The Impact of the First Foreign Language on Another Foreign Language

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Abstract

Learners of foreign languages often make mistakes resulting from language interference. When two (or more) foreign languages are studied, then this kind of interference becomes "doubled" (or even "more multiplied"). Mistakes caused by language interference are made also by university students majoring in teaching two foreign languages. That is why it is necessary to draw these pre-service teachers´ attention to the issue of negative impacts of the first studied foreign language on the second studied foreign language. Future teachers of foreign languages should be, however, also aware of positive transfers existing when more foreign languages are studied. The text presents preliminary findings of the beginning phase of a research project realized at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). The research focuses on the impact of the already acquired knowledge of English on the process of learning another foreign language. The main objective of the research is to find ways how to diminish the interference, how to eliminate "unnecessary" mistakes and how to use positive transfers arising in the process of learning foreign languages.

1. Introduction

During their course of life, a majority of human beings get into contact with more languages. The mother tongue is obviously the first language heard by a human individual. However, in the present multi-cultural environment, inputs of other languages logically appear quite soon and come from media, films, contacts established with foreigners, etc. Some expressions of foreign languages are then acquired unintentionally and in unplanned ways. In accordance with the present educational policy of the European Union, learning at least one foreign language is obligatory at European schools. In

frequent cases, both school children and adults take additional language courses offered by language schools or other institutions; foreign languages are taught also privately. According to Stockwell (2007, p. 11), "*the ability to speak more than one language is more common in the world than monolingualism.*" This ability is nowadays required more or less automatically from people in their productive age. The number of cases when at least a working knowledge of more than one foreign language is required is constantly increasing.

The process of learning a foreign language is a life-long and really demanding one, learning more foreign languages is then obviously more demanding. However, certain learning skills and abilities are generally transferrable, and language learning skills definitely belong to them. Moreover, when learners are well trained by their teachers, they can gradually develop into autonomous learners and they can make their learning processes easier because they gradually get to know how to profit from the already acquired language skills and abilities and how to eliminate the factors negatively influencing performances in foreign languages studied.

2. Learning Foreign Languages

The aim of this text is not to go deep into theoretical linguistics, however, some general terms and findings have to be used, mentioned and referred to.

The first language (mother tongue) is acquired naturally, this process of acquisition is linked with any normal human being´s mental and psychological development because language is the basic means of making oneself understood, and the ability to communicate is quite essential for human life. Learning the second (third, fourth, etc.) language is then easier, considering the fact that a person does not have to start "from scratch". Mental and social abilities and skills, as well as language abilities developed during the process of becoming familiar with the mother tongue, are highly important pre-conditions for later processes of foreign language acquisition. The already acquired patterns existing in the mother tongue can be transferred by learners of foreign languages into the use of other languages. However, this transfer is not always positive. Moreover, foreign languages are usually learnt in artificial conditions, and this process is quite different from the process of natural acquisition of the mother tongue in real communicative situations.

2.1. "Interlanguage" of speakers of a particular mother tongue

Experienced foreign language teachers are well-aware of the fact that the already acquired knowledge of the mother tongue can make a kind of problems for their learners in their process of learning of foreign languages. The impact of the mother tongue on performances in other languages is inevitable, and teachers should be able to anticipate the characteristic difficulties resulting from this impact. Every individual creates his / her own language system in the process of controlled learning of languages. This language system is called ´interlanguage´ and results from mutual impacts of at least two languages (the mother tongue and the target language). This ´interlanguage´ is very dynamic, it is constantly developing with the simultaneous process of the development of a learner´s language and communicative abilities, skills and experience. The ´interlanguage´ differs from the really existing

particular language – it includes not only correct forms of the target language but also incorrect forms not existing in the target language system. Another interesting feature of ´interlanguage´ is that it is quite systematic – even the elements which are not in accordance with the norm of the target language are still systematically structuralized. That is why the analysis of ´interlanguage´ can be expected to support potential clarifications of the process of language learning. And if teachers of foreign languages are aware of this dynamic phenomenon, their ways of language teaching can be positively impacted.

