

Interference of L1 on the L2 Oral Expression of Undergraduate Agricultural Students in terms of Transfer of Rules

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Received: 16-11-2021

Revised: 25-01-2022

Accepted: 28-02-2022

ABSTRACT

Interference of the mother tongue (L1) is inevitable in the second language (L2) learning. This research study was taken up to look into the first language interference on the oral expression of undergraduate agricultural students of Anbil Dharmalingam Agricultural College and Research Institute (ADAC&RI) Tiruchirappalli, one of the constituent colleges of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), India. The scope of this study is restrained to identifying how the first language interferes with students' spoken language in terms of transfer of rules. Ninety-eight sophomore agricultural students (34 boys and 64 girls), whose mother tongues are Tamil (85), Telugu (8), Malayalam (3), and Kannada (1), have been involved in this study. Two recorded audio clippings were received from each student through google classroom, and they were analyzed in terms of transfer of rules. The results suggest that L1 influences 69% of students in terms of 'transfer of rules' in grammar, 46% in 'redundancy', and 18% with 'zero interference'.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The speakers of EFL are inclined to use their mother tongue experience to structure the information in L2.
- 85% of students in Tamil medium education schools were significantly influenced by their mother tongue in their oral expression.
- Among the significant types of redundancy, 54% of the interferences are found in the form of plague words.
- 68% of students apply direct translation methods from their mother tongue into English, and 18% of them converse with zero interference.
- 2% of Tamil-medium-educated students from rural backgrounds spoke with zero mother tongue interference.

Keywords: Mother Tongue Interference, Mother Tongue Influence, Interference of L1 on L2, Transfer of Rules

The mother tongue (L1) plays a significant role in the second language (L2) acquisition, as it eases to explain of specific complex ideas and concepts from L2 to "help students learning new vocabulary more effectively and preventing waste of time in explanations and instructions" (Spahin, 2013). Outside the classroom, students mostly converse either in their mother tongue or in the dominant language of the campus, and hence

L1 and L2 are 'interdependent' and 'nurture' each other (Cummins, 2001). The problem of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning leads to many errors

How to cite this article: Thangaraj, K. and Kalpana, M. (2022). Interference of L1 on the L2 Oral Expression of Undergraduate Agricultural Students in terms of Transfer of Rules. *Int. J. Soc. Sci.*, 11(01): 35-41.

Source of Support: Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore

Conflict of Interest: None



while speaking a foreign language, especially when the speaker applies the rules from the first language.

The speaker's first language influences verbal expression in acquired languages, becoming a significant barrier to professional development. The mother tongue is not the only language that learners learn at home; they also learn the dominant language in their environment. The syntax and grammar of this first language are unconsciously applied while learning a second language. The application of 'transfer of rules' refers to the speaker's employing of knowledge from their mother tongue to the acquired language. The idea of 'interference' is "fundamentally a psycho-linguistic concept" (Onike, 2009), and it is basically "a condition when two different languages overlap" (Ghazwan, 2021). Mother tongue interference in the natural transfer due to the habit and preconceptions of L2 learners, which affects the second language learning, as 'language' is considered a set of new habits. In contrast, 'learning' is considered to establish habits (Jie, 2008).

Significance of the Study

The field of L1 became an exciting area of research after the formation of the International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) in 1992. Pragmatic factors such as appropriateness, comprehensibility, and interpretability justified English as an international and intranational language. Positive and negative transfers occur while learning a second language; however, positive transfers are less discussed and go largely unnoticed. Negative transfer mainly occurs due to inadequate vocabulary, ignorance of grammatical rules, unfamiliarity with differences between the syntax of L1 and L2, applying word for word translation, following standard norms for singular and plural forms, and the cultural and customary differences of the speaker. Nevertheless, L1 interference may broadly be analyzed from different areas of phonology, syntax, and semantics. This study is limited to focusing on the transfer of rules, one of the seven interferences proposed by Aisa Hanif (2014).

Though there are differences of opinion on learning a second language through the native tongue, it is inevitable for a learner to unintentionally apply the rules of L1 on L2, which often misleads the content. Bhela

(1999) regards that the second language environment encompasses everything the language learner observes in listening and watching the new language. It may include different circumstances such as conversations with teachers and friends, watching a movie, dialogue in a restaurant, reading newspapers, and other classroom activities. Lado (1994) views that the language learner unconsciously applies the transfer of rules and knowledge of L1 in second language acquisition, which may be a set of rules which is equivalent in the target language but may fail to convey the idea precisely.

