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Cross Linguistic Influence on English Usage of Rivers State University of Science and Technology Freshmen

Ngulube, Isaac Eyi
Institute of Foundation Studies
Rivers State University of Science and Technology
E-mail: isaaceyingulube@yahoo.com
Mobile: +2348160228168

Abstract

This paper examines specific instances of L_1 interference on L_2 in the syntactic structures of the second language learners' writing. This paper also identifies the effect of the differences and/or similarities between the structures of L_1 and L_2 on the use of English among UST students. The study focuses on the effect of each of the areas of difficulty identified on a native speaker's interpretation of the written text. It also identifies the importance of the learner's knowledge of the syntactic structures of L_1, which cause difficulty in L_2. The study is designed to make the learner aware of the errors made and how they may be rectified. It provides new information in the L_2 learning context. Finally, it identifies the language use and knowledge of the learner; it attempts to provide up-to-date evidence in the current L_2 learning. An important aspect of this study is that it provides an interesting comparison of four groups of languages, namely Igboid, Ogonoid, Ijoid and English, this is a move from other researches which focus on one Nigerian language and English and this is useful for the current local teaching context.

Exordium

The title of this paper appears very familiar especially to the Nigerian linguist. This is because native language interference in learning a second language has been very well studied in Nigeria. But what is different here is that as Baljit Bhela

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(1999, p.22) pointed out, the second language learning *environment* vary and the influence they bring to bear on the learner also varies. There are two types of second language learning environment. The first environment encompasses 'everything the language learner *hears* or *sees* in the target language', which may include 'exchanges in restaurants and stores', 'conversations with friends', 'reading street signs and newspapers' and 'classroom activities'. The second environment involves a situation where encounter with the target language 'may be very sparse', including 'only language classroom activities' and 'a few books'. The UST situation falls neatly into the first environment, where the target language is spoken in the environment, but the problem is the variety spoken around them falls miserably short of the standard envisaged.

If I put the environment and the complication it poses aside, a second issue, raised by Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982) and Ellis (1984) is that of the learner's *goal*, which is the 'mastery of the target language'. For learners in Bhela's second environment they begin 'learning a second language from point zero (or close to it) and, through the steady accumulation of the mastered entities of the target language, eventually amasses them in quantities sufficient to constitute a particular level of proficiency' (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982 and Ellis, 1984). Again, the UST students' situation is not that of learning the target language from point zero but the *lack of the will* to steadily accumulate the mastered items of the target language, so that they have sufficient quantities of items of the language to constitute a good level of proficiency. In other words, UST students' language learning is devoid of 'successful mastery of steadily accumulating structural entities and organising this knowledge into coherent structures which lead to effective communication in the target language' (Rutherford, 1987).

I expect that 'well-formed accurate' and 'complete target language structures' should develop on the learner's path towards eventual mastery of the language (Beardsmore (1982) and Hoffman (1991). If UST students went on to master the language, I could, in principle, tabulate the expansion of their repertoire up to the point where all of the well-formed structures of the target language is accounted for.

This is not the situation on ground. UST students appear to accumulate structural entities of the target language but evince difficulty in organising this knowledge into appropriate, coherent structures. There is a significant gap between the accumulation and the organisation of the knowledge. This triggers critical questions – What kind of English do UST students produce in speaking and writing? When writing or speaking the target language (L_2), UST students tend to rely on their native language (L_1) structures to produce a response. If the structures of L_2 and L_1 are distinctly different, then I expect a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L_2, thus indicating an interference of L_1 on L_2 (Dechert, 1983 and Ellis, 1997).

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Review

A number of studies have been carried out around the world on L_1 interference with the L_2. Dulay et al (1982) elucidate cross linguistics influence 'as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language.' Lott (1983, p. 256) explicates cross linguistic influence as 'errors in the learner's use of foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue'. Ellis (1997, p. 51) suggests that cross linguistics influence is a 'transfer', which is 'the influence that the learner's L_1 exerts over the acquisition of an L_2'. His argument is that 'transfer' is governed by learner's perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in L_2 learning.

Available studies further reveal that in learning a target language, learners construct their own interim rules (Selinker, 1971, Seligar, 1988 and Ellis, 1997) using their L_1 knowledge, that is, if they believe it will help their learning task. This happens when they are sufficiently proficient in the L_2 for transfer to be feasible.

