# Research Evidence of L1 Interference in the Acquisition of English Syntax

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## Abstract

By and large, the occurrence of errors is integral to the process of learning. The learning of languages (both the mother tongue and a second language), likewise, involves the making of errors. It is claimed and supported by research evidence that SLA errors are caused by both inter- and intra-language factors. Inter-lingual errors result from the negative transfer of a learner's L1 features while intra-lingual errors are due to factors within the L2 itself like overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized. Although both inter- and intra-lingual factors act as sources of errors in SLA, there is compelling evidence in the research literature that SLA errors are overwhelmingly L1 driven, i.e., mainly caused by the negative transfer of the language features of the first language of the learner. There is also strong evidence that first language interference presents itself to the learning of all aspects of a second language, i.e. morphology, syntax, semantics and discourse. The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss  the claims and views on L1 negative transfer to SLA; then to present secondary data in support of and as evidence for the claims with reference to the acquisition of the English syntactic properties of word order, subject-verb agreement, tense, copula BE, subject omission, the subordinate clause, expletive pronouns, positions of adverbs, and plurals among others; and, finally, to recommend an approach to the remediation of L1 induced English syntactic errors adopting form-focused instruction in tandem with meaning-focused, communicative activities. The evidence and examples of L1 transfer have been collected from diverse English language learning contexts and contexts of use which can be generalized to contexts other than those examined in the article.

*Keywords*: SLA, L1 Transfer, Intralingual Influence, Syntactic Errors, Form-focused Instruction, Focus on Forms

## Introduction

**The Problem: L1 Interference in Second Language Acquisition**

The learning of anything involves making errors. Language learning in general and second language learning in particular involves making errors, too, as Dulay and Burt (1974, p. 95) puts it, "You can't learn without goofing." The SLA process, likewise, involves errors which are said to be caused both by a learner's first language (interlingual) factors and factors within the target language (TL) itself (intralingual) which he is learning, like overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized. Having said that, there are strong claims and compelling research evidence that first language interference is the overwhelming reason for erroneous or deviant L2 forms. The similarities or the differences between the two language systems determine the intensity of influence. When the languages are similar, facilitation or positive transfer occurs whereas differences result in inhibition or negative transfer manifesting itself in erroneous or deviant L2 forms. Lado (1957, p.2); Corder (1967); Gass (1996); Ellis (1997); Benson (2002, pp. 68-70); Collins (2002, pp. 43-94) and a host of others strongly believe that SLA errors are mainly due to the interference of the first language of the learner. Cornu(1973, pp. 13-47) and Steinbach (1981, pp. 249-259) share this view and add that there is evidence that the share of L1 induced L2 errors is usually 60% of the total number of errors. I would like to propose to use the term *transfer* synonymously with *influence* and *interference* as factors responsible for L2 errors; hence, these three terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

L1 influence is said to be negative in most cases because no two languages share the same  linguistic properties; if they do, the acquisition of the L2 is facilitated by the L1 examples being Hindi and Urdu which are almost identical in syntactic structures and  their lexis have some similarities, too. Therefore, spoken Hindi and spoken Urdu are mutually intelligible but the two alphabets are so different from each other that without the knowledge of them, written Hindi and written Urdu would be far from being mutually comprehensible. The role of similarities and differences were first conceptualized by Fries (1945, p.2) who believes when two languages are similar, L2 learning is facilitated but when they are different, inhibition occurs making it difficult to learn the L2. Larsen-Freeman (1991, p.53) has the same view that similarities assist in acquisition whereas differences negate it and give rise to errors. A recent comment by Chan (2004, pp. 56-74) supports the view that L2 language deficiencies by and large are because of L1 negative interference. He adds that when a learner finds it difficult to communicate in the TL, he/she resorts to his/her previously learnt

repertoire, i.e. his/her L1 habits. L1 negative interference occurs in all aspects of language, namely phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics; Odlin (1989, p.23) and Lee (1999) support the claim that transfer can occur in all linguistic subsystems including morphology and syntax.

