

Interference in Foreign Language Learning

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This paper deals with the concept of **interference** from the point of view of Contrastive Analysis in which it plays a central role. Interference as a term has very negative connotations as it implies a disturbing effect. In Contrastive Analysis it refers to the disturbing effect of the learner's mother tongue on the learning of a foreign language. It is, however, part of a more general phenomenon, transfer, which is said to occur in all learning. The assumption is that prior learning affects subsequent learning, that „new learning is based on what the learner already knows” (Ringbom 1991). This transfer effect is positive in nature if there is similarity between what has already been learnt and the new learning task, and negative, ie. interference, if the two tasks are different. When talking about foreign language learning the knowledge already acquired usually refers to the knowledge of the mother tongue, although there could also be transfer from another previously learnt foreign language. The transfer effect is supposed to be positive where the two languages are similar and negative where the two languages are different. The idea of transfer effect, its negative type (interference) in particular, became the psychological foundation of Contrastive Analysis (James 1980).

However, even before Contrastive Analysis got on the way at the beginning of the 1960s, Weinreich (1953) and Haugen (1956) had used the term „interference” in explaining how the two languages of a bilingual speaker influence each other. Haugen (1956: 370) thinks that – at least in the case of immigrants – „it is the language of the learner that is influenced, not the language he learns”. Weinreich, however, has a different view of the direction of the influence. He observes that interference is greatest from the native language to the foreign language and „that the language which has

been learned first... is in a privileged position to resist interference” (Weinreich 1953: 88). Weinreich’s view thus supports the use of interference in Contrastive Analysis, ie. the idea that the native language of the learner has an effect on the foreign language.

To begin with, the concept of interference was used in a very straightforward manner in Contrastive Analysis. The argumentation at the beginning was something like the following (cf. Lee 1968 and Szwedek 1976):

- the most important cause and even the only cause for difficulties encountered and errors made in foreign language learning is mother tongue interference
- interference is caused by differences between the two languages
- the greater the differences between the two languages, the greater the difficulties
- systematic contrasting of the two languages is needed for predicting difficulties and errors
- by comparing the two languages and then subtracting from the foreign language what it has in common with the learners’ mother tongue we can find out what the learner has to learn

This type of thinking led to great enthusiasm for Contrastive Analysis in the early 1960s, first in the United States and then in Europe, where several extensive contrastive projects were launched. It also led to the creation of hierarchies of difficulty on the basis of differences found between the learners’ mother tongue and the foreign language to be learned. The basic assumption in these hierarchies was that the greater the differences the greater the difficulties. The best known of the scales of difficulty is one by Stockwell, Bowen and Martin (1965), who suggest that the greatest difficulties are caused by cases in which the mother tongue has no rule or category but the foreign language has an obligatory one. However, it is difficult to accept the view that the total lack of some feature could result in interference. Moreover, there are research findings that show that absent categories carry a low error index. James (1980: 191) suggests that „it is probably the case that sounds and categories of L2 nonexistent in the L1 are not difficult

once they have been identified to be learnt, but until they are, they will continue to be overlooked: this should not, however, be interpreted so much as their constituting a **learning** as a **recognition** difficulty.”

The view that the greatest differences do not necessarily cause the greatest difficulties – or at least not the most persistent ones – is supported by the findings of a study carried out at Åbo Akademi (Ringbom & Palmberg 1976), in which the errors made in English by Finnish and Swedish speaking Finns were compared. According to the results of this study, the Swedish speaking Finns managed better than the Finnish speaking Finns at the beginning phase but the differences between the two groups got smaller at a more advanced stage. This suggests that the relatedness of Swedish and English and hence their similarities help at the stage where the basic structures of the foreign language are being learnt but does not help at a later stage when the basic system has already been mastered. It can be argued that difficulties and errors persist where there are minor differences between the languages because there the learning tasks seem easy and therefore no special attention is paid to them. Interestingly, Lee (1968), as quoted by James (1980: 188), claims that he did not experience much interference from his mother tongue (English) when learning Chinese because the languages were so far apart that he was lifted „into a new orbit of non-interference”. This suggests that if the two languages are really far from each other, interference is not even possible.