Current literatures indicate that adults struggle in learning a second language that is as well learned as the first language. An adult 'learns a second language partly in terms of the kinds of meanings already learned in the first language.' (Carrol 1964, Albert & Obler 1978 and Larson-Freeman & long, 1991) In this connection Beebe (1988) claims that in L_2 learning; L_1 responses are grafted on to L_2 responses, and both are made to communicate a common set of meaning responses. The fact remains that, the learners are less fluent in L_2, and the kinds of expressions they use in L_2 'bear tell-tale traces of the structure of L_1.'

It is argued that the circumstances of learning L_2 are like those of L_1 (Carroll, 1964). This is because it happens that there are interferences and sometimes responses from one language system filtering into the speech in the other language. Linguists claim that learning is most successful when the situation in which the L_1 and L_2 are learned, are kept as distinct as possible (Faerch and Kasper, 1983). Learning L_2 successfully requires the L_2 learner to often preclude the L_1 structures from the L_2 learning process if the structures of the two languages are distinctly different.

Beardsmore (1982) is of the view that many of the difficulties L_2 learners have with the phonology, morphology and syntax of L_2 are due to the interference of habits from L_1. 'The formal elements of L_1 are used within the context of L_2, resulting in errors in L_2, as the structures of the languages, L_1 and L_2 are different.' Putting together what these experts have said, the relationship between the two languages is vital. Albert and Obler (1978) evince that learners demonstrate 'more lexical interference on similar items'. Therefore, languages with more similar structures, such as Kana and Gokana, are more susceptible to mutual interference than languages

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with fewer similar features like Eleme and Igbo. In the same vein, we might also expect more learning difficulties and thus more likelihood of performance interference at those points in L_2 which are more distant from L_1, as the learner would find it difficult to learn and understand a completely new and different usage. Hence, the learner would resort to L_1 structures for help (Selinker, 1979; Dulay et al, 1982; Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Bialystok, 1990 and Dordick, 1996).

Dechert (1983) also supports the view that the further apart the two languages are syntactically, the higher the instances of errors made in L_2 which bear traces of L_1 structures. The performance error here may be the result of a strategy on the part of the learner which predicts equivalence, both formally and functionally, of the items or rules sharing either function or form. An advanced L_2 learner may develop a greater number of rules or marking features for distinguishing between the two languages (Bhela, 1999, p. 23). A number of questions come to mind here: does the L_2 text have to be grammatically correct for its meaning to be understood? Do the identified errors in the written text reduce semantic and syntactic acceptability? The answer is not straightforward; it ranges from the L_2 learner's purpose in learning the target language, the L_2 learner's proficiency level of the target language to the knowledge state of the learner in L_1 and L_2.

Significance

This paper examines specific instances of L_1 interference on L_2 in the syntactic structures of the second language learners' writing. This paper also identifies the effect of the differences and/or similarities between the structures of L_1 and L_2 on the use of English among UST students. The study focuses on the effect of each of the areas of difficulty identified on a native speaker's interpretation of the written text. It also identifies the importance of the learner's knowledge of the syntactic structures of L_1, which cause difficulty in L_2. The study is designed to make the learner aware of the errors made and how they may be rectified. It provides new information in the L_2 learning context. Finally, it identifies the language use and knowledge of the learner; it attempts to provide up-to-date evidence in the current L_2 learning.

An important aspect of this study is that it provides an interesting comparison of four groups of languages, namely Igboid, Ogonoid, Ijoid and English, this is a move from other researches which focus on one Nigerian language and English and this is useful for the current local teaching context.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

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1. Are there differences and/or similarities between the grammar of L_1 and L_2 in a written task of UST students?
2. Are the instances where the grammar of L_1, used in L_2, triggers error?
3. What are the instances where the lack of a particular grammatical item in L_1 creates a difficulty for the learner of L_2?
4. What is the effect of each of the noted areas of difficulty on interpretation of meaning by a native speaker of English?
5. What is the learner's knowledge of the syntactic structure of L_1, which engenders difficulty in L_2?
6. What is the learner's knowledge of the syntactic structure of L_2?

Scope

This paper is limited to the analysis of written samples of four undergraduates, adult second language learners, in the use of English (ENG 111) classroom in UST. It focuses on syntactic structures and takes into account errors made in semantics and spelling.

Methods

This study uses the case study approach as an experimental intervention. It is designed to reveal the complexity of language use in a particular sample of language learners and so it has an explicit descriptive purpose (Bhela, 1999, p. 24). The goal is to analyse the use of specific aspects of language and to use the outcomes of that analysis to make judgements about the status of the L_1 –L_2 cross linguistic postulation. The interview is not structured, it is flexible to enable the researcher investigate 'the participants linguistic knowledge'.