**Purpose of the Paper**

Originally, the paper aimed to survey the literature for evidence for L1 influence on the acquisition English syntax and lexis but allowing for the constraints of space, it now examines secondary data on L1 influence on English syntax alone in the interlanguage of English learners and non-native English users' English across cultures. The data encompass the syntactic properties of word order, tense, Copula BE, subordination, plural forms, articles, and the passive, among others. The survey is followed by a discussion of pedagogic implications of L1 interference for teaching English. In the end, an English teaching approach based on form-focused instruction in tandem with meaning-focused classroom communicative tasks is explained and recommended. The survey of secondary data which support the above claims and views follows in the section below.

## Methodology

The paper is not a primary research report; it does not need a methodology as such; instead, it is a survey of the relevant literature on L1 influence on the acquisition of English syntax followed by its implications for teaching. The survey comprises description of findings of earlier research, an analysis and critical discussion of the findings and their implications for teaching English syntax.

## Survey of Literature on L1 Transfer

The literature abounds with findings on L1 influence on SLA which is said to influence all aspects of language, i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax and pragmatics although it has been observed that second language phonology suffers the most interference from L1 and it is difficult to repair bad pronunciation habits. Originally, this paper planned to examine English learners and users' syntax and lexis in their English for evidence of L1 influence, but because of the constraints of space, its focus is now restricted to the discussion of secondary data on syntax alone in English learners' interlanguage affected by L1.

## L1 Syntactic Transfer

From the survey of literature and the examination of relevant examples where research data have not been available, the following facts have emerged with respect to the transfer of L1 syntactic features to the acquisition of English and hence leading to errors by various nonnative English speakers and learners representing a wide variety of contexts.

### Plurality and Article Errors

Farooq (1998) carried out a study of written English of Aichi Women's Junior College in Japan. The students were aged 19-20 having six years of English learning at a secondary school. Their English speaking and writing were at upper-basic level. They were given the topic, "My English learning" to develop into an essay. Errors of the following types, among other things, were found:

**Plurality errors.** 1. *She taught **song***. 2. *I wanted to study other language.*

**Articles errors.** Examples 1. *I studied English for- time.* 2. *I met – good host family*.

The above errors of plurality and articles can be easily justified as Japanese (L1) induced on the ground that in the Japanese language, similar constructions do occur as correct sentences because plurals and articles are not available in Japanese. The findings of this study, thus, clearly show that unavailability of certain L2 syntactic forms in the learners' L1 is a difficulty factor which is likely to deplete their acquisition of the second language. Such interference is also noticeable in a Bengali speaker's acquisition of the English syntactic features in question. The following examples of wrong English sentences with plurality errors, adapted from Syed (2016, pp. 75-76), bear testimony to this: 1. *The **boy** (*for 'boys'*) play.* 2. *I have bought a few **book** (*for 'books')*. 3. *I'm eating some **mango*** (for 'mangoes')*.  In Bengali, plural forms are not always morphologically differentiated from the corresponding singular forms, which, in effect, gives rise to such wrong word forms. Articles in Bengali, as in Japanese, may sometimes be omitted resulting in the following wrong sentences (omission error): 1. *He is reading **book.*** 2. *I have written **assignment.*** 3. *I couldn't take **test** because I was sick.* 4. ***Textbook** is (article omitted) good source of materials.* (From Syed, ibid. p. 74)

### Determiner Errors

Santesteban and Costa (2005) conducted research on the processing of L2 determiner nouns by two groups – Basque-Spanish and Catalan –Spanish early bilinguals. Four different groups of sixteen subjects took part in the study. The

