

L1 Interference on L2 Acquisition: A Case Study of a Chinese Learner in the U.S.

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Keywords: First language, English as a lingua franca, expanding-circle country, second language acquisition, World Englishes

Abstract: The significance of first language (L1) interference on second language (L2) learning has always been an interesting topic of discussion related to language acquisition. This topic of discussion is particularly important in expanding-circle countries in the context of English learning, particularly after the theory of World Englishes (WEs) emerged in 1986. WEs advocate to embrace various interferent varieties of English which are much influenced by the speakers' L1. This study aims to investigate how L1 influences L2 acquisition in various linguistic aspects. The findings reveal that despite the participant's being a student in an English speaking-country university, Chinese as his first language still interferes his English in terms of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Thus, they may serve twofold; first as a reminder that English teaching and learning should not be aimed to develop students' English competence similar and/or equal to the native speakers of the language and two, as an advocate to raise awareness and to embrace WEs as the pluralistic reality of the language.

1 INTRODUCTION

The relation of first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition has been the focus of research for decades. Gass and Selinker define L1 acquisition as the process a child acquires her first language, while L2 acquisition as the process of learning another language after the acquisition of the first language (Gass and Selinker, 2008). One of the focuses of research under this topic is how L1 influences L2 acquisition. This influence occurs because when an L2 learner wants to communicate in the target language either in spoken or written form, she tends to rely on her first language structures. Thus, if the structures are much different, she will likely make a lot of errors indicating the interference of L1 on L2 acquisition (Decherts, 1983).

L1 interference on L2 acquisition and vice versa is inevitable. The interferences are even more obvious in the acquisition of English as a second language since it serves as a lingua franca, meaning it is much used by people of different mother tongues and countries of origin as a language of

contact in immediate interactions. The use of English as lingua franca (ELF) by multicultural people with a range of fluency and deviation from the so-called Standard English in various linguistic aspects has resulted in nativized and distinct varieties of English spoken worldwide, which are known as World Englishes (WEs) (Kachru, 1986).

However, despite the emergence of WEs and its popular recognition worldwide, English teaching and learning in outer circle countries, where English plays no official role but is usually taught and learned in schools such as in China, Japan, and Indonesia, still holds the belief of native speaker competence as a golden standard to reach (Fithriani, 2018). In relation to this belief, this study was conducted to investigate various interferences of L1 on the English development of a Chinese learner studying in a university in the United States. This study is also aimed to provide evidence that the L1 interference on L2 acquisition is inevitable even for those staying in English speaking countries. It is hoped that the findings of this study raise awareness of WEs particularly in the English teaching and learning in Indonesia. In relation to the purposes of this study, the research question can be formulated

as follows: “what linguistic aspects of a Chinese learner’s L1 that interfere his English acquisition?”

2 THE STUDY

This study used a qualitative approach. The data were collected using two instruments: observation and open-ended interview. The observation was conducted in the participant’s English 101 class in a state university in the Northeast area in the US for half a semester (approximately 7 meetings). The interview was conducted after the observation ended, audio recorded, and later transcribed verbatim (look at Appendix for the transcription). The data were analysed using Structural Coding which is defined as ‘acts as a labelling and indexing device... to quickly access data likely to be relevant to a particular analysis’ (Namey et al. 2008, p. 141). In this case, the labels were phonological, morphological, and syntactic interferences. To maintain the trustworthiness of the data analysis, a native speaker of Chinese who is also an English instructor was consulted as a peer for the peer debriefing. The peer also served as an informant to provide information related to common influences of Chinese language on English learning.

2.1 The Participant

The participant of this study was Shine (a pseudonym), a 19 years old student from Chengdu, China. He was a native speaker of Chinese/Mandarin who came to the US in the beginning of August 2016 to study computer science at a state university in the US. It was his second time to be in the US. His first visit was when he participated in a scientific competition for one month long which also gave him the first opportunity to practice his English in an English-speaking community. Since he shared an apartment with two other Chinese students, he spoke Chinese for daily communication. He only used English in classrooms or when he communicated with people from different countries.

Just like most other students in expanding circle countries, Shine learned English for the first time at school when he was six years old. He admitted that the reason he learned the language because he had no choice as English is a compulsory subject for all students in China. He also explained that his sole purpose to learn English was to pass the test, so he could avoid punishment from his English teacher as well as his parents. During his study, he did not

practice his spoken English much as there were not many people speaking the language in his hometown. He used his English only in class or in the English centre in his hometown.

3 FINDINGS

As an L2 speaker of English, Shine speaks English fluently and his English can be considered good overall. Although Shine was aware of being recorded, he did not try to speak more slowly or in a lower voice. He spoke in the same pace as he usually does in his class and maintained the pace during the interview. There were times when he had longer pause while talking, but that was not because he did not know what to say, he just needed more time to think what to say. However, as most other L2 speakers of English, he made some mistakes and/or deviation in his English due to some interferences from his L1. The following is the analysis of Shine’s L1 interferences on his English from three linguistic aspects; Phonology, Morphology, and Syntax.