The research questions are exploratory, since the purpose of the study is 'to develop a pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry'. Four hundred undergraduates of the Rivers State University of Science and Technology participated in the test but four scripts are selected for the study. The selected scripts belong to an Ikwerre-speaking twenty-one-year-old female (Benita), an Ogoni-speaking twenty-six year-old female (Burabari), an Eleme-speaking twenty-year-old female (Elizabeth) and a wakirike-speaking twenty-year-old female (Tamunobelema). Writing is crucial for these learners as they are undergraduates taking the Use of English (ENG. 111), and will be doing schoolwork in English for the next four years.

These four hundred learners are given sixty structural questions as test items for one hour. The test is marked by me. The next task is that the best four learners on the grammar test were given two sets of sequential pictures, one at a time, and asked

to write a composition with the first picture and terminating with the last, in the order presented in each set. The first sets of pictures are those of a girl who decided to marry instead of going to school and the second pictures are those related to a policeman apprehending a burglar in the city of Port Harcourt. The four participants are given a time limit of one hour for the task. The participants are advice to ensure that their composition is logically sequenced following the pictures.

The participants are asked to write the first composition using the first set of sequential pictures in their native language only. They are to attempt the second composition using the second set of sequential pictures in English and their native language. They are to attempt the task individually without any group interaction at first. After the individual attempt, they are allowed to interact with each other if they so desire. The compositions are part of the classroom activities done in the presence of the lecturer.

Writing two compositions in English and in the native language provided a wider base for the analysis of the errors made. It also provided a suitable sample of written performance, thus allowing a more reliable estimate of the participants' competences.

The follow up approach after the writing tasks, is an oral interview, the four learners are interviewed individually, and these are tape-recorded where they are asked to explain why and how they used a specific L_1 or L_2 structure, if there is an error identified. They are also asked what they know about the structures of L_1 and L_2 and to make judgements on semantic acceptability of sentences in L_1 or L_2. They are then asked to self-correct identified errors in the L_2 text.

Finally, the analysis of the learners' L_1 written texts is done with the help of my colleagues who are native-speakers of the languages, while I analysed the English texts. Three L_2 native speaker linguists are asked to interpret the learners' L_2 written texts and rate these texts for semantic and syntactic acceptability. The reason is to enable me answer the vital questions raised – does the L_2 text have to be syntactically correct for its meaning to be understood for L_2 learners at the assessed level of L_2 proficiency?

Results

The participants accomplished each tasks in an hour. I analysed the different versions of each participant's written text. I assessed the participants before they embarked on the tasks, using the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR). The ASLPR has 12 proficiency levels with a scale of zero to five, with five evincing native-like proficiency. I also used the ASLPR as a comparison gauge for the native language teachers to identify the learners' L_1 writing proficiency in comparison to their L_2 proficiency. These four participants are at level one plus in

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their writing skills according to the ASLPR. Bhela (1999) and Wylie and Ingram (1995) observe that participants at this level can 'write simple social correspondences, their language is creative enough to use stock phrases and complex enough to convey in a simple way, their own attitudes to familiar things, they make several mistakes but generally get their ideas across'. L_1 and L_2 proficiency levels of the learners' are shown below. The learners were found to have similar levels (1+) in their L_1 and (1+) in their L_2.

Table 1: Proficiency Levels of L_1 and L_2

Participants	*L_1*	*L_2*
Benita	1+	1+
Burabari	1+	1+
Elizabeth	1+	1+
Belema	1+	1+

The analysis of each participant's writing evinced lots of L_1 grammatical errors. These errors made by the learners in their written text are indicated on Table 2, where (ϰ) stands for an error and a (Ⱥ) denotes a correct response (s) made with the specific structure, while 'ϟ' denotes an absent of L_1 structure altogether.

Table 2: L1 Errors in the written text

	Benita	Burabari	Elizabeth	Belema
Apostrophe	ϰ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Punctuation	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ
Spelling	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ
Prepositions	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ
Capital letters	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ	ϰ
Present & past progressive tenses	Ⱥ	Ⱥ	Ⱥ	ϰ
Subject pronouns	Ⱥ	Ⱥ	Ⱥ	ϰ
Vocabulary	ϰ	Ⱥ	Ⱥ	ϰ
Passive & active voices	ϟ	ϟ	Ⱥ	ϰ

Secondly, I examine L_2 errors made by the participants in the two writing assignments. The four participants faulted in the use of punctuation (indicated by the use of 'ϰ'). Belema and Elizabeth never used the repeated pronoun as this item is

absent in their L_1 (denoted by a 'ϟ'). Benita employed subject pronouns appropriately in her L_2 texts (denoted by a Ѧ).