Basque-Spanish subjects were students of Basque philology at the University of the Basque Country whereas the Catalan- Spanish were students of Psychology at the University of Barcelona. Both groups were passively exposed to Spanish through TV, the radio and other means and the media. The subjects were given 39 pictures with the job of producing: 1) singular DPs 2) plural DPs and 3) numeral DPs in the singular and 4) numeral determiners in the plural. Each participant was asked to supply a suitable determiner to each picture. It was found that the Basque-Spanish speakers made more errors than the Catalan speakers because Basque determiners have N+D structures whereas Catalonian and Spanish have D+N structures. The Catalonians, therefore , made a fewer errors in processing the D+N structures in Spanish, the second language they were learning than did their Basque counterparts. The results confirm that L2 syntactic processing is different when L1 and L2 structures are different.

## Miscellaneous Errors (1): Omission of Determiners, Wrong Possessive Forms, Subject-verb Agreement, Copula 'BE'

Moros and Saleuddin (2007) conducted a study involving 20 students from two rural schools in each of the three States of Malaysia (Pahang, Selangor and Melaka) selected for the investigation. They wrote two essays for half-an-hour on "My family" and the following errors were found among the learners. Examples of the errors were as follows:

**Omission of determiners.** Examples: 1**.** *Sometimes I bring it to ____park to play*. 2. *He works as_____ meter reader*. 3. *She plays _____ piano while I play*.

The above errors indicate direct transfer of Malay grammar which does not require a determiner before a noun. Many other languages too, including Bengali, have the same feature  and it exerts the same influence on the learners' English.

**Wrong form of the determiner/possessive.** Examples: 1. *All **this** countries lost their properties. 2. My **mother** name Zahora.  3. **She's** hobby is drawing.*

The above, also, can be justified as the transfer of the Malay language in which the possessive form of the determiner is the same as the nominative form of the noun.

**Subject-verb agreement.** Examples: 1. *My mother **like** to eat chicken rice.* 2. *She **stay** at home.* 3. *The game  **consist** of two teams.*

In Malayan grammar, the verb form does not differ according to the person of the subject. In some other languages too, including Bengali, this grammatical characteristic exists like *He eat* (Syed ibid. p.75). This sentence is equivalent to Bengali: 1. *Shey* (Singular) *khaey* and 2. *Ora* (Plural) *khaey*.

**Copula 'BE'.** Examples: 1. *My mother's name ____ Maznah Binti Haz Dahlan.*

2. *My cat's name _____ Koko.*

The presence of the copula 'BE' is not often essential in Malayan sentences so the first language behaviour is transferred to English language, the learners' L2.

**Miscellaneous Errors (2): Subject-verb Agreement, Subject Omission, and Prepositions**

Chen (2006, pp. 76-110) conducted a quasi-experimental research at a private college in Taiwan to find out computer assisted instruction's impact on EFL grammar skills of beginning EFL language learners. He used grammar instruction with contrastive analysis of Mandarin and English to help students learn English grammar. Fifty students were in the control group and fifty were in the experimental group. The participants were medical technology students who received formal education at school for six years. The population was divided into 29% male and 71% female students. The participants in both groups received the same duration of treatment for two weeks with sixteen hours for each group. Grammar areas covered were nouns, articles, pronouns, verbs, adjectives and subordination. As tools of instruction, grammar explanation and exercises were used. After the grammar instruction, both groups were given this post-writing assessment task: "The most memorable thing in my life." Some of the types of errors found are as follows:

**Subject-verb agreement errors.** Examples**:** *She say*; *The doctor say.*
These are certainly a case of transfer from Chinese, the learners' mother tongue which lacks verb conjugation.

**Subject omission.** Example: *"He says he forgot to prepare the gift. Till evening. Say his ring drops in the sand heap. Call me to find."*

The above telegraphic text is in fact a topic-comment structure which is adhered to in some languages including Mandarin. Such a sentence is acceptable in Mandarin and as an L1 habit it found its way into English. In English, to the contrary, the subject, especially in formal or written English, is mandatory. Hindi is another language where such a split is permissible and may be transferred to an English sentence as: "The plane reached Detroit. Later stopped for an hour." (Syed, ibid. p.73). Syed observes that this sentence is acceptable to a Hindi speaker of English because the co-reference subject deletion rule is acceptable in Hindi. In Bengali, such splits occur in a complex sentence like: "I will not go with you. Because you treat me very badly." The reason is simple: Such structures are commonplace in Bengali and are generally transferred to English writing.

