



The Effects of Language Interference in Learning English Syntax for Spanish Native Speakers: A Case Study on a Mexican Context

Tanya Jocelyn Narvaez Flores

University of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, MEXICO
Division of Social Sciences and Humanities

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Abstract

Language interference is a relevant topic for second language acquisition because most language learners face this phenomenon when learning a new language. This study followed a social constructivist philosophy, focusing on inductive and qualitative methods. This case study was conducted in Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico. In this case study, I explored the experiences of two young-adults language learners from the center of Guanajuato, Mexico. These participants have been taking formal English lessons for more than twelve years. However, these learners are still not able to have fluent conversations in English. The instruments used for this research were questionnaires, interviews, and recorded conversations. After conducting a thematic analysis, the result indicates that the main issue these participants are facing is the use of translation as a strategy and the concern the participants have of committing mistakes.

Keywords: language interference, transfer, syntactic transfer, interlanguage, translation.

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language has its challenges, one of the most common difficulties language learners faces in their learning process is accuracy while speaking. In this case study, I analyzed the situation of two young-adult language learners that have been receiving English lessons for more than twelve years. However, they still have challenges when speaking because of syntax issues. In this paper, I will explore terms such as language interference, language transfer, syntactic transfer, interlanguage, and translation as a strategy for EFL learning. The purpose of this case study is to understand the effects of language interference on young-adults language learners at the center of Guanajuato, Mexico. It is crucial to understand the effects language interference has on Spanish native speakers' learning process because this might be the reason why Mexican people do not reach the expectations after several years of language classes.

2. Research question

How does language interference affect Spanish native speakers in learning syntactic features in English?

3. Literature review

3.1 *Language interference*

When learning a second language, the learner might present language interference. Language interference is defined as “the transference of elements of one language to another at various levels including phonological, grammatical, lexical, and orthographical elements of language” (Vintoni, 2016: 94). For example, it is very common for native Spanish speakers to avoid pronouncing the letter **h** while reading because, in Spanish, the **h** has no sound. This would be an example of phonological interference. When two languages belong to different linguistic systems, there will be a tendency for the transference of the elements from one language to another. This phenomenon is defined as language “interference”, this will lead the learners to difficulties or errors in their learning process (Vintoni, 2016).

3.2 *Language transfer*

Another important concept regarding language interference is language transfer. According to Wang (2017), “transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired” (p. 16). This means that the language repertoire a learner has can influence the learning of the target language, however, this is not always a disadvantage. There could be negative transfers which are interferences that obstacle learning, and positive transfers which can facilitate the learning process (Butler, 2012). For example, finding similarities between the target language and the language previously acquired might help the learner to process the information easier, rather than if the target language was completely different from the previously acquired languages.

3.2.1 *Syntactic transfer*

As part of language transfer, there is another concept that Wang (2017) mentioned, which is syntactic transfer. This concept refers to the L1 influencing at the sentential level of the L2 sentence. One common example of syntactic transfer is the accommodation of nouns and adjectives. In Spanish, the noun is first used and then the adjective (e.g., la manzana roja). On the contrary, in English, it is used first the adjective, and then the noun (e.g., the red apple). Thus, learners might use the form *the apple red* due to the interference they have from Spanish. This type of transfer is the one that will be analyzed during this case study. As well as how syntax transfer and interlanguage are related to this issue.

3.3 *Interlanguage*

Another concept used in this study was interlanguage. “Interlanguage refers to the knowledge of the L2 in the speaker’s mind as the L1 does. But this L2 interlanguage exists in the same mind as the L1 does” (Cook, 1999: 190). A Spanish native speaker has certain grammar forms in their interlanguage. This means that learners already have stored information about one language, and they know how to use it. When they start learning another language, in this case, English, they must incorporate new structures into their interlanguage. This is when the mix of both languages occurs, and the learner might encounter language transfer.