Anbil Dharmalingam Agricultural College and Research Institute, Tiruchirappalli, is one of the leading higher learning institutions in agricultural education, where English is the medium of instruction. Though students studying here are heterogeneous, they share a common educational background that English was one of the compulsory subjects for them up to their higher secondary level, and 71% studied all their subjects in English medium at their school level. However, their exposure to the English language is not reflected in their oral proficiency. Denizer and Zhao (2017) suggest that harmful mother tongue interference is the primary reason for affecting learners' performance. So, teachers' understanding and recognition of L1 interference will help eliminate negative transfers and apply the positive transfers for cultivating positive language learning habits among students to ensure effective language teaching and learning process. This study will further aid curriculum development and the developing of teaching modules by focusing on critical areas of language learning.

Statement of the Problem

English is the medium of instruction for higher education in India, particularly for professional courses like agriculture and allied sciences. English is also taught as a second language with two credits to undergraduate agricultural and allied students, apart from a technical writing and communication skills course at the post-graduate level. Speaking is an essential linguistic skill that professional students should demonstrate during their presentations, group discussion, conversation, and interview. However, the EFL (English as Foreign

language) learners “tend to use their previous mother tongue experience as a means of organizing the foreign language data” (Hanafi, 2014). This study becomes significant that agricultural students are more likely to get involved with service sectors, and they must interact in professional language with zero mother tongue interference.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

During the lockdown period in May 2021, the state government of Tamil Nadu in India raised the retirement age of its employees from 58 to 59, and the respondents were asked to record an extempore speech on the pros and cons for about three to five minutes. After two months interval, one more audio narrative on their lockdown experience was collected through Google classroom. Ninety-eight respondents (34 boys and 64 girls) whose mother tongues are Tamil (85), Telugu (8), Malayalam (3), and Kannada (1) took part in this study. Watchara Punyawong and Usaha (2013) propose that L1 interference may be categorized into more than a hundred forms in terms of syntactic and semantic properties. However, this paper is limited to focusing on the L1 interference in terms of rules transfer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The speakers of EFL are inclined to use their mother tongue experience to structure the information in L2. The right choice of vocabulary tends to be a blockade to both understanding and expressing ideas lucidly. “Grammar and vocabulary are the bricks of a building upon which communication can be constructed” (Bygate, 2003). The complication in loan transfer interference occurrences is commonly found when the speaker translates L1 into L2, distorting to convey the meaning precisely in L2. The incorrect translation of words or inappropriate logical equivalence in the target language occurs due to the learners’ misconception and lack of vocabulary. Sometimes, they do not consider that a word might have more than one meaning or rely on their previous target language knowledge.

English is noted for its subtlety and nuances, and it has multiple layers of meaning due to its association

with prolific western languages like Greek, Latin, and German. In addition, English has an action-based verb pattern and maintains its relationship with the subject, whereas most Indian languages have a subject-based verb pattern.

As the noun ‘one’ represents a single noun, many of the students applied the phrases like, ‘one of the strategy’, ‘one of the river’, and ‘one of the reason’, thinking that ‘one’ should be followed by a singular noun as in the Tamil language. Students were taught to add ‘s’ to make plural nouns, which was inappropriately applied by 12% of students for nouns like ‘newses’, ‘staffs’, ‘families’, ‘experiences’ that do not require ‘s’ to be made plural. Inappropriate translations like ‘holiday’ for ‘lock down’, ‘amount’ for ‘benefits’, and ‘Covid news’ for ‘Covid experience’ were some commonly-found interferences. In table 1 are some excerpts from the top five grammatical interferences of the students (Table 1).

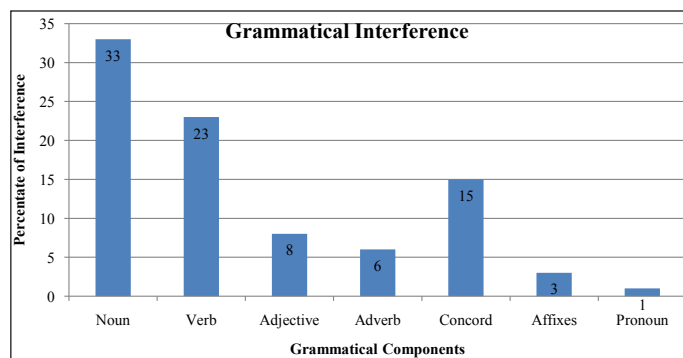


Fig. 1

The words ‘ago’ and ‘back’ were alternatively applied without the difference that ‘ago’ refers to a certain amount of time before the present moment, whereas ‘back’ refers to a specific period in the past. ‘Checked’ and ‘tested’ are also used interchangeably, as in the sentence ‘corona was checked.’ In the Tamil language, both ‘check’ and ‘test’ imply the process of examination. In English, ‘checking’ is the process of confirmation, verification, and validation, but ‘testing’ is done with the motivation to find something. Testing is a process of investigation and learning, which requires consecutive action, and hence Corona test is the correct terminology. Phrases like ‘corona has come to India’, ‘leave came’, ‘rain came’, ‘news came’, and ‘news coming’ were applied