**Preposition errors.** Example: *At last I went the market*. Such an omission of prepositions is certainly an influence of Mandarin Chinese in which prepositions are

not present as they are unnecessary. So, in English sentences produced by Chinese-speaking learners, prepositions may be omitted or wrong prepositions may be used. Other examples of prepositional errors found are 1. *I am listening music.* 2. *I am going to abroad* 3. *They discussed about the matter.*

**Miscellaneous Errors (3): Word Order Errors and Subject Drop**

**Word order.** Unlike Russian, Italian, Arabic or Bengali (to some extent), English is a fixed word order language having the S+V+O basic word order. The following sentences make sense in Russian: 1. *A boy is reading a newspaper: S+V+O* 2. *A newspaper is reading a boy: O+V+S* 3. *Is reading a boy a newspaper: V+S+O* 4. *Is reading a newspaper a boy: V+O+S* (From Isurin, 2005, p. 1118). Except for sentence 1, the rest are wrong in English.

It is not surprising that a Russian learner of English may produce any of the above sentences and be considered correct. Accordingly, Isurin (ibid) observes that though pattern one above is dominant in Russian as in English, Russian speakers are free to produce patterns 2-5 after their L1. As in Russian, in Italian too, sentence structures enjoy free word orders. As Chapetón, C. M. (2008) observes, in Italian, SVO, VOS and OVS orders are found in speech whereas VSO is permitted in the written language. Vigliocco et al (1995) presents these examples of the free word order in Italian: 1. SVO*: John has eaten the apple 2. VOS: Has eaten the apple John* 3. OVS*: The apple has eaten John* 4. VSO*: Eaten John the apple.* Except for sentence 1, sentences 2 – 4 are wrong English sentences but would be correct in Italian.

Research literature abounds with L1 syntactic transfer at the level of word order. In fact, word order transfer has been one of the most intensively studied syntactic properties in SLA research (Odlin, 1989). The following report on L1 word order transfer by Mede et al (2014, p. 77) would testify to the matter. Nineteen students, 13 males and 6 females, from the preparatory programme at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey, participated in the study. They were aged 17 – 26. A grammaticality judgment test was administered to the subjects to find out whether Turkish had an influence on the placement of verbs in the English sentences the learners produced. The participants were given twenty sentences out of which ten contained wrong verb placements. Five of the ten sentences appear below as examples: 1. *He four hundred Turkish Lira earns* 2. *Some people very slowly speak.* 3. *My granddad alone lives.* 4. *She homework hardly ever does.* 5. *We every day TV watch.* Interestingly, all five were considered correct. The reason for the errors, as the researchers correctly pointed out, is the

influence of Turkish word order in which the verb is usually at the end of the sentence (S + O + V).

Another study on L1 word order transfer carried out by Chapetón (2008) involving an Italian English learner is reported below. The learner did not learn English through interaction but received formal instruction in English at school. He was asked to write a composition titled "My favourite movie" in 15 minutes' time. The assignment was analysed for syntactic transfer of word order, subject use and tense use. As for word order transfer of Italian, the following were found: 1. *Eat the apple I*: VOS 2. *The film (-) like it*: O+S (subject dropped, in this case) +V

The sentences are clear transfer of the flexible word order rules of Italian to the interlanguage of the leaner concerned. One weakness of the study is the number of subjects involved. However, it is very likely that the same result would be found if a larger number or subjects were used. This study also revealed **Subject Drop** as seen in this example of the learner's English: *This film like it*.

