence of the L1 upon the L2.

Nowadays, however, a renewed interest is placed on the phenomenon of language transfer as one of the strategies in the acquisition of a second language. Since the Michigan Conference on Language Transfer, which was held in 1981, several new theories have emerged and new terms have been coined to substitute the word "transfer". Kellerman & Sharwood-Smith (1986), for instance, use the term "crosslinguistic influence"

1.- My underlining.

because it is not related to any specific theory and it may refer to such phenomena as "transfer", "avoidance", "borrowing" and others under one heading. Dulay et al. (1982) argue in favour of the substitution of "transfer" by "interlingual errors", since this term refers to errors in the L2 reflecting the L1 structure independently of the processes and conditions which caused them. On the whole, the focus is no longer on whether L1 plays a role in L2 acquisition but on how, where, why and what to transfer (Schumann, 1988). Therefore, the adaptation of the idea of transfer to suit the new framework of creative learning has given way to a number of analyses and discussions on different types of transfer, on the linguistic regularities which govern it, on the learner's perception of languages and also on the importance of the learner's attitude and motivation for transfer to occur. We shall see, then, how recent models of SLA accommodate the notion of transfer.

The L2=L1 hypothesis states that the acquisition of the L2 proceeds in much the same way as the acquisition of the L1. L2 acquisition is not seen, then, as a process of habit-formation but as a creative process in which learners take an active role just as first language learners do. Within this framework, the role of the L1 as a factor of interference is discarded. This was concluded from several pieces of research where the errors that learners with different native languages made in the acquisition of an L2 were compared to the errors made by learners of that L2 as a first language. The results showed that most of the errors were the same. Consequently, they cannot be caused by transfer from the native language. They are "developmental" errors or natural errors in the process of language acquisition and they are the result of the learner's strategies.

Dulay & Burt (1983), following Burt & Kiparsky (1972), use the term "goof" to refer to these kind of errors. They classify "goofs" into four classes and, although one of these is called "interference-like goofs" <sup>2</sup>, they explain these possible cases of transfer as overgeneralizations of the L2 itself. The researchers maintain thus the coherence of the L2=L1 hypothesis and the idea that second language learners, especially children, rely heavily on the L2. In another work, Dulay et al. (1982) accept the existence of transfer errors. They argue, though, that these errors are only committed in two specific situations, namely, when learners are forced to perform either before they are ready for it <sup>3</sup> or in L2 poor environments and in certain elicitation tasks. From my point of view, the former may be the answer to the gap that exists between the acquisition and use of a given L2 in naturalistic settings where the L2 is the language used for communication and in foreign language classrooms where the L2 environment is limited and learners are under

2.- Quantitatively, this group is smaller than the other three.

3.- On this point, see also Taylor (1975) and Krashen (1981).

pressure to perform. Research by Ervin-Tripp (1974) and Terrell et al. (1980) is a clear example of the role of the L1 in the acquisition of a foreign language, especially among beginners.

Nevertheless, some followers of the L2=L1 hypothesis claim that the number of transfer errors which appears in most studies is so small that not much attention should be paid to them. Within this hypothesis, though, we also come across research which validates the role of the L1 in SLA. This is so because transfer is seen as a processing strategy or, as Sharwood-Smith (1979) calls it, a "problem-solving procedure", a view which takes into account the active role of the learner. Transfer, then, need not be mechanical: it can also be creative.

Ravem (1978) and Taylor (1975) can illustrate this idea. Ravem studied his own children's L2 production of negatives and interrogatives and concluded that there were clear examples of transfer provided that it was viewed as the learners' active use of their L1 competence, that is, one of their processing strategies. Taylor sees transfer, together with overgeneralization, as learning strategies which consist in relying on existing knowledge to make learning easier. He differentiates one strategy from the other. Transfer implies relying on the L1 whereas overgeneralization affects the L2 exclusively. As he compares elementary to intermediate learners, Taylor reaches the conclusion that the less a learner knows of the L2 the more he/she will transfer from his/her L1. In a way, this finding agrees with those by Ervin-Tripp and Terrell mentioned above.

