

CHAPTER-23

Impact of mother tongue influence on English language learning among undergraduate students: Issues and challenges

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ABSTRACT

The mother tongue effect still constitutes an important variable among factors affecting the process of English language acquisition in multilingual environments, especially when it comes to higher education contexts where English learning implies more than basic correctness but academic and communicative proficiency. This paper explores the effect of first language influence on English acquisition in terms of pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and semantics and focuses specifically on the problems encountered by undergraduate students in India and similar countries. In light of current research dealing with issues related to language transfer, contrastive analysis, classroom languages, and multilingual teaching approaches, it becomes evident that L1 interference is far from a mere source of errors in learners' output but a complex phenomenon which can be either beneficial or hindering depending on how it is approached during classes. Indeed, negative transfer is most often found in areas like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and syntax in cases of insufficient exposure to English as well as predominant translation-based learning approach in class. Simultaneously, conscious exploitation of linguistic potentialities can help promote understanding and enhance metalinguistic awareness. Finally, undergraduate English education must embrace contrastive and context-sensitive strategies which account for learners' language background.

KEYWORDS: Mother Tongue Influence, L1 Interference, English Language Learning, Undergraduate Students, Language Transfer, Multilingual Classrooms, Contrastive Awareness

1 Introduction

Studying English in societies where several languages are spoken is really a mixture of the learner's home language and the target language. A lot of studies on how people learn a second language focus on what is called language transfer; this means that the knowledge that a learner has in their mother tongue can affect both learning and using a second language. Positively, the influence could be that when languages are similar, it is easier to understand. However negatively it can happen that the learner uses phonological, grammatical or semantic patterns that are simply not in line with the English language. Even after so many years, research on the first language interference continues to reveal that transfer influences the main areas of English learning, particularly phonology, syntax, and lexis. The problem at a Bachelor's degree level might be even more so as students need to read academic articles, take part in discussions, write papers, and be proficient in spoken English. However, large numbers of students come from educational backgrounds with regional languages and for most of them, exposure to English outside the classroom is just limited. Under such circumstances, the influence of the mother tongue manifests itself in pronunciation features, word-for-word translation, the limited use of vocabulary, and the formation of sentences that

are not native. The study of multilingual teaching methods and English learning at college indicates that the learners' problems are pretty much a reflection of the differences between their home languages and English.

1.1 Conceptual Background

Mother tongue influence is a term that describes how the native language of a learner can impact the learning and usage of a second or foreign language. This effect has been explored via various related terms such as interference transfer cross-linguistic influence, and contrastive analysis. Traditionally, L1 influence was seen largely as a problem, but more recently, researchers have recognized that first language can also provide cognitive and teaching support if used in a well-thought-out manner. Studies on multilingual English teaching show that being aware of differences in languages can help develop plurilingual competence and also make learners more conscious of language-specific features. It is critical to differentiate between positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer happens when there are similarities between the first language and English in terms of structure or meaning, and this similarity can lead to easier learning. Negative transfer, on the other hand, happens when learners incorrectly apply L1 rules to English. In language learning situations, negative transfer is commonly encountered because it manifests itself through errors in pronunciation grammar sentence structure, and vocabulary choices. A number of studies reveal that L1 interference tends to be very prevalent when learners depend greatly on translation and when the exposure to English in the classroom is irregular.

This conceptual background is particularly relevant to undergraduate students, as higher education by its very nature is multilingual. Students interact with their home language, regional language, language of the classroom and English, thus creating intricacies in the transfer effects instead of simple one language transfer to another. Hence, the influence of one's native language should not be considered a mere isolated problem but a reflection of a larger sociolinguistic and pedagogical context.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The paper is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how mother tongue influences English language learning among undergraduate students.
- To analyse L1 interference at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic levels.
- To identify the major issues and challenges faced by undergraduate learners because of negative transfer.
- To suggest pedagogical strategies for minimising harmful interference while using the mother tongue as a supportive resource.