**Adverb Position Errors**

The placement of adverbs in English varies according to adverb types; they are positioned at the front, in the middle or at the end of a sentence according to its type. In some languages, however, as in Bengali, the adverbs placement is fixed – they are always placed before the verb. Bengali learners usually follow the Bengali adverb placement rules for English, too, irrespective of adverb types, as in these sentences:  1. *He slowly walks* ( Correct: "He walks slowly.") **2.** *She is beautifully dancing* (Correct: "She is dancing beautifully.") 3. *Have you yet taken the TOEFL?* (Correct: "Have you taken the TOEFL yet.")

Wrong adverb placements in English sentences because of L1 interference were found in a study carried out by Garnier (2012) who ran a project for designing automatic correction strategies for syntactic errors in English written by French native speakers. A 10000-word English corpus composed of scientific texts written by French students and professional and personal emails written by French native speakers was examined. The following are a few examples (in sentence segments or full sentences) of adverb placement errors found:

Table 1 (Adapted from Garnier, ibid, p.60)

*Types of adverb placement errors found in French speaking users of English*

| Type | Examples | % in corpus | Remark |
|---|---|---|---|
| Manner, means or instrument | *To index **efficiently** the distribution data* | 35.5% | Highest among the types |
| Degree | *His father resembles **strongly** his own character* | 12.9% | |
| Temporal location | *The TextCorp.is now evolving to become **shortly** a software component* | 6.5% | |
| Connectives | *They exhibit **nevertheless** the dependency relationships* | 16.1% | Ranks third |
| Evaluation | *The input documents can be **a priori** any type of Web page* | 3.2% | |
| Additive | *The treatment of this official day exemplifies **also** an answer to associations* | 22.6% | Second among the types |
| Restrictive | *In order to hand down **exclusively** family memories* (?) | 3.2% | The placement of *exclusively* seems all right. The '?' indicates correct placement. |

Except for the last item, all of the six placements are syntactically influenced by French in which adverbs have a fixed position in the 'S + V + ADV + O' order whereas English adverbs, as mentioned earlier, are differently placed according to adverb types; unlike English, French adverbs are rarely found between a verb and its object, the researcher observed. What is interesting is that the largest percentage of placement errors concern adverbs of manner and "might be due to negative transfer" of French, the researcher pointed out. The truth, however, is that the consistency of the error pattern concerning all the adverb types clearly points the finger at French (L1) negative influence as the culprit in the erroneous placement of not only English adverbs of manner but also the rest of the types.

**Transfer of Tenses**

Celaya and Torras (2001) analyzed data on the acquisition of English tenses used by Catalan Spanish speakers. The data revealed that the present simple was used in cases where the present continuous would be more appropriate in English. The reason is, in Spanish, both "I'm eating now" or "I eat now" are correct to express a current action. In English, however, only the present continuous is suitable for an action happening at the time of speaking. This is also true about some other languages

including Bengali where the past tense verb sometimes is not morphologically distinct from its present simple counterpart. In Bengali, the past form of verbs like *eat, see, go*, *lie*, *run* and a host of others may be the same in their simple present and present continuous form.

**Miscellaneous Syntactic Errors (4)**

Meriläinen (2010) investigated frequent grammatical errors in the writing of Finnish learners of English caused by the influence of Finnish. The researcher (ibid, p.53) pointed out that Swedish is a Germanic Indo-European language having typological similarities with English whereas Finnish is a Fenno-Ugric language, distant from both Swedish and English. Merilainen made this point: "Differences between these two learner groups in their acquisition and use of English can, thus, be reliably attributed to L1 influence." The researcher collected materials consisting of a 96787-word corpus from 500 written compositions by Finnish Upper Secondary School students as part of the Finnish National Matriculation Examination in three successive years: 1990, 2000, and 2005. The following table adapted from Meriläinen (ibid) shows the difference in transfer of the syntactic items from the two first languages, i.e. Finnish and Swedish to the acquisition of English syntax by the respective learners:

Table 2

*Difference in Transfer from Finnish and Swedish to English*

|  | Finnish-speaking students | | Swedish-speaking students | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Syntactic categories | Number of errors | % of errors /10000 words | Number of errors | % of errors/10000 words |
| The passive | 69 | 7.1 | 1 | 0.36 |
| Expletive pronouns | 93 | 9.6 | 2 | 0.7 |
| Subordinate clauses | 88 | 9.1 | 7 | 2.5 |
| Future time | 63 | 6.5 | 6 | 2.1 |
| Propositions | 358 | 37.0 | 33 | 11.7 |
| TOTAL | 671 | 69.3 | 49 | 17.4 |

The errors committed by the Swedish students were far outnumbered by the Finnish students in the categories examined because of the dissimilarity in the syntactic features between Finnish and English. Swedish being similar to English, Swedish-speaking learners of English made a lot fewer mistakes in the syntactic categories in question. The results also attest to the fact that the more similar the L1 is to the L2, the easier it will be to learn it. It follows that because Swedish syntactic features are similar to those of English, they had a positive influence in its learning

whereas, Finnish had a negative transfer effect because of differences. Examples of errors of the above syntactic features found in the Finnish-speaking learners' English are as follows:

**The passive.** Examples**:** 1.*There is a lot of animals in the world which **use** in an awful way.* 2. *There **need** help very much.* 3. *Pets can't **leave** or **free** because they need people***.** 4***.** Now nature is so polluted that something **have to do.*** These sentences are the result of direct influence from Finnish which does not have a passive form like English.

**Expletive pronouns.** Examples: *In our culture is unusual if a twenty years old woman is married.* 2. *Nowadays are only few places where is possible to swim.* 3. *Almost every home is a pet.* 4. *But are people who don't care about animals.*

The researcher pointed out that Finnish lacks the anticipatory pronouns *it and there,* so in sentences (1) and (2) *it* is omitted; in sentence (3), on the other hand, the learner changed the word order by beginning the sentence with an introductory adverbial *Almost* followed by a verb and the subject was placed sentence-finally instead of 'there' because of Finnish influence. With the inclusion of 'there' the sentence would read: 'There is a pet in almost every home'. Sentence (4) lacks "there" after "But" for the same reason. If all of these sentences were directly translated into Finnish, they would be considered correct though.

**Subordinate clauses.** Examples: 1. *It is never easy to divorce so it's same to you are you married or not. 2. I do not know have I enough courage and skills.* 3. *Now-a-days the main reason why people kill animals is usually it, that it is fun.*

In (1) and (2) above, as the researcher pointed out, the absence of subordinators *if* or *whether* is because of Finnish influence. In (3), however, *it* has been used as a supporting pronoun represented by *se* at clause boundaries in Finish. The above three examples clearly show L1 syntactic transfer in the acquisition of English syntax.

**Future time.**  Examples of transfer: 1. *In my opinion, wars are wars also in future. 2. So Nokia's collapsing doesn't affect the Finnish unemployment. 3. I don't shut out the thought that I live my life alone.*

The omission of the grammatical constructions expressing future time resulted from the interference of Finnish which has no equivalent for "will + infinitive" and "going to" as used in English.

**Errors of prepositions.** Examples: 1. *Watching news from (*for *on) TV is interesting.* 2. *Instead of being good in* (for *at) math.* 3. *The whole of life I have dreamed (of* is dropped*) a rich man.* 4. *I will go (to* is dropped*) that country.*

The researchers pointed out that prepositions are difficult for Finnish students of English because Finnish has a rich inflectional system which renders English

prepositions redundant; as a result, often wrong preposition choices are made or they are omitted. The prepositional errors in (1) and (2) were caused by the abstract locative cases, and in (3) and (4) omissions of preposition occurred with respect to verb complementation and adverbial phrases respectively. Prepositions are equally problematic for Bengali speakers of English often