The concept of interference and the whole of Contrastive Analysis suffered a severe blow when researchers doing Error Analysis found out that learners did not actually commit errors where according to the predictions of CA they were supposed to do so, ie. not all errors could be traced back to mother tongue interference. Some people estimated that only one third of errors made by learners could be explained through L1 interference, which meant that there were other causes for errors. Similarly, researchers interested in the learners' interlanguage showed that native language influence was only one of several factors having an effect on what the interlanguage was like. These findings undermined the foundation of Contrastive Analysis and caused many former enthusiasts to give it up as a useless enterprise. It was not after all the

„open sesame” that solved all difficulties in foreign language learning and teaching. However, there were still people who believed in its value as a predictor of the areas where difficulties could occur and errors be made. Furthermore, all along there have been linguists who have found Contrastive Analysis, ie. the systematic comparison of two languages, interesting and useful for its own sake. They have compared languages from a purely theoretical point of view, eg. out of interest in possible language universals or because a contrastive analysis may reveal in the languages under comparison features that might otherwise go unnoticed.

At present, however, there seems to be renewed interest in Contrastive Analysis and its relevance for language teaching. This seems to be a result of the fact that a great deal of present-day linguistic research focuses on language use rather than language structure. It is easier to believe in the influence of the mother tongue, for example, in the choice of discourse or politeness strategies than in its influence on the learning of grammatical structures. It seems natural that a foreign language learner applies the norms of linguistic behaviour learnt in the mother tongue to the use of the foreign language, particularly if the foreign language norms have not received much attention in teaching. It can be assumed that every language has, for example, a code of politeness, or norms for when to be direct or indirect, but they may be different in different languages. If learners are not aware of these differences, they will of course apply the norms of their mother tongue in communicating in the foreign language. A difficult grammatical structure can be avoided by expressing the same thing in a roundabout way. But a speaker cannot avoid choosing to be either polite or impolite, either direct or indirect.

Thus, transfer from the mother tongue seems an inevitable reason for erroneous choices of communicative strategies in a foreign language. If a learner has a need to communicate in the foreign language, he or she will look for help, if in difficulties, in the code he/she already knows, ie. the mother tongue. But it is a totally different question whether this influence should be seen as only negative. It could be claimed that looking for support in the mother tongue is positive in the sense that it shows that the learner is aware of some rule or category being needed. It could even be

seen as positive if a learner supplies a word from his/her mother tongue when at a loss in the foreign language. At least she/he tries to communicate, instead of not saying anything. But this does not necessarily mean that the mother tongue is interfering. It can be claimed to be doing the opposite, helping the learner in his/her attempt to communicate. Therefore we should perhaps give up the very negative concept of interference altogether and talk simply about transfer from the mother tongue. Moreover, the learner could be compared to a bilingual speaker, whose two languages influence each other. There could also be transfer from the foreign language to the learner's mother tongue.

There have even been suggestions that the mother tongue could be an ally in the process of foreign language learning and that it is better to take advantage of it rather than to avoid it at all costs. Marton (1981: 172) talks about the learners' tendency „to perceive and assimilate the elements of the target language” and suggests that „utilizing and controlling this tendency instead of ignoring it or fighting it will go a long way towards facilitating learning and ensuring success.” But this means that, instead of differences, similarities between the languages should be emphasized because they are „much more frequently an aid to the foreign language learner than an obstacle” (Ringbom 1991: 179).

There is also another question to be considered in the case of possible transfer from the mother tongue. Is it after all necessary to avoid mother tongue influence at all costs, even if it is negative? It has been suggested that a foreign language speaker who speaks the language perfectly is looked upon with suspicion. At least he or she is expected to have the same cultural knowledge, the same background information and the same general behaviour as the native speaker since he/she speaks the language so fluently and faultlessly. It has also been suggested that some degree of foreignness adds „exotic charm” to the speaker. Of course, one has to learn to use the foreign language well enough to be able to get across what one wants to express, and to know what kind of linguistic behaviour is expected in different social situations, so as not to sound for example aggressive or uncertain or impolite unintentionally. But transfer from the mother tongue may not after all have such a negative effect as the term „interference” suggests.

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