1.3 Method and Scope

The paper is a qualitative conceptual study conducted from the close reading of the theme extracted and reviewing relevant literature on first language interference, contrastive analysis, multilingual pedagogy, and English language teaching. It does not offer new field data but rather draws on recent studies and theoretical discussions to develop an analytically well-grounded conference paper. This method is suitable for a conference paper in which a classroom problem is discussed in the light of general theoretical and pedagogical debates. The paper will only consider English learners at the undergraduate level in multilingual settings with the main focus on Indian classrooms and second-language learning environment in general. It aims at language transfer, classroom practice, and exposure patterns resulting difficulties in English learning rather than broader policy or testing frameworks.

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2 Mother Tongue Influence at Different Linguistic Levels

2.1 *Phonological Influence*

Phonological interference is one of the most conspicuous kinds of mother tongue influence since it affects not only pronunciation but also factors like stress, rhythm, and overall intelligibility. Quite often, learners replace the target language's sounds with the closest sounds from their first language, which is especially common in cases of major discrepancies between the two sound systems. Studies involving various multilingual learner groups strongly indicate that phonology is the area where L1 interference has the greatest impact, often even more than syntax or vocabulary.

Students who are at the university level usually face challenges with consonant clusters aspiration vowel length, correct stress placement, and the pronunciation of sounds unfamiliar to their mother tongue. Not only can these types of pronunciation errors hinder the learner's speaking confidence, but they might also discourage them from engaging in oral activities. Research into L1 influence in pronunciation highlights that the errors of this nature are not just random slips but rather the result of the learners being previously conditioned phonologically to their first language. Pronunciation is often the subject of less focused and sustained teaching as compared to grammar and writing in many language classes. This situation means that phonological transfer could become fossilized way beyond the initial stages of intervention. What is worse, once incorrect pronunciation habits have been engrained, correcting them can pose a significant challenge without directed listening, repetitive practice, and activities that raise awareness of the differences.

2.2 *Morphological Influence*

Morphological interference shows up when learners use the first-language patterns of word formation inflection agreement, tense marking, or derivation in English. Since Indian and other bilingual learners frequently switch between languages that have very different morphological systems, they sometimes leave out English inflections, make overgeneralization of rules, or even create words by an incorrect analogy. Studies on interference at different linguistic levels show that morphology is frequently the one to cause first language structure to influence learner output in a very subtle, yet persistent, way.

At undergraduate level, these issues can be visible through the incorrect usage of plural markers articles verb inflections, tense-aspect forms, and derivational suffixes. In cases where the native language does not make the same distinctions in the same way as English, the students may come up with grammatically incomplete or structurally changed forms. Such mistakes impact both the written accuracy and oral fluency since morphology is very much connected to the sentence-level grammar.

2.3 *Syntactic Influence*

One of the main reasons why the problem persists is that the classroom correction tends to target only the surface errors without taking into account the underlying cross-linguistic source of the error.

When teachers fail to illustrate how English structurally differs from the learner's first language, the students continue to produce similar syntactic patterns in speaking as well as writing tasks.

2.4 *Semantic and Lexical Influence*

Semantic interference refers to the transfer of meaning constructs, idiomatic connections, or ethnically based use patterns from the first language into English. Language learners might pick words that are only partially related in their meaning but wrong in the context or they might translate a proverb or an expression by rendering the words literally. Research on learner

interference reveals that when first language conceptual categories do not conform to English usage in a straightforward manner both semantics and lexis suffer.

Undergraduate students are the ones most of the times who experience this problem when writing essays, giving presentations, and responding in class. The knowledge of vocabulary can in fact be quite extensive but the understanding of the meaning can still be quite vague because the words chosen are through the first language equivalence rather than through the actual English collocation or discourse context. Apart from communicative ability, this also impacts the standard of academic expression.

2.5 Major Issues and Challenges

2.5.1 Limited Exposure to English

One of the key reasons why mother tongue influence is often the strongest is limited exposure to the English language in real-life situations. When English is only or mostly used in the classroom, students will still rely on their mother tongue for thinking, processing, and interacting. Such dependency on the mother tongue leads to higher chances of transfer. Research on English learning in multilingual and higher education environments shows that infrequent use of English is one of the causes of interference and it leads to slower progress towards becoming proficient in English production.