2.2. Language interference

There are numerous definitions of the term "language interference". Nearly fifty years ago Weinreich (1968) defined it as "*those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language*". According to Ellis (1986, p. 51), interference is "*the influence that the learner´s L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2*". Lott (1983) made a kind of a more precise classification of interference errors in which he distinguishes three types of them: The first type results from *overextension of analogy* (students misuse vocabulary items because they are similar, either phonetically, orthographically, semantically or syntactically to another form in the L1). The second type of errors results from *transfer of structure* (students make errors because they apply the rules of their mother tongue). *Interlingual errors* (the third type of errors) are errors in grammar and vocabulary which are made by students because certain phenomena, either lexical or grammatical, existing in L2 do not exist in their native language.

Swan & Smith focus on learners of English and claim that "*the mother tongue can affect learners´ English in several ways*" (Swan & Smith 2001, p. xi). Their findings presented on the same page are not limited to English and they can be summarized and generalized in the following way:

1. Where the mother tongue has no close equivalent for a feature, learners are likely to have particular problems in the relevant area.

2. Where the mother tongue has an equivalent feature, learning is in general facilitated.

3. Equivalences are rarely exact, and so-called ´interference´ or ´transfer´ mistakes are common where students assume a more complete correspondence than exists (then mother-tongue patterns are used even if they are not in fact parallel).

4. Since transfer mistakes arise where the systems of two languages are similar but not identical, they are most common (at least as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned) in the interlanguage of students who speak languages closely related to the target language. Speakers of unrelated languages have fewer problems with the transfer.

2.3. Positive transfer

The aim of teaching any language is to make pupils aware of the particular language and to establish their knowledge of that language. Since this kind of wording may seem rather vague, Chomsky´s terminology and conceptions used in Radford et al. (2009, pp. 2 - 3) seem convenient for the purpose of our considerations and presentation: "*Chomsky identifies knowing a language with having a*

mentally represented grammar. This grammar constitutes the speaker´s competence in that language, and in this view, the key to understanding what it means to know a language is to understand the nature of such a grammar." Talking about grammar, Radford et al. (2009, p. 6) come to the conclusion that *"a grammar of a language comprises (at least) four components: a lexicon, a syntactic component, a phonological component and a logical component."* Radford et al. (2009, p. 6) go on to come up with a very interesting idea, which seems even more interesting in connection with our considerations about positive transfers and potential ways of using these positive transfers: *"Suppose grammars are produced for a variety of languages by specifying the components introduced above. Naturally, we would expect these grammars to exhibit certain differences, but we might also discover that they have some properties in common. If these properties appear in grammars for a wide range of languages, standard scientific practice leads us to hypothesize that they are common to the grammars of all natural languages, and this means that an additional goal for the linguist is the development of a theory of Universal Grammar."*

The purpose of this article is definitely not to describe the process of development of such a theory, but to draw the attention to the fact that the ability to use the potential of the positive transfer should be developed in case of both learners of foreign languages and their teachers.

2.4. Foreign language teachers´ competences

Especially foreign language teachers should keep in mind one of the basic premises linked with their professional career: *"Learning more about language and about how language works is a useful, productive and interesting activity: increasing one's awareness – being more ´alive´ to language - can bring considerable benefit, both personal and professional."* (Arndt & Harvey & Nutall, 2000, p. 11) Thinking about and referring to the premise presented above, we have to specify the term language awareness, which is used in the text. According to Arndt & Harvey & Nutall (2000, p. 12), *"Language awareness is an approach to language study which draws upon a number of disciplines including language teaching, applied linguistics, and several other related areas such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics. It encompasses work undertaken in a variety of contexts: first language learning in schools and higher education; teaching and learning second or foreign languages; and the study of socio-cultural influences upon people´s use of language."* We can come to the conclusion that language teachers should be constantly increasing their language awareness because then they can make more competent judgements and decisions in their teaching process. This task is more challenging for foreign language teachers – they should be aware of both the target foreign language and their students´ mother tongue. And the task is even more demanding when teachers work with students learning more languages and / or when teachers themselves teach more foreign languages.