3.1 Phonological Interference

There are some sounds that most people speaking English may find “unique” when listening to Shine’s English. The term unique is chosen in this case because these sounds do not appear as incidental mistakes but more like a constant pattern which comes repeatedly. Two of those sounds are /s/ sound which is used to replace /θ/ and the /l/ sound at the end of words which is pronounced in three different variations.

The first unique sound appears every time Shine says the words ‘think’ (L6, L25, L28, L33, L38, L45, L48, L50, & L57) and ‘thing’ (L8 & L45). He pronounces those words /sɪŋk/ and /sɪŋ/ instead of /θɪŋk/ and /θɪŋ/. For the second unique sound /l/, first it is omitted such as in the words ‘school’ (L4 & L16) and ‘call’ (L61). So, /skul/ is pronounced /sku/ and /kɒl/ becomes /kɒ/. When Shine pronounces the word ‘feel’ (L23), the /l/ sound is replaced by /n/ so /fi:l/ becomes /fin/. Interestingly, for the word ‘fail’ (L61), the /l/ sound is pronounced clearly as /fel/.

During the debrief, the Chinese peer explained that these interferences occurred because of Chinese language influences on his English pronunciation. She stated that most Chinese speakers learning English have significant difficulty in pronouncing some sounds in English such as /θ/ and /ð/ because those sounds do not exist in Chinese and are likely to be substituted by similar sounds appeared in their

mother tongue (H. Y. Chang, personal communication, November 10, 2017). In this case, Shine substitutes the /θ/ with /s/ (personal communication, November 10, 2017). Furthermore, she said that the /l/ sound can only appear syllable-initially in Chinese language. That is why most Chinese speakers have more trouble with an /l/ sound at the end of a word, so what they typically do is either to drop the final consonant sound or to substitute it with the similar sound in their mother tongue.

3.2 Morphological Interference

There are two significant morphological errors that Shine constantly makes when using his English. The first one is related to the verb conjugation confusion. The term “confusion” is used because it is found that he sometimes can use the verb correctly in simple past when talking about his past experience in learning English, for example the verb ‘forgot’ (L9). However, most of the times he does not add the inflectional morpheme –ed in the verbs to denote past tense, like in the verbs ‘study’ (L10), ‘start’ (L12), and ‘ask’ (L16).

Sometimes Shine uses the auxiliary verb ‘do’ functioning as do-support which is used to support the construction of the negative (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002) in its present form when he talks about his childhood experience in learning English (L5 & L32-L33). There are also times when he does not conjugate the verbs at all to indicate the tense, for example the verb ‘teach’ (L4) is neither used in its correct form ‘taught’ nor added the inflectional morpheme –s ‘teaches’ to make it in agreement with the third person singular subject ‘the teacher’ if he wants to make it in the present tense. The morphological error took place several times during the interview as seen in the verbs ‘ask’ (L16 & L59) and ‘call’ (L61).

The other error is gender confusion. Shine uses the function morphemes ‘he’ and ‘she’ interchangeably when talking about the same person. When he talked about his high school teacher who helped him the most in learning English, he uses the pronoun ‘she’ (L58) at first but uses ‘he’ (L61) later to refer to the same person.

To get explanation why these morphological errors take place, the Chinese peer was again consulted to find out whether they have any relation with Chinese language system. She explained that there is no such thing as verb conjugation to denote tenses in Chinese (H. Y. Chang, personal communication, November 10, 2017). For example,

Chinese speakers know only a single word that means *go*. If they want to use the present tense, they simply say “*I go*”, “*yesterday I go*” for the past tense, and “*tomorrow I go*” for the future. She furthermore said that verb conjugation is one of the most difficult parts of the English language for native Chinese speakers to master, simply because there are so many tenses, and each can only be properly used in select situations. The same reason can be used to explain the gender confusion Shine has when using personal pronouns, ‘he’ and ‘she’. In Chinese, the separate gender pronouns do not exist. Thus, when Chinese speakers learn English, they often forget to use the appropriate pronouns to indicate gender.

3.3 Syntactic Interference

The data analysis also reveals two points of L1 syntactic interference on Shine’s English. The first one is the use of definite and indefinite articles (‘a/an’ and ‘the’). It is interesting to see that Shine’s mistakes in this particular part of speech happen because he inserts the articles, especially the definite article ‘the’, in places where it does not belong, for example when he says, ‘the Chinese’ (L7) and ‘the English’ (L9). However, in general he does not find much difficulty to use articles in obligatory contexts like in ‘the teacher’ (L4) and ‘a language’ (L32-L33).

The second interesting syntactic aspect from Shine’s speech is the reduplication he makes when he wants to emphasize the meaning of particular words. This pattern appears twice in the interview when he explains the importance of memorization for him in learning English (L59–L64). Instead of using adverbs to intensify the verb ‘remember’ (L59 & L63), he repeats it twice which makes it awkward not only to say but also to hear.

