The Role of Cross-linguistic Influence in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Cross-Linguistic Influence (CLI) occupies an important but rather complex position in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). It is difficult to determine its specific role, but by observing research and theories, its impact on SLA can be divided into two types, positive and negative. The role of CLI in SLA largely depends on the similarities and differences between L1 and L2, and the contact of these two languages. In addition, cross-cultural influence must also be considered, its relationship with CLI, and its role in SLA. This paper will also briefly discuss some factors that affect CLI because CLI does not exist in isolation, nor is it immutable.

Keywords: second language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, transfer, cross-cultural influence

1. Introduction

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) is the influence of a person's knowledge of one language on that person's knowledge or use of another language[1]. Under this heading, we can include phenomena like 'transfer', 'interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing', and L2-related aspects of language loss[2].

Many scholars tend to use the term 'cross-linguistic influence' and 'language transfer' interchangeably. Odlin[3] once gave a definition of transfer, suggesting that it is the influence that emerges from differences and similarities between two languages, one is the target language, another one is the language that the learner has acquired before. Although 'transfer' is an imprecise term, in this essay, the two terms are going to refer to the same meaning.

2. Positive transfer and negative transfer

The role of cross-linguistic influence in SLA is complicated, it is generally considered two main ways, positive and negative, according to the sense of behaviorist psychologists. However, we must note that CLI has no absolute positive nor negative effect in SLA, due to its complex nature and other variables that may affect the transfer.

In a certain situation, CLI enables the acquisition of L2. The so-called 'positive transfer' results in correct performance[4].

2.1 Positive transfer

Language distance plays a role in the early examination of whether the transfer is 'positive' or 'negative'. The distance between one's L1 and L2 is crucial, as we are able to get a glimpse of how L1 influences L2 according to their differences and similarities. One is more likely to acquire better and faster a foreign language that is similar to his/her L1. For instance, when a Chinese speaker (L1) and a Spanish speaker (L1) are studying the present tense of L2 French, the Spanish speaker is going to understand the necessity and the process of verb conjugation and is ready to memorize the rules of conjugation. Whereas the Chinese speaker (L1) would need more time to comprehend this particular grammatical process and may encounter more obstacles using these verbs in a correct way; since in Mandarin Chinese, all verbs only have a single form. We can thus see that CLI is also affecting the acquisition process one goes through to reach a certain language proficiency.

Nevertheless, as Laura Sanchez suggests, language distance is ultimately in the eye of the beholder[5], languages have their connections in various ways, one can have a weaker understanding in a specific topic and a stronger one in another topic; also, we must not neglect other variables that influence the speed of acquisition, we will discuss them later in the essay.

Differences between L1 and L2 do not necessarily lead to learning difficulties. Kleinmann[6] compared two groups of L2 English learners acquiring English passive and present progressive, the Arabic group and the Spanish & Portuguese group, and found that two groups did not differ significantly in terms of productive capacity, although the English progressive does not have an equivalent term in Arabic, this structure is not hard for them to acquire.

2.2 Negative transfer

2.2.1 Error production

Researchers often consider errors as a proper way to interpret the negative transfer in SLA. It is interesting to see that

many errors are originally caused by differences between languages, but the errors tend to increase or decrease in different ways at different stages of learning.

An example of the negative transfer is when an L1 Spanish speaker uses the infinitive after a modal verb when learning L2 English, 'She can't understand'[7]. Another example of the negative transfer is when an L1 Italian speaker forms English sentences like 'The bird is blue, is small, sings beautifully', the error of ignoring adding the subject pronouns usually takes place in earlier stages of acquisition, as Italian is a null-subject language while English is not, learners tend to apply the same rule to their L2. These kinds of errors reduce as the learner improves the L2 at the later stages.

Nevertheless, this is not always a regular process that can be applied in every SLA situation. Sometimes, the error appears when the learner has earned enough amount of L2 knowledge, and when he/she is able to identify the similarities between the two languages. Wode[8] discovered that while L1 German speakers acquire L2 English, in the most initial stage of their acquisition of English negation form, they do not display influence from German, however, after the first stages, they do show influence from German (e.g., I steal not the base), which might be surprising, and this once again validates the complex nature of CLI.

2.2.2 Avoidance (Underproduction)

It is also true that errors are not the only way to explain CLI. There are two other phenomena that illustrate the negative transfer of SLA. The first one is avoidance; or underproduction. When L2 learners are not familiar with a certain linguistic structure, and they do not wish to make mistakes, they tend to avoid using them and stick to forms that they acquired or know better.

For instance, when native Italian speaker with elementary or intermediate L2 Chinese proficiency is speaking the target language, it is noticeable that they try not to use Chinese classifiers (e.g. the character 张 zhāng is originally meant "to span", and is used as a classifier to indicate flat objects like paper to form expressions like 一张纸, 'a sheet of paper'), as there are numerous classifiers with distinct usages, it is confusing and easy to make mistakes. Instead of adding classifiers to make the sentences clearer, they tend to indicate only the nouns, making the sentences lack preciseness, but still, it is grammatically correct.

The underproduction is demonstrated in several ways: 1) lack of an important and specific part of L2 knowledge, however, may understand its function through L1, 2) learners know the specific structure, but it is difficult to use because of language deficiency, 3) learners can produce the correct structure, but they are not willing to use it for a certain reason[9].

For beginners who are just starting to learn L2, CLI seems to give tentative ideas to what to produce. However, the negative impact of too much CLI will cause learners to experience a lack of sufficient language knowledge, especially in a conversational environment, and it may eventually become an obstacle in SLA.

2.2.3 Overproduction

Overproduction indicates the fact that an L2 learner builds some structures using the L2 with a higher frequency than native speakers.