3.4 Translation in EFL learning

One of the most controversial aspects of language teaching is the debate between using or not translation inside the classroom. “In terms of using translation as a learning strategy, translation has often been classified as one of the cognitive learning strategies” (Liao, 2006: 193). In this context, the translation would be defined as “converting the target language expression into the native language (at various levels, from words and phrases all the way up to whole texts); or converting the native language into the target language” (Liao, 2006: 194). As previously mentioned, translation can be used as a strategy in language learning. However, some researchers believe that translation between the L1 and L2 can cause language interference. In this case, the authors recommend using only the L2 and making the acquisition of the language simpler, letting aside the L1 of the learner. For example, using the CLT approach in the classroom would be the best option according to those authors (Liao, 2006). However, these authors are not taking into consideration the interlanguage of each learner. As it was previously explained, interlanguage is the linguistic information each person has stored in their mind, thus, it might be difficult to ignore completely the L1 during the learning of another language.

4. Methodology

This research was conducted with a qualitative approach, “Qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analyzed primarily by non-statistical methods” (Dörnyei, 2007: 24). In this study I addressed the issues Spanish native speakers face while learning syntax features in English, thus the research focused on students' experiences and the theory behind the issues they are facing.

The research also was conducted as a case study, which is an “empirical investigation of contemporary phenomena in a real-life context” (Hood, 2009: 86). In this case, the phenomenon studied was “syntax errors while speaking”. The case study analyzed how this phenomenon affected students' learning and use of the language. The research was conducted with two language learners, which present difficulties in the use of syntax while speaking. These two learners have been learning English since preschool level, now they are young adults. After more than twelve years of taking English lessons, it would be expected to have an advanced proficiency level in English. However, these students are not able to use the language fluently due to syntax mistakes.

4.1 Context and participants

This case study was applied in the center of Guanajuato, Mexico. The participants of the study were two young adults that had English classes as a foreign language since preschool, and they attended English classes for more than twelve years. These classes were either from their schools, or in private language courses. However, both participants expressed that after all those years of lessons, they still do not consider themselves bilinguals, and they struggle with language production. The participants were informed of the purpose of this research, and they signed a consent form to participate in the study and give me permission to use their data. There will be used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. The questionnaires and interviews were conducted in Spanish, to give the participant the opportunity to express themselves in the best way.

4.2 *Inquiry tools*

This case study used different tools to collect the data. First, the use of questionnaires, to gather the main ideas of the participants. I applied an open-response questionnaire that had five open-ended questions, “open-response items call for the respondents to answer in their own words” (Heigham & Croker, 2009: 202). The purpose of this questionnaire was to know participants’ issues while using the language, and what are the most frequent problems while speaking. This questionnaire was followed by a semi-structured interview in which participants had the chance to expand on their ideas. I used semi-structured interviews, in which I had prepared three questions, but I made follow-up questions for some answers I received during the conversation. The purpose of these interviews was to get more information from their previous answers because some comments were very interesting, and I wanted to get more information from those ideas. In these interviews, the purpose was to explore the experiences the participants have been through in their learning path, and how having issues with oral production have affected their learning. Also, I recorded a short conversation with each participant. Participants were expected to follow this conversation fully in English. In this conversation I asked them to talk about their favorite vacations, thus they were expected to use past tenses. I analyzed the mistakes committed by the participants, to identify the origin of those mistakes, for example, due to language interference.

4.3 *Data analysis procedures*

The data analysis was done through thematic analysis. “Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns” (Kiger & Varpio, 2020: 2). I gathered all the relevant data in a table, and coded the data by type of instrument, the number of participants, and theme. Using thematic analysis, I was able to identify patterns and key concepts that were recurrent in my participants’ answers. Once I identified these repeated concepts or ideas, I organized them into themes.