Table 3: L2 errors

	Benita	*Burabari*	*Elizabeth*	*Belema*
Apostrophe	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Contractions	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ	ϟ
Punctuation	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Articles	ϟ	ϟ	Ѧ	Ѧ
Prepositions	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Spelling	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Capital letters	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Repeated pronouns	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Subject pronouns	Ѧ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Present & past progressive tenses	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	Ѧ
Past tense	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	Ѧ
Adverbs	ϟ	ϟ	Ѧ	ϟ
Plurals	ϟ	Ѧ	Ѧ	Ѧ
Incomplete sentences	ϟ	ϟ	Ѧ	Ѧ
Vocabulary	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Passive & active voices	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ

When the the analysis of L_1 and L_2 were compared, it became apparent that the participants evince signs of direct interference of L_1 and L_2 in eight syntactic areas. These are shown on Table 4. The errors are in both their L_1 and L_2, suggesting that the L_1 errors were transferred to L_2 texts.

Table 4: L_1 interference on L_2

	Benita	*Burabari*	*Elizabeth*	*Belema*
Possessive apostrophe	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Punctuation	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Passive & active voices	ϟ	ϟ	Ѧ	ϟ
Prepositions	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ
Spelling	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ	ϟ

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Capital letters	✗	✗	✗	✗
Repeated pronouns	✗	✗	✗	✗
Present & past progressive tenses	✗	✗	✗	✗

Thirdly, I studied the differences and similarities (Table 5) between the syntactic structures of the participants' native languages when compared to English. Here, 'A' stands for an absent structure, 'P' stands for an existing structure with limited use in L_1 and 'S' stands for a corresponding structure in English. The four languages divide into two pairs since some of the structures of Kana and Eleme are similar and Ikwerre and Okrika are also similar.

Table 5: L1 structures	*Ikwerre*		*Kana*		*Eleme*		*Okrika*	
Possessive apostrophe	A	✗	A	✗	A	✗	A	✗
Punctuation	S	✗	S	✗	S	✗	S	✗
Passive voice	P	✗	P	✗	S	✗	S	✗
Prepositions	P	✗	S	✗	P	✗	P	✗
Repeated pronouns	P	✗	P	✗	A	✗	A	✗
Present & past progressive tenses	P	✗	P	✗	S	✗	S	✗
Capital letters	S	✗	S	✗	P	✗	P	✗

Table 5 integrated the results from Table 4, indicating the learners' L_2 errors alongside each structure. Table 5 reveals that the participants still made errors with structures that are present in their L_1, with its use in L_2. This shows that they did not fully grasp its L_2 use, therefore the learners' recourse to its L_1 form in L_2 situation, making errors in L_2. The data here evinces that where a grammatical item is not present in L_1, for instance the *possessive apostrophe*; the participants fail to understand its use in L_2 situation, leading to errors. A situation where the use of a grammatical item such as the use of *punctuation* is the same in both L_1 and L_2, the participants still made errors with its use, as they have also made similar errors with its use in L_1 in all cases. This evinces direct interference of L_1 and L_2.

Oral Interaction

The participants were carefully observed during the oral group interaction, while the task is on-going; they solicited help from each other in the areas of spelling

and choice of vocabulary. During the personal interviews, I asked them to elucidate why they had used specific L_1 and L_2 structures, and also to correct their errors, were applicable. The four participants were able to correct some of the errors made in their L_2 texts only after the errors were pointed out to them individually. In the self-correction exercise, the participants focused on spelling and a few instances of grammatical errors such as punctuation, carefully avoiding other areas of grammar, such as tenses, concord, etc.

L_2 Semantic Acceptability

Here, the Native Speaker Teachers (NST) were requested to interpret the participants' L_2 written texts without allowing them access to the sequential set of pictures which the participants had used in developing their write up. The NST were further requested to rate the write up on a scale of 1 (poor), 2 (average), and 3 (good) for semantic and syntactic acceptability in relation to stories written out of the sequential sets of pictures, as indicated in Table 6 below.