According to a discovery by Turco[10], L1 French speakers overproduced presentational structures when they are acquiring L2 Italian, they prefer the more complex structure, the relative esserci + subject + [che] structure. She states that advanced French-speaking learners tend to do this because of these two possible reasons: first, the presence of the same type of structure in their L1 (il y a + subject + [qui]) can facilitate its learning; second, for them, these structures are seen to be "lifebuoy (the original word uses by the author is 'bouée de sauvetage')", they are useful for easily performing many communicative tasks in the speaking phase.

From here, we might argue that overproduction is not exactly a negative fruit of CLI. Even for highly advanced L2 learners, this phenomenon occurs from time to time. CLI serves as a mirror to reflect the similarities between the two languages. On the one hand, it helps learners to correctly produce a certain structure, on the other hand, it also hinders the learners' motivation to master more native-like expressions.

It is essential to notice that both underproduction and overproduction are not grammatically wrong, it is just that learners will appear to be relatively unnatural when they overuse or do not use certain important structures, and they will not be able to deliver the exact same meaning that they have in mind.

3. Cross-cultural influence

Cross-linguistic influence often implies the cross-cultural phenomenon, and it leads to the exploration of gaining communicative competence in SLA. While one is acquiring an L2, especially in a classroom environment, without being fully exposed to the target language, it is hard for him/her to gain success in acquiring high sociolinguistic competence.

There are some common situations in SLA caused by cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influence, when learners directly

substitute the situations and emotions expressed in their native language into the L2, this often leads to misunderstandings and is considered a fairly negative transfer.

Even where social situations are alike in two cultures, the routines united with them may vary[11]. For instance, in order to respond to a compliment in English, native speakers tend to use 'Thanks' or 'Thank you' to express their acknowledgment; while in Italian, other than 'Grazie' (equivalent to 'thank you'), native speakers also often use 'Non è vero' (equivalent to 'it is not true'); whereas in Chinese, other than '谢谢' (equivalent to 'thank you'), native people are more likely to be humble by responding '哪里哪里' (literal translation as 'where where', actually means 'your compliment comes from nowhere, and I am not that praisable') or '没有没有' (equivalent to 'not at all'). When a Chinese L1 speaker with elementary sociolinguistic competence is responding to a compliment in English from a native English speaker, he/she may try to respond with things like 'no, no' instead of directly receiving the compliment; even when he/she does respond 'thank you', it is highly possible that his/her facial expressions or gestures are uncomfortable and awkward.

We might say that cross-linguistic influence derives from the cross-cultural phenomenon, while culture shock is present and inevitable, especially in the early stages of SLA. Although it seems to be an interference or a negative transfer, it is impossible to completely skip the stages, which is an important phase for every L2 learner.

4. Discussion: other factors affecting CLI

Cross-linguistic influence is not the only factor that affects SLA, it associates with other factors, and they can collectively determine the probability of transfer[1]. Some factors, like CLI, are important considerations for testing SLA, and they are also topics of great concern to researchers.

4.1 Age

Age is an important factor that determines transfer occurrence and frequency. Children get less transfer when their L1 system is exceedingly weak to have an impact on the new L2 structure, and young learners normally acquire an L2 without much influence from L1[12].

4.2 Input variables

When L2 learners cannot get enough L2 input, their language proficiency is relatively low, and in order to start or continue a necessary communication, they have to rely on their L1 to understand and produce words and sentences in L2.

For instance, when an L1 Swedish speaker is learning L2 English and has not yet gained sufficient input, he/she knows very few words. When he/she wants to express happiness, they may end up saying 'luckily' instead of 'happy', since in his/her native language, 'lycklig' is the equivalence of 'happy', and since this word is similar to the English 'luckily', so it can be easily misunderstood and treated with a cross-linguistic perspective. This may aggravate the negative impact of CLI on SLA.

4.3 Markedness

In phonology, the most common sounds and sound patterns are more basic or unmarked, on the other hand, the ones that are less common are noted to be marked[1]. When L2 learners are trying to pronounce a marked sound or a sound pattern and are not able to acquire the correct and accurate sound, they will replace this marked sound in L2 with a similar sound in the language they have previously acquired. For example, when L1 Chinese students try to pronounce the /r/ in Italian, the voiced alveolar trill which does not exist in Mandarin Chinese, at the first stages, most of the learners fail to do so and they have to practice constantly in order to pronounce it precisely, they will not give up learning this sound, but, in order not to affect communication, they often use a more vague /l/ sound instead of trilling their tongue, because they are able to master the /l/ sound.

The markedness affects the level of cross-linguistic influence in SLA. For this specific phonological aspect, cross-linguistic influence serves as a transition zone for learners, and this makes the initial second language acquiring process less difficult. However, if learners wish to reach a higher level of L2 oral proficiency, it is necessary for them to consciously abandon or avoid the negative impacts of CLI and acquire correct and native-like pronunciation rules.

5. Conclusion

From above, we discover the complexity of the role of CLI in second language acquisition. It sometimes has a positive impact on SLA, when L1 and L2 have a closer language distance, L2 learners can connect the acquired language with the target language, and they apply the knowledge to the new language. In many cases, it provides learners with good and positive references, so that learners will not experience complete unfamiliarity within the target language. On the other hand, the negative transfer occurs in various circumstances, and it leads to the production of errors, avoidance, and overproduction.

Among them, CLI has also played a role, such as helping learners better understand certain language structures, but in the long run, the more frequent the CLI, the harder it is for learners to reach native-like language proficiency. In addition, CLI implies cross-cultural influence, and it also has a certain impact on SLA, but it is unavoidable. Nonetheless, we cannot conclude that CLI is the determinant of SLA; because CLI interacts with many other factors, and they ultimately all together determine the process and results of second language acquisition.

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