2.5. Research into the impact of the first foreign language on the second foreign language

English is the first foreign language in the Czech Republic (the situation is more or less the same in other European countries), children start learning this language at lower primary schools. In accordance with the documentation and recommendations created by the Czech Ministry of Education, the second foreign language is then taught at upper primary schools and at secondary schools. As it has been

already mentioned, both the mother tongue and the first foreign language have an impact on performances in the second foreign language. This impact is evident in all the language spheres – in pronunciation (phonetics and phonology), in word forms (morphology and syntax), in vocabulary (lexicology). The impact of English on the other foreign languages is long-termed, dynamic and inevitable. Since quite a sufficient level of competence in English language can be expected from pupils and students who start learning their second foreign language, it is desirable to use their already acquired language skills and competences for more effective learning of that second foreign language.

As it was mentioned above, language awareness of foreign language teachers shall be high. And if these teachers are aware also of ways in which the knowledge of other languages can be positively used, then a more effective teaching process can be expected. This awareness depends on the way in which teachers are educated. That is why a research project was started at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic). The length of the project is planned for two years (2016 – 2017), and the research focuses on the impact of the already acquired knowledge of English (the first foreign language in the Czech Republic) on the process of learning another language (with the main focus on German). The spheres in which mutually negative impacts appear are in the centre of interest. The main objective of the research is to find ways how to diminish the interference and how to eliminate "unnecessary" mistakes. Simultaneously, possibilities how to use positive transfers arising in the process of learning foreign languages are to be found. The choice of German as the second foreign language taught and then analyzed in the research was motivated mainly by two facts. The first one is that German language is the most frequent second foreign language at Czech schools, so the two target groups potentially benefiting from the research (i. e. students and teachers of German) are quite numerous. The second influencing factor is the fact that the academic staff of the Department of German Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove has been involved in carrying out research into errors made by Czech native speakers studying German. The experience gained during this research and findings resulted from it can be used and further developed with the aim of improving the foreign language teaching and learning process.

The Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove encourages its students to begin with research activities within the framework of their studies. The students´ research abilities and skills are developed, certain fundamentals for their potential research and academic career are established. The students become aware of other angles of view of particular issues and their ability to practically apply their theoretical knowledge is improving. When participating in research activities already during their studies, students develop necessary skills and habits which will be hopefully deepened in their future professional careers. The involvement of students into research projects is linked with the aim mentioned also by Penny Ur, who calls for educating and supporting of "autonomous and creative professionals, with responsibility for their wider development of professional theory and practice" (Ur, 2009, p. 8).

Six students majoring in teaching foreign languages are involved in our research. Five of them are undergraduate students of German and English (Master´s degree studies), one student majors in English, French and Czech (this selection is quite intentional – both the mother tongue and another foreign language perspective will be applied). These students´ "double position" (they are studying

foreign languages and, simultaneously, they have started their teaching career) will hopefully bring a broader perspective to the research realized, especially at the qualitative research level.

Our research has been inspired also by Swan & Smith, who pay a great attention to ´interlanguage´ in the process of teaching English as a foreign language. The term ´interlanguage´ has been already discussed, but a more specific view (focusing on learning and teaching of English) is linked with findings made by Swan & Smith. According to them, ´interlanguage´ is "*the variety of a language that is produced by non-native learners*" (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. ix). These authors have been focusing on typical ´interlanguages´ of speakers of particular mother languages; their findings can help teachers of English anticipate certain characteristic and specific problems of particular groups of learners. As it has been mentioned, Swan & Smith focus on ´interlanguages´ in the process of learning English. When starting our research into the impact of the process of learning English as the first foreign language on the process of learning other foreign languages, we looked into the typical interlanguage of German speaking people studying English and mistakes made by them, as they are presented by Swan & Smith.