Table 1

Sl. No.	Language feature	Samples of L1 interference in English	Right usage	% of transfer occurrence
1	Noun	Corona has come to India. Corona affection Leave came Kerala friends Big surprise Law was come on Big disadvantage If a person retires, the place will be emptied.	Corona was reported in India. Corona infection Leave was announced Keralite friends Amazement/ astonishment Law was enforced Major drawback If a person retires, the place will be kept vacant.	33%
2	Verb	Government launched lockdown Checked coronavirus Leave will happen Improved the retirement age Postponing the payment Tower problem The government of Tamil Nadu discloses ₹ 1000 Put on the TV	Government announced lockdown Tested for coronavirus Leave will be announced. Raised the retirement age Withholding the payment Signal problem The government of Tamil Nadu announced ₹ 1000 Turn on the TV	23%
3	Adjective	Gratitude amount Body health Employ benefits Retirement people Nutrient food Unemployment candidates Postponing retirement age The news said	Gratuity benefits Physical health Employment benefits Retired people Nutritional food Unemployed candidates Raising retirement age Announced in the news	8%
4	Adverb	Worked honourly A few days ago	Worked honestly A few days back	6%
5	Pronoun	By isolating ourself	By isolating ourselves	1%

when students failed to find the correct equivalent word without considering that the meaning they chose in the target language may refer to something different from the source text.

The word 'thing' was used as a noun in the sense of 'information' by 13% of the students on various occasions, such as 'the main thing', 'boredom thing', 'an important thing', 'good thing', 'now I tell one thing', and 'their things' instead of 'issue', 'information', 'point', 'problem', 'belongings', 'properties' and 'matter of discussion'. These words have a bland effect on the

listener, and they can either be bettered with proper substitutions or eliminated to avoid convoluted meaning. Though these words do not impact the listener's understanding, the speakers unconsciously use them due to their lack of vocabulary. Frequent occurrences of such filler words diffuse the impact of other words and sentences. The right choice of words makes ordinary speech unique and meaningful.

Apart from such imprecise words, many students make 'filler sounds' such as *um, ah, hmm*, etc. and 'filler phrases' like, 'I think', 'what I mean', etc. These 'fillers'

affect the natural fluency, which could be reworded or eliminated to avoid a convoluted sentence. In Table 2 are some instances that could be reworded for better expression (Table 2).

Redundancy occurs when speakers apply additional words than necessary due to ignorance or intensively in the same sentence that mean the same idea. It occurs when speakers apply the learning of their native language to the second language situation when they do not have a native-level command of a language, such as when translating into a second language. On many occasions, redundancies are just fillers and contribute no more idea that can be ascribed to the speaker's lack of vocabulary and dictionary skills. Students tend to use their mother tongue experience to heighten the intensity of their speech, such as when they say 'lakhs and lakhs of people' for 'multitudes', 'crores and crores' and 'hundreds and thousands' for 'millions or billions'.

The common types of redundancies in English are the pleonasm, intensifiers, plague words, platitudes and clichés, and redundant abbreviations. Pleonasm uses more than the required words, such as 'home household activities', 'returned back', 'blunder mistake', and 'routine activity', in which the first words in the phrases are applied unconsciously for the second time.

Intensifiers are adjectives applied to emphasize an idea. These can be eliminated with a single strong adjective, as 'extremely useful' for 'very very useful', 'great disadvantage' for 'huge disadvantage', and 'delicious' for 'very very tasty'. Next to plague words, intensifiers are the common interference that happens due to a shortfall of vocabulary skills, which can be eliminated by creating word associations and learning vocabulary

with its etymology.

Plague words are 'annoying words' that the speakers just 'fill up' the sentences with words like 'actually', 'basically', 'we all know', and 'coming to a conclusion'. They suggest poor communication habits can be avoided with proper planning in a formal setting and strategically-placed pauses in speech. Plague words are the most common type of interference that 46% and 28% of students studied from English and Tamil mediums, respectively, exercised in their speech. Clichés and platitudes are overused opinions, expressing a lack of original thought and making the speaker appear unimaginative. They make the speech vague and seem dull, and they may gotten rid of by pinpointing what to speak and focusing on the main ideas than on clichés and platitudes.

A redundant abbreviation, called 'RAS Syndrome' by Stanley Newman (2001) adds an extra word at the end of the common abbreviation as in 'ATM Machine' 'PIN Number' and 'PDF Format'. The two topics suggested to the students are unrelated to any of such expressions, and none of them makes this redundancy.