Table 6: NST rating for L_2 semantic acceptability

	Rating for L_2 semantic acceptability					
	Text A			Text B		
Participants:	NST1	NST2	NST3	NST 1	NST2	NST3
Benita	2	2	2	2	2	2
Burabari	3	3	3	3	3	3
Elizabeth	3	3	2	3	3	2
Belema	2	2	2	2	2	2

As this Table shows, the NST gave similar rating to Text A and Text B. The implication for this study is that the type of writing each participant produced in both texts, Text A and Text B were of the same level and could be understood by the L_2 native speaker teachers, despite the errors found in the texts. This settles one of the vital questions raised at the beginning of this study – that L_2 text does not have to be syntactically correct (by L_2 standard) for its semantic import to be understood, for L_2 participants at the assessed level of L_2 proficiency.

Discussion

This study reveals the kind of written English that undergraduates of the Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt produced in writing tasks in the classroom. The study provides solid evidence of L_1 interference

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with L_2, its extent and effects, as evinced in the analysis of the participants' written L_1 and L_2 texts. This study clearly shows that the learners used their L_1 structures to help them form their L_2 texts, suggesting a direct interference of L_1 on L_2. What this reveals is that the participants have been influenced by their native language linguistics input from their environments and positive reinforcements for their correct repetitions and limitations. Consequently, habits have been formed which has affected the L_2 learning process since these participants have started learning L_2 with the habits associated with L_1. The L_1 habits interfere with those required for L_2 learning, and new habits are formed. The resultant errors are because of L_1 habits interfering with the acquisition of L_2 habits (Bhela 1999, Beebe 1988 and Selinger 1988). These findings support the earlier notion that 'where there are similarities between L_1 and L_2, the learners use L_2 structures with ease, where there are differences, the learners have difficulty' (Ellis, 1997). This further reveals that the participants have developed their own L_2 idiosyncratic rules with the use of their L_1 knowledge to help them in the writing tasks, producing in L_2 errors (Ellis 1997).

A number of L_2 errors are listed on Table 3. These are articles, adverbs, past tense, plurals, contractions and fragmentary sentences, which are not considered in the discussion of the $L_1 - L_2$ interference. The reasons for this is because these errors did not appear in L_1 texts, suggesting that the participants use these structures appropriately in their L_1 even though they made these errors in their L_2 texts. Alternatively, it could be that the participants did not use these structures at all as 'these were absent structures in their L_1' (Bhela, 1999).

These participants struggled to use appropriately L_2 responses that are well formed in their L_1 structures, what happened is that they use the L_2 structures partially in terms of the structures already learned in their L_1. Put differently, 'their L_1 responses are grafted on the L_2 responses and the kinds of L_2 expressions used bear tell-tale traces of the L_1 structures' (Larson-Freeman & Long, 1991 and Ellis, 1997). This is evident in the way the participants employed L2 structures like punctuation, capital letters, prepositions and the present and past progressive tenses in their L_2 texts. They equally struggled in their use of these structures since these structures are used in a different form in their L_1. In certain instances, the absent L_1 structure like apostrophe and the active and passive structures, are problematic for the participants because they are unfamiliar with its use in L_2, triggering errors which reflect a gap in the participants' knowledge (Ellis, 1997).

It was Dechert (1988) who posits that 'the further apart L_1 and L_2 are structurally, the higher the instances of errors made in L_2 which bear traces of L_1 structures'. If this claim is correct, a momentous outcome of this study is the significance of the effect of the differences between the structures the English language and the various L_1s (Ikwerre, Kana, Eleme and Okrika) on the written

exercise in English. Considering the level of proficiency of the participants in the study, the students' L_2 texts are semantically acceptable by L_2 teachers as evinced in the analysis. The implication is that the L_2 texts do not have to be syntactically correct for its meaning to be understood. 'The identified L_2 errors do not reduce the semantic acceptability of the L_2 texts' (Bhela, 1999, p. 29).

Now, I turn to the issue of cognitive process involved in producing an L_2 text. Do the participants have to 'think' in the target language to be able to produce a meaningful response which may not be syntactically correct but which may be understood and semantically acceptable? Experts think that the answer to this question poses a major implication in the second language classroom (Bhela, 1999). If RSUST students are able to write a semantically acceptable text in English (according to English standards), then correct grammar need not be the focus of the *Use of English* instruction, given the existing knowledge base of the students whose main purpose of leaning English is to communicate information in a meaningful way.