To a great extent, many college students know English through the use of textbooks, exams, or teachers' explanations rather than through communication that makes a difference in the learners' lives. Consequently, English may remain just a subject at school rather than a language for real-life interaction. This gap between learning English formally at school and using it in real life will result in the dependence on mother tongue remaining strong.

2.5.2 Overdependence on Translation

Translation can be a useful tool in early or strategic learning however relying heavily on translation often results in negative transfer. Learners who always convert every English item to the mother tongue in their mind, may end up producing literal equivalents instead of English structures that are appropriate to the context. Studies on the use of translation and mother tongue in language classrooms indicate that L1 can be helpful in understanding, but excessive use may postpone direct interaction with target language patterns. On the undergraduate level, translation-driven behaviors seem to be evident in note-making, paragraph writing, speaking and comprehension exercises. Usually, students first come up with ideas in their native language and then translate into English, which may result in unnatural wordings and structural distortions.

3 Classroom Practices and Pedagogical Limitations

Teaching strategies in the classroom will largely determine whether the natural influence of the mother tongue on learning is increased or decreased. For example, if education is heavily dependent on rote memorization, grammar drills done in isolation, or cramming for exams, it is very likely that students will not go beyond memorizing and recognizing the differences between English and their native tongue structurally and functionally.

Most of the time teachers in universities have to handle students from different language backgrounds and might not even be able to give each student individual attention due to time constraints. Therefore it is quite common that errors influenced by interference are simply considered as general mistakes instead of being recognized as a result of predictable cross-linguistic patterns. Such kind of understanding is essential because without it, pedagogical correction is hardly correct or complete.

3.1 *Anxiety and Reduced Communicative Competence*

Mother tongue influence is not just a language-related issue; it can be an emotional issue as well. If learners constantly make mistakes in pronunciation or grammar, it can cause them to feel shy or ashamed when they speak English, especially in mixed-ability settings. When students expect to be corrected or mocked, they might even refrain from speaking altogether. Doing so decreases the number of speaking opportunities, which in turn makes first-language structures even more dominant. Although many researchers mainly examine linguistic results, the cited effects on speaking confidence and classroom participation show that communication ability is very much related to the handling of interference. Therefore, teaching methods must consider both language correctness and learner confidence.

3.2 *Positive Role of the Mother Tongue*

A well-rounded conversation would have to note that the first language is not merely a challenge. On the contrary, research reveals that the mother tongue is capable of aiding understanding, preserving culture, grasping concepts, and even metalinguistic reflection provided it is not abused. Indeed, learners seem to understand complicated instructions, abstract ideas, and the meaning of a text much better if they are allowed to use the L1 from time to time. Strategic use of one's mother tongue in a multilingual setting may lower the mental effort required and facilitate students making explicit comparisons between the two language systems. Instead of forcing students to adhere to an unrealistic English-only approach, good teaching practices can direct L1 knowledge toward a better grasp of differences. This is particularly relevant in universities where students are required to comprehend academic English as a language system rather than only imitate it.

Hence, it is not a matter of having the mother tongue present in an English class but of how it is used. Over-reliance without control can be a barrier to learning, on the other hand, wise and sparing use can really serve as stepping stones.

4 Pedagogical Strategies for Undergraduate Classrooms

4.1 *Developing Contrastive Awareness*

The best way to lower damaging L1 interference is to raise contrastive awareness. Educators can highlight differences between features in English and those in students' mother tongues, especially in aspects like pronunciation, word order, verb time, and word choice. Contrastive analysis support states that such comparisons enable teachers and learners to have a clearer view of the reasons the same errors keep appearing and to find the right measures.

Revisiting the contrastive teaching method does not imply to limit it to mere error counting as was done in the past. Rather, it entails employing linguistic comparison as a means of figuring things out and imparting knowledge. Undergraduate students gain from teachers' efforts to not only point out what is incorrect but also to explain why a form has been influenced by a language habit that has been carried over.