While learners translate L1 into L2, the interference of loan translation or *claque* occurs, noticed in 17.6% of students due to the lack of vocabulary or not knowing the precise words in the second language. It can be inferred that the students lack dictionary skills.

Among the significant types of redundancy, 54% of the interferences are found in the form of plague words. In terms of the pleonasm, 'own experience' (2), 'blunder mistake' (2), and 'new habits' (3) are frequently used phrases. The majority of the students (34 %) applied

Table 2

Sl. No.	Filler Words	Intended Idea with Better Substitution
1	Main thing	Idea, plan, area, problem etc.
2	I learnt an important thing.	I learnt an important lesson
3	The important thing is...	The Important idea/ concept/ lesson/ plan is....
4	Good thing is	The positive idea/ positive point/ better choice is
5	Now it is the thing	Now it is the problem/ issue.
6	Now I tell you one thing.	Now I share an information/ idea/ concept.
7	His things	His belongings, his stuff.

Table 3

Sl. No.	Pleonasm	Intensifiers	Plague / Crutch words	Cliché and Platitudes
1	Home household activities	Very very useful/ very very far away/ very very helpful/	Actually, we want to / basically it is	Last but not least
2	Inner hidden talents	Small small work	First thing is/ next thing/	Nothing but
3	For time passing passing	I really enjoyed/ bored	Then only I	That's life
4	Own personal experience	More and more depressing news	We all know that / we all know about the virus	
5	Blunder mistake	Only and most importantly	What I mean is	
6	Maintaining my body health	The very big disadvantage for me is	Coming to the conclusion	
7	Regular routine activity	Lakhs and lakhs of people/ crores and crores of rupees/ crores and crores of people	I want to tell	

intensifiers such as ‘I was fully enjoying with my family, ‘I tell one thing’, ‘small works’ to emphasise an idea. Though these intensifiers are the “linguistic devices that boost the meaning of a proper upwards from an assumed noun” (Quirk *et al.* 1985), they are interchangeably used with degree modifiers, which are used to convey the exact value of the quality of item expressed to modify. When it is wrongly used or overused, it affects the smooth flow of language. Instead of words like ‘elated’ or ‘delighted’, students applied phrases like ‘very happy’ or ‘very, very happy. In table 3 are some instances of further applied redundancies (Table 3).

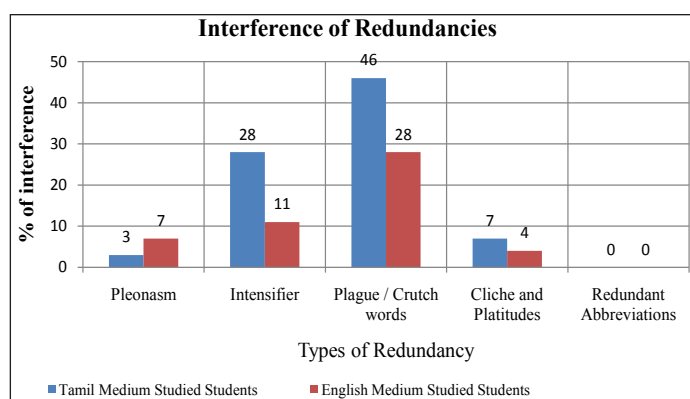


Fig. 2

Though not due to L1 interference, crutch words were frequently found in 15% of the students who unconsciously applied common crutch words such as

‘basically’, ‘really’, and ‘mainly’. The direct intervention of L1 is reflected in phrases like ‘I helped my mum for small works’, and ‘more and more problems’. Frequent usage of these words creates the same bland impact on the listeners.

It is evident from the chart that the highest frequency interference, about 46%, among English-medium educated students and 28% among Tamil-medium educated students in plague/clutch words. It is inferred that the students who struggle to find apt words either lack dictionary skills or are not interested in using language-learning applications to enrich their vocabulary. The results correlate with the word choice that more than 80% of students have mother-tongue interference in at least one form of oral expression. Crutch words are the other common filler words that spoil the beauty of sentences. It is observed that 68% of students apply direct translation methods from their mother tongue into English, and 18% of them converse with zero interference. It is noteworthy that 2% of Tamil-medium-educated students from rural backgrounds spoke with zero mother tongue interference.

CONCLUSION

The interference of L1 may affect the flow of students’ presentation, but it can be overcome by listening to native speakers, improving vocabulary, and becoming

familiar with grammar. The results indicate that 85% of students in Tamil medium education school were significantly influenced by their mother tongue in their oral expression. In contrast, it is 63% among students from English-medium backgrounds. The results of this study confirm the study of Manrique (2013), who found that phonological and grammatical interferences are the most common types of interference that occur while learning a foreign language. The challenges can be overcome with the constant practice of the digital tools available in the language laboratory.

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