As we can see, then, according to the L2=L1 hypothesis there exist several points of view on the matter. Some researchers affirm that the L1 plays no role in L2 acquisition; others, because of the results from their studies, maintain the opposite. However, those researchers who deny the presence of the L1 in the acquisition of the L2 seem to forget that learners do not start learning a second language from scratch, as first language learners do. The L1 is part of the learner's knowledge and, especially in foreign language learning situations, we can frequently detect the help/burden of the L1 behind any interlanguage. Maybe the L1 only affects the speed of acquisition and not the sequence or maybe it affects both, but the influence of the L1 on the L2 should not be completely dismissed. In fact, it is generally agreed that the mother tongue plays an important role in L2 phonology.

An effort directed towards the reconciliation of a theory of transfer with a natural sequence of acquisition has one of its representatives in Zobl (1980 a, 1980 b). He states that transfer and developmental influences interact in the acquisition of an L2; transfer itself delays the reorganization of an interlanguage and affects the number of rules which are used to go from the acquisition of one form to another. Zobl studies data presented by other authors to demonstrate his two hypotheses. As far as the first one is

concerned, he argues that Spanish speakers will use preverbal negation, as in "I no like dogs", longer than other speakers because this is the kind of negation in their L1. As to the second prediction, Zobl compares the acquisition of articles by a Chinese child and by a Spanish child. Since Chinese has no articles, the Chinese informant was observed to use a deictic determiner before acquiring the use of the articles in English (L2), a step which the Spanish child did not go through because he already had the category of articles in his L1. The influence on the speed and route of acquisition mentioned above is, then, obvious from this perspective.

A different focus on the role of the L1 in SLA appears in Gass's theory of the relationship between language universals and transfer (1979, (ed.) 1983, 1984 a and 1984 b). Her main argument is that universals of language interact with both the L1 and the L2 and that this interaction sometimes results in the adherence to a given universal and sometimes it does not. Gass gives three conditions for language transfer to occur. Transfer will take place, she says, when surface structures are involved, when languages are perceived as being closely related and, finally, when the interlanguage form is closer to the logical form, and not the syntactic form, of the L2. On the whole, however, she finds that it is universals which increase or decrease the likelihood of transferability.

The second condition that Gass gives, "distance" between languages, needs further consideration, since it is the basis of another theory of the role of the L1. It is Kellerman's notions of "psychotypology" and "markedness" (1977, 1983). The learner's psychotypology is his/her perception of distance between the L1 and the L2. Corder (1983) states that the learner's psychotypology determines his/her willingness to borrow from the L1. Kellerman's study (1977) shows that learners actually perceive the similarity between Dutch and English in the area of idiomatic expressions. "Markedness" refers to the learner's perception of a given L1 structure. It can be felt as language-specific or "marked" or as language-neutral or "unmarked". Kellerman's hypothesis is that transfer will be constrained when the languages are felt as unrelated or distant and when a given structure is felt as marked. Hyltenstam (1986), however, states that markedness conditions do not apply in early phases of acquisition when unmarked elements are always preferred to marked ones.

Rutherford (1983) follows Kellerman's theory to explain his findings on the transferability of two typological organizations, namely, topic-prominence and pragmatic word-order in the interlanguages of learners of English with five different language backgrounds. Canonical arrangements (e.g. SVO) were also studied but with no evidence of transfer. Canonical arrangements appear at the level of sentences whereas the other two typologies are discourse phenomena. Since both topic-prominence and

pragmatic word-order are transferred by the speakers in his study, Rutherford concludes that discourse-related information is perceived as being less marked than syntax-related information.

The problem in these theories lies in the fact that, although we are told why learners may transfer a given linguistic form, we do not know how they are able to perceive languages as distant or related or structures as marked or unmarked. It is my belief that this matter has not been sufficiently discussed in the literature and, hence, we are left with a vague idea of the process behind such points of view.

To sum up, this paper has presented some of the new perspectives on language transfer which have come to light in the last 15 years or so. According to Krashen (1981), results of investigations can be grouped into three main findings:

1. First language influence is strongest in complex word-order and in word-for-word translations of phrases.
2. First language influence is weaker in bound morphology (e.g. plurals, agreement...).
3. First language influence seems to be strongest in acquisition-poor environments.

Unfortunately, the bulk of research on the subject makes it difficult to analyse as many theories as would have been desirable. The aim of this paper has been, then, to deal with those ones which have been most influential whether supportive or critical of the role of the L1 in L2 acquisition, presenting, at the same time, some evidence and critical comments. From what we have read, then, it is clear that more empirical studies are needed to validate theoretical assumptions. At least, "it is comforting to know that the investigation of first language transfer has once again become respectable." (Andersen, 1983:177).

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