This assertion has implications for the teaching and learning process. It follows that an understanding of the L_1 grammatical structures and the type of errors that they generate in L_2 plus the extent of the students' knowledge of L_1 and L_2 grammatical structures, will aid the teaching and learning process by allowing an individualised learning program for each learner. The lecturer is able to predict possible future errors in the target language and may begin to attribute a cause to an error with some degrees of accuracy. The lecturer can also build up a picture of the frequency of types of errors, thus it would be feasible to discover it, for example, L_1 interference, or teaching techniques, or problems inherent in L_2, are the major causes of the students' errors. In this way it is feasible to organise classes that will provide specific help to the students. This paper therefore opens up future research in other areas of second language teaching and learning. Lastly, this study contributes significantly to the base knowledge in the second language learning and teaching literature on the effects of cross linguistic influence of L_1 on L_2.

Conclusion

This study was designed with the intention of studying the observable features of interference of L_1 on L_2 and what its effects are on the grammatical structure of a written task of a second language learner. The students have employed certain L_1 structures to produce correct responses in L_2, producing semantically acceptable texts. Subsequently, the students have also used L_1 structures interchangeably with L_2 structures, realizing wrong L_2 responses, showing an interference of L_1 on L_2. These structures are used to make them understood and reflect on the way they arrive at a certain usage at a specific point (Faerch & Kasper, 1983). Bhela (1999) argues that 'these structures do not reflect failure in any way but are a means to increase their resources in order to realise their communicative

intentions.' What this actually indicates is that the participants, in employing L_1 structures, are taking some risks which include guessing of a more or less informed kind. They employed invented or borrowed items that approximates to the rules of L_2 structures as far as their knowledge of L_2 permits.

It is obvious when the participants 'experience gaps' in their L_2 grammatical structures, 'they adjust the form of their L_2 written responses' through using grammatical items that are part of their L_1. My analysis of their papers revealed the extent to which their L_2 responses are effected by their L_1, the processes employed show concepts for which L_2 grammar is unknown and the extent to which and the manner in which L_1 grammar interferes with L_2 (Bialystok, 1990). One could trace the L_2 errors to the students' L_1 and I can conclude that there is definite interference of L_1 on L_2 as the analysis of the eight grammatical areas discussed indicated.

The participants related 'L_2 grammar to what they already know about language'. It is empirically evidence that the most salient knowledge they possess about language are those of L_1. Therefore, in the act of trying to relate L_2 to L_1, they guess at the similarity or difference between L_2 and L_1. This is why they subsume L_2 under known categories of L_1 competence and hence a translation process has taken place (Seligar, 1988). 'Where the structures of L_1 and L_2 are similar', the students' lack of understanding its use in L_1 is also reflected as an error in L_2.

The findings of this study agree with Bhela's opinion that 'the use of L_1 structures as a principle of fundamental language organisation and processing has immediate serviceability for these learners. The participants bring the form and meaning of both L_1 and L_2 into closer alignment and thus render usable a complex portion of L_2 grammar that would otherwise be for the time being, inaccessible to them. The prior disposition of L_1 has affected the L_2 responses' (1999, p. 30).

Blum-kulka and Levenston (1983) argue that all second language students start with the assumption that for every word in L_1 there is a single translation equivalent in L_2. 'The assumption of word-for-word translation equivalence or thinking in the mother tongue (L_1) is the only way a student can start to communicate in a second language.' This strategy surfaces here where the participants have adopted their L1 structures to help them in their L_2 writing assignments. My fear is that these participants will never attain mastery of the English language as long as the process of translation equivalence is in place. Blum-Kulka and Levenston posit that mastery of the second language involves the gradual abandonment of the translation equivalence, the internalisation of the grammatical items in L_2 independently of the L_1 equivalent, and the ability to 'think in the second language' (1983). But, I fear if this will ever be the case with my subjects and by extension RSUST students as a whole.

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Finally, it appears to me that the participants have accumulated enough grammatical items but failed in organising this knowledge into appropriate, coherent structures, creating a significant gap between the accumulation and organisation of this knowledge. Thus, when writing in the English language, these participants depend on their L_1 structures to produce a response, as this study indicated. Since the structures of L_1 and L_2 have differences, there has been a relatively high frequency of errors occurring in the English language, thus indicating interference of the native language on the target language, as expected.

Limitations

This study was predicated on the observation of four RSUST undergraduates and an analysis of each of their writing tasks in the classroom. This necessitates the paucity of the sample involved, this is followed by a limited range of languages analysed – Ikwerre, Kana, Eleme and Okrika. This is why no generalisations for all second language students are postulated. The value of this study is, paradoxically, its generalizability to a similar set of circumstances for the type of students identified in the study. It is generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations.

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