The Chinese peer seemed surprised when reading the result of this analysis, especially the one related to the use of article. Chinese has bigger number and more complicated articles compared to those in English, so articles should not be a problem for Chinese speakers learning English (H. Y. Chang, personal communication, November 10, 2017). She had no explanation for these phenomena. Her assumption is that Shine does not have the vocabulary to use to emphasize the meaning, so he repeats it twice.

4 DISCUSSIONS

There are three theories that can be used to explain these linguistic errors made by the participant in this study. The first is the interlanguage or developmental errors. The term interlanguage is used by the American linguist Larry Selinker to refer to learners' developing second language knowledge (Larry Selinker, 1972). Lightbown and Spada furthermore argue that one of the characteristics of a student's interlanguage analysis is the omission of function words and grammatical morphemes that seem to be general and to occur in all interlanguage system. That is why Shine sometimes can use the verbs correctly, but some other times he makes mistakes by either using the wrong form of the verbs or not conjugating the verbs at all (Lightbown and Spada, 2013).

The second one is overgeneralization errors, that is, errors caused by trying to use a rule in context where it does not belong (Lightbown & Spada, p. 44, 2013). The overgeneralization might be the best reason used to explain the article insertion made by the participant.

The last theory is simplification errors, where elements of a sentence are left out or where all verbs have the same form regardless of person, number or tense (Lightbown & Spada, p. 44, 2013). The simplification errors might explain the verb conjugation confusion.

5 CONCLUSION & IMPLICATION

L1 has a significant influence on the learning of L2 and research has much been conducted to show the interference of L1 on L2 acquisition. This present study particularly highlights some difficulties that Chinese speaking learners may face to learn English, which include phonological, morphological, and syntactic interferences. This study may contribute to the growing body of research showing how L1 influences L2 acquisition. The findings of this study could also be used to inform English teachers in expanding countries like Indonesia who still hold the belief that native-like English competence is the golden standard to reach that students' L1 interferences are inevitable. Thus, they should advocate the recognition of WEs in their classroom practice and not focus too much on helping students have the ability to use English like the native speakers.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

1. Keys to the transcription:

- a. RF = Rahmah Fithriani (the interviewer)
- b. S = Shine (the participant)
- c. L = Line
- d. [...] = short pause
- e. [...] = extended pause
- f. () = non-verbal responses
- g. ... = The participant dragged the words spoken
- h. XXXXX = Inability to understand the words spoken

2. Transcription

- RF: L1: Okay. Let's start with 'when did the first
L2: time you learn English?'
- S: L3: Maybe in my six years old in [...] in my
L4: school and the teacher teach English but
I
L5: do not really hmmm pay attention to this
L6: [...] to this class because I think it's just
[...]
L7: just mess and the Chinese is most

- I L8: important thing so I [...] so I forgot it and
- L9: forgot to hmmm study the English. So
- L10: actually I really study English is in my
- L11: hmmm about maybe [...] 12 years old
- L12: and the [...] that is real time I start to learn
- L13: English.
- RF: L14: why did you learn English?
- S: L15: Because (laughed) (looked at his friend)
- L16: the school ask me to have to (laughed
- L17: louder) study English.
- RF: L18: How did you feel when the first time you
- L19: learned English?
- S: L20: How (looked at me and frowned) what
- L21: [...] (lower voice) excuse me?
- RF: L22: How did you feel?
- S: L23: Feel?
- RF: L24: Aha
- S: L25: I think [...] I almost forget but [...] I think
- L26: it's just [...] ac...actually I...I will need L27: XXXXX not know what kind of people
- L28: you see in that time so I just think that's
- L29: mmmm ehmmm it's just [...] just like
- L30: other class and errrr just learn it and do
- L31: not errrr [...] pay more attention to it
- L32: errrr I... I do not even know it's just a
- L33: language I just think it is just for test
- L34: (laughed) and the [...] and the class so
- L35: (lower voice) (stopped talking)
- RF: L36: so what part of English do you think the
- L37: most difficult to learn?
- S: L38: Ooo I think [...] let me see [...] I think the
- L39: words. To remember the words
- RF: L40: The vocabulary?
- S: L41: oh ya ya hmmm no hmmm [...] our
- L42: Chinese got have completely different
- L43: hmmm language system so it's hard for
- L44: me to remember one a, b, c, d, e, f, g
- L45: errrr this thing is hard I think it's hard
- L46: (laughed) but maybe for other countries
- L47: or or our language but the same language
- L48: system errr like French people they think
- L49: that maybe it's easy to remember the
- L50: word but I think it's difficult. Ya.
- RF: L51: Okay. Because now you speak fluent
- L52: English, who helped you the most?
- S: L53: Who helped me the most? (lower voice)
- L54: (looked at his friend)
- RF: L55: Who or what helped you the most in
- L56: learning English?
- S: L57: Who? maybe [...] I think it's my high
- L58: school teacher. I [...] hmmm she always
- L59: ask me to remember remember and if you
- L60: do not pass [laughed] usually fail to
- L61: remember or fail the test he he call my
- L62: mom [laughed] so [laughed louder] I
- L63: have to remember remember but it's
- L64: good for me. It's right.
- RF: L65: I think that's all. Thank you very much
- L66: for your time
- S: L67: Sure