4.2 *Strengthening Pronunciation Practice*

Since phonological interference is often central, classroom teaching should include regular listening and speaking practice. Minimal pairs, stress drills, guided reading aloud, and audio-assisted repetition can help learners notice sound distinctions absent from their mother tongue. Research on L1 effects in pronunciation supports targeted intervention rather than assuming that exposure alone will solve speech problems.

A supportive speaking environment is equally important. Students improve more when correction is constructive and practice opportunities are frequent rather than punitive or occasional.

4.3 *Reducing Mechanical Translation*

Instructional staff ought to slowly wean students off of the literal translation method of learning by promoting understanding and producing language English directly. Word changes, vocabulary in context, teacher-led summaries, as well as brief oral activities that emphasize meaning rather than form of memorization are examples of how this change can be realized. Given that some research recognizes the potential yet very limited effect of translation, the ideal approach would be moderation and not complete disallowance.

At the university level, the emphasis of activities should be on the gradual fading of bilingual dependence and the nurturance of English-thinking. Changing one's mode of thought will necessitate providing support to the extent that is just sufficient especially to those coming from non-English-medium backgrounds.

4.4 *Encouraging Rich English Exposure*

Classroom teaching by itself is not sufficient to completely overcome the influence of the learners' mother tongue unless they come across English in numerous and meaningful ways. One's English language skills can be greatly enhanced through a variety of non-classroom activities including forming reading clubs, having peer discussions, making presentations, recording podcasts, watching subtitled audio-visual materials, and doing language lab exercises. Research shows that low exposure is linked to continued interference; therefore, frequency and quality of engagement are critical for making lasting changes. The more learners are exposed to natural English language, the more they will be able to internalize the patterns rather than constantly translating everything into their mother tongue.

5 Teacher Sensitization to Linguistic Diversity

Teachers at the university level need training in both English teaching methods and the realities of multilingual classrooms. Merely being aware of common mother tongue-related learner problems can greatly enhance teacher feedback, lesson planning, and assessment. The research on multilingual pedagogy points out that understanding students' language backgrounds not only helps in building teacher-student rapport but also results in making better instructional decisions.

It is a good example of why teaching with sensitivity is necessary in Indian institutions of higher learning where one class may comprise students of different languages with varying interference patterns. Sensitized teaching avoids the danger of overgeneralization and is a way to promote fairness.

6 Discussion

Based on the documented proposals referred to in this paper, the effect of the mother tongue should be viewed as neither a minor problem nor a sign of learner failure, but rather as one of the usual and natural characteristics of second language acquisition in multilingual societies. In fact, the problem arises for the learners' English skills when their linguistic backgrounds are not taken into consideration, their access to English is very limited, and the English teaching in the classrooms is only correction without explanation.

Undergraduate students are at an even greater disadvantage as English may well be the only language subject or the academic "door" tool. If L1 is consistently interfering, students may not be able to effectively participate in the classroom, perform well in exams, write quality papers, or communicate for the purpose of employment. However, viewing mother tongue influence solely as a source of deficiency is not sufficient; what we require is a teaching methodology that raises awareness, provides support, and gives students opportunities for thorough practice.

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The conflict implies that the acquisition of more than one language should be interpreted as a positive feature. Besides, if educators use contrastive and reflective approaches, the first language may even lead to a better English acquisition rather than to hindering it. This belief is in line with the general multilingual pedagogical rational considering learners' complete linguistic capabilities to be valuable.

7 Conclusion

First language or mother tongue influence is one of the major factors impacting English language acquisition among university students. It changes aspects such as pronunciation, word formation, grammar, and even meaning, especially in situations where learners have very limited English exposure and rely a lot on translation. Meanwhile, the mother tongue, if used properly, can aid understanding and raise awareness.

The main instructional problem is not to get rid of the learner's first language but to stop the negative transfer from the first language becoming fixed. English language teaching for undergraduates therefore should support the understanding and teaching of the contrasts, assist with pronunciation, discourage the use of translation as a default mode, enlarge the time that students are actually in contact with the English language, and increase the awareness of teachers working in multilingual environments. This kind of English language teaching approach will help students shift from using their interference-driven language performance to their ability to communicate fluently and confidently, which is what communicative competence is about.

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