

How Learners' Native Language Affects Them When Learning a New Language Online (Poster)

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Abstract

Learners' native language (L1) affects them during second language (L2) acquisition (Shekhzadeh & Gheichi, 2011; Tolentino & Tokowicz, 2011). This crosslinguistic effect is partially attributable to L1 interference, which is caused primarily by the transfer of structures from learners' L1 to their target L2 (Bennui, 2008; Lekova, 2010; Yuan, 2014). Because prior studies used narrow samples, literature calls for a large-scale study of the subject (Bhela, 1999; Darus & Ching, 2009).

The present study examines data from a learner corpus known as the Education-First Cambridge Open Language Database (Geertzen, Alexopoulou, Baker, Jiang, & Korhonen, 2013). The corpus consists of a collection of texts submitted to an international, online, English as an L2 program. The texts were submitted by learners at the end of set progress points in the program, and consequently marked for errors by English teachers.

The current sample consists of 360,000 texts composed by 55,000 English learners, representing seven L1s, and all L2 proficiency levels. Four types of linguistic errors were analyzed, which relate to articles, prepositions, plurality, and capitalization in English. The proportion of each error's frequency (in comparison with all other errors in the database, which cover aspects such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling) was compared between the L1s, and this data was further plotted based on learners' L2 proficiency. The results for each error were then examined in relation with the related feature values of each L1, which were derived using the World Atlas of Language Structures (Biberauer, Holmberg, & Roberts, 2014; Dryer & Haspelmath, 2013).

The findings show that in some cases, such as article errors, structural dissimilarity between learners' L1 and the target L2 increases L1 interference, particularly when relevant linguistic features that exist in the L2 are absent from the L1. However, there are also cases, such as capitalization errors, where structural similarity between the languages increases interference. Furthermore, interference is affected by learners' proficiency in the target L2; when structural dissimilarity increases interference, learners struggle with the subject even as their L2 proficiency improves, but when similarity increases interference, learners tend to cope well with the subject as their L2 proficiency improves. These findings are valuable both from a theoretical as well as from an applied perspective, as an improved understanding of the topic contributes to the optimization of learning curriculums and educational tools, and because promoting awareness of L1

interference among learners facilitates L2 acquisition (Benson, 2002; Chang & Chang, 2004; Ge, 2015; Sersen, 2011).

Keywords: learner corpus, foreign language teaching, online language learning, second language acquisition, language pedagogy.

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