Our first aim was to reveal whether an expected "reverse" impact (i. e. the impact of English on German) appears in performances in German language made by Czech native speakers whose first foreign language is English. Certain kind of a "double interlanguage" can be expected – an interlanguage appearing in the process of learning German language which is influenced by two language impacts - both the mother tongue´s impact and the impact of the first foreign language studied.

A very small sample was used for the very first step of the quantitative research – 48 written tests in German were analyzed. These tests were taken by applicants wanting to study German language at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (the Czech Republic). In total there were more applicants for German studies but the entrance tests are taken only by those applicants who did not pass the secondary school leaving examination (maturita) in German with excellent results or who could not present a kind of certificate proving their knowledge of German. The analyzed written tests consisted of three parts – translation from Czech to German, cloze (i.e. filling the gaps with the correct form of the word) and reading comprehension. 27 respondents (that means 56.25% out of the total number of applicants) made at least one of the mistakes which are listed by Swan & Smith (2001, pp. 40 – 49) as mistakes typical of German native speakers learning English. The most frequently appearing mistake was misspelling of the German word ´Sohn´ (´Son´, ´son´), there appeared frequent English expressions or expressions resulting from knowledge of English (´wenn´ / ´when´ instead of ´wann´; ´where´ instead of ´wo´; ´uncle´ instead of ´Onkel´; ´schauen´ instead of ´ziegen´, ´behaind´ instead of ´hinter´, etc.). The sentences and structures to be translated were not complicated, so it was difficult to carry out a deeper morphological or syntactic analysis.

It is necessary to carry out further and deeper analyses of written performances of learners of German (not only of performances made by students majoring in teaching German, but also of texts created by students attending courses in general German). The mistakes and errors resulting from mutual negative transfers between German and English will be recorded and efforts will be made to create certain generalized survey with the intention to potentially eliminate this negative impact in the learning process.

2.5.1. Research questions

The research is in its very beginning phase, a big number of questions and issues will definitely appear during the research process. However, the basic research question is: Is any impact of the first

studied foreign language evident in performances in the second foreign language? On the basis of findings and conclusions presented in literature dealing with this issue, two basic hypotheses can be formulated:

a) "Mistakes and errors resulting from the previous learning of English appear in performances made by learners of German as the second foreign language."

b) "Abilities, knowledge and skills acquired in the process of learning a foreign language can be positively used in the process of learning another foreign language / other foreign languages."

Apart from the basic research question mentioned above, a number of other questions will be asked in the planned qualitative research into students´ subjective opinions (e.g. how the knowledge of English can be used when studying another language, which kinds of knowledge of English can be supportive when studying German, etc.). The set of questions will be created by the six students mentioned above. Forming the questions, they can reflect on their own experience from the student´s position and simultaneously think about their ways of teaching both German and English.

3. Conclusions

There are no doubts about the fact that knowledge of one language has an impact on learning and understanding of another language. This impact can be both negative (errors and mistakes made due to the existing differences between the particular languages when learners wrongly transfer their already acquired language habits on another language production) and positive (the already acquired language learning skills are transferred; learning can be facilitated if the languages share some equivalent features).

Foreign language teachers should be able to anticipate difficulties resulting from the negative impacts, they should be also able to use potentials of positive transfers. Then a more effective teaching – learning process can be expected. Preliminary findings made during the first phase of our research project aiming to reveal positive and negative impacts of the first studied foreign language on the second studied foreign language are not contradicting the opinions and findings presented in literature. Therefore the planned research will focus on the three above mentioned types of interference errors with the intention to reveal them and to eliminate and prevent the negative transfers.

All the next phases of the research are expected to strongly support the idea that knowledge and skills acquired by studying the first foreign language are evidently transferred into the process of studying the second foreign language. The aim of language teachers should be to improve their students´ ability to eliminate the interference and to use the potential of a positive transfer.

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