5. Results

5.1 *Translation and language interference*

It was observed that the main issue the participants had with speaking is language interference. The participants explained that when having a conversation in English, they always try to translate the sentences from the L1 to the L2. Here is where they face several issues regarding the syntactic transfer, because the participants want to say the sentences word-by-word as they would say them in Spanish. Although they already have the syntactic knowledge, they still cannot do this process automatically while speaking. Spanish and English have different syntactic features and translating a sentence word-by-word from Spanish to English would lead to a grammatically incorrect sentence. As extracted from the conversation with Participant 1:

I: What did you do in your last vacation?

P1: I went to a place in San Luis Potosí... I swim with my family and eat, ate, Carne asada.

I: Could you describe the place?

P1: mmm yes, it was big and hot. This place had mmm... cascadas, big and beautiful.

In this conversation, Participant 1 translated the sentence in Spanish “Casacadas grandes y hermosas”, which would be grammatically correct in Spanish. However, when translating it literally into English, the order of the adjectives is incorrect. The correct syntactic

form would be “beautiful, big waterfall”. Here the participant was facing syntactic language transfer, as he took the word order he would usually use in the L1 and applied it in the L2.

5.2 Language interference and syntax

Also, from this same extract of the conversation, I observed that the participant struggles with using the correct conjugation of the verbs in the past form. However, the participant demonstrated that he has grammatical knowledge, because he was able to self-correct in one verb (eat - ate). This shows that the participant has awareness of the grammar forms he should use depending on the context. In this example, he was talking about the past, thus, he must conjugate the verbs in the past. This same participant expressed that for him it was difficult to remember the correct use of irregular verbs while speaking.

Q3: What is the most challenging aspect for you while speaking in English?

P1: I think that in the conjugation of the verbs, I always get confused between the past, present, and future. Because I know a lot of vocabulary, but I feel I can't use it because I do not know how to apply it to a sentence.

This participant clearly received explicit instruction regarding language structures during his language classes because he is aware of the structures and the labels for each form. The disadvantage of Spanish native speakers that want to learn English, is that the structures are very different. Thus, learners might face language transfer and syntax transfer often.

Also, Participant 2 explained that in his school, his teacher always wrote the “formulas” to explain grammar structures. These formulas helped him understand and pass the exams. In this case, the participant processed the formulas and made them part of his interlanguage. However, this participant expressed that he does not feel confident in his knowledge, thus he always tries to be accurate and careful with the sentences he says. However, during the conversation, he did not have any syntax mistakes. The issue with Participant 2 was the time he took to answer the questions and follow up on the conversation. He seemed to be too worried about the accuracy, that he took a long time to process the sentences in his head to produce the language. He said that he uses translation most of the time, but always keeps in mind the modifications he needs to do in order to have the sentence correct. This might be effective for writing, but in speaking, it is necessary to do all these processes more automatized.

Explicit grammar instruction has several benefits for language learners, According to Nazari (2013), “if learners receive communicative exposure to grammar points that have already been introduced explicitly, they will have a longer-lasting awareness of form and their accuracy will improve” (p. 157). Thus, for these participants, it would be beneficial to put into practice the knowledge they already have. As seen in the conversations, they have the knowledge, it is just necessary for them to put into practice that knowledge to develop their speaking skill.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to understand the effect language interference has on young-adults Spanish native speakers' learning process. After collecting the data through questionnaires, interviews, and recorded conversations, I analyzed the information with thematic analysis. The results show that using translation as a strategy for learning English could be beneficial, however, there can be some language transfer when trying to have a conversation. However, this issue does not limit communication skills. Also, the syntactic differences between Spanish and English can lead to syntactic transfer because the learner already has in his interlanguage all the structures from his L1, thus it is normal to present some mixtures between both systems. As seen in the conversations and questionnaires, the participants have plenty of

vocabulary knowledge, and also about grammar structures, thus they might need to practice and use the language so they can improve their speaking skills.

Some limitations I have encountered so far in this study were the data collection and the lack of participants. First, as my participants are adults, they were always busy, and it was challenging to find time in our schedule to do the interviews and conversations. Also, I would have liked to have more participants, to understand the experience of more language learners in the same context.

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