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Influence of Mother Tongue on English Language Learning Abilities

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Abstract

The mother tongue plays a significant role in shaping an individual's cognitive, linguistic, and communicative development. When learners begin studying English as a second or foreign language, their first language (L1) inevitably influences the process of acquiring the second language (L2). This influence may be both positive (facilitative transfer) and negative (interference). The phenomenon, often referred to as language transfer, affects pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and overall communicative competence. Scholars such as Robert Lado, Stephen Krashen, and Larry Selinker have contributed significantly to understanding cross-linguistic influence and second language acquisition. This paper examines the theoretical background, types of language transfer, areas of influence, advantages and disadvantages of mother tongue use, and pedagogical implications for English language teaching. The study concludes that while mother tongue influence is unavoidable, it can be managed effectively to enhance English language learning abilities.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Language Transfer, Interference, English Language Learning, Cross-Linguistic Influence

Introduction

Language learning is deeply connected to a learner's first language. The mother tongue serves as the foundation for cognitive development, conceptual understanding, and communication skills. When students learn English, they do not start from zero; instead, they rely on existing linguistic knowledge from their first language.



The influence of the mother tongue can either support or hinder English language learning. In multilingual countries, learners often translate mentally from L1 to English, which may lead to structural errors, pronunciation problems, or vocabulary misuse. However, the mother tongue can also provide a strong conceptual base, enabling learners to grasp new language concepts more efficiently.

Understanding how the mother tongue influences English learning is essential for designing effective teaching strategies and minimizing language interference.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

Robert Lado proposed the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (1957), which states that learners experience difficulty when structures in the target language differ significantly from those in their mother tongue. According to this theory:

- Similar structures → easier learning
- Different structures → more errors

This theory emphasizes predicting errors by comparing L1 and L2 structures.

2.2 Interlanguage Theory

Larry Selinker introduced the concept of *interlanguage*, a transitional linguistic system created by learners. Interlanguage reflects the influence of both the mother tongue and the target language. It explains why learners produce systematic but incorrect forms.

2.3 Input Hypothesis

Stephen Krashen emphasized the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition. While Krashen minimized the role of explicit grammar instruction, he acknowledged that learners may rely on their mother tongue during early stages of language learning.

3. Types of Mother Tongue Influence

3.1 Positive Transfer

Positive transfer occurs when similarities between L1 and English facilitate learning.

Examples:

- Similar sentence structures
- Shared vocabulary (cognates)
- Similar phonetic sounds

Positive transfer accelerates comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

3.2 Negative Transfer (Interference)

Negative transfer occurs when differences between L1 and English cause errors.

Common examples:



- Incorrect word order
- Literal translation of idioms
- Pronunciation influenced by native phonology
- Grammatical errors due to structural differences

Negative transfer is more noticeable in speaking and writing.

4. Areas of Mother Tongue Influence

4.1 Pronunciation

Learners often pronounce English sounds using phonetic patterns from their mother tongue.

For example:

- Difficulty with /θ/ and /ð/ sounds
- Stress and intonation patterns influenced by L1

This results in accented speech and sometimes miscommunication.

4.2 Grammar

Mother tongue structure strongly affects grammar learning.

Examples:

- Omission of articles (if L1 lacks articles)
- Direct translation of sentence patterns
- Incorrect tense usage

4.3 Vocabulary

Learners may:

- Use false cognates
- Translate idioms literally
- Depend heavily on bilingual dictionaries

4.4 Writing Skills

Students often transfer rhetorical patterns from L1 to English writing, affecting paragraph organization and coherence.

4.5 Speaking Fluency

Many learners mentally translate from L1 to English before speaking, which slows down fluency and increases hesitation.

5. Advantages of Mother Tongue Use in English Learning

Despite concerns, the mother tongue has several benefits:

1. Helps explain complex grammar concepts
2. Supports comprehension at beginner levels
3. Builds confidence
4. Facilitates vocabulary understanding



5. Saves classroom time

Strategic use of L1 can enhance learning efficiency.

6. Disadvantages of Excessive Mother Tongue Dependence

1. Reduced exposure to English
2. Slower fluency development
3. Habitual translation
4. Limited thinking in English
5. Reduced communicative competence

Therefore, balanced use is necessary.

7. Strategies to Minimize Negative L1 Influence

1. Encourage thinking directly in English
2. Use communicative teaching methods
3. Provide pronunciation training
4. Practice contrastive analysis activities
5. Increase exposure to authentic English input
6. Promote extensive reading and listening

Teachers should not completely ban the mother tongue but should regulate its use effectively

8. Research Evidence

Studies in second language acquisition demonstrate that:

- Early stages of learning show strong L1 influence
- Advanced learners gradually reduce dependency
- Phonological transfer persists longer than grammatical transfer
- Classroom practices influence degree of interference

Research suggests that controlled mother tongue support improves comprehension without hindering proficiency.

9. Pedagogical Implications

1. Teachers should understand students' linguistic backgrounds.
2. Contrastive analysis can predict common errors.
3. English exposure should be maximized in class.
4. Pronunciation practice must address L1-specific issues.
5. Students should be trained to avoid literal translation.

A balanced bilingual approach is more effective than strict monolingual policies.



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Conclusion

The mother tongue significantly influences English language learning abilities. Its impact can be both positive and negative, depending on structural similarities and teaching approaches. Theories proposed by Robert Lado, Larry Selinker, and Stephen Krashen provide valuable insights into cross-linguistic influence. While complete elimination of mother tongue influence is neither possible nor desirable, effective teaching strategies can reduce interference and promote successful English acquisition. Ultimately, understanding L1 influence allows educators to design more responsive and inclusive language learning environments.

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