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 at 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 /snk/ and /sn/ instead of /θŋk/ and /θŋ/. 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 /knl/ becomes /kn/. When Shine pronounces the word ‘feel’ (L23), the /l/ sound is replaced by /n/ so /fil/ becomes /fin/. Interestingly, for the word ‘fail’ (L61), the /l/ sound is pronounced clearly as /fɛl/.

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 /θ/ sound can only appear syllable-
initially in Chinese language. That is why most 
Chinese speakers have more trouble with an /θ/ 
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 –ed ‘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.

REFERENCES


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
L8: important thing so I [...] so I forgot it and
I
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 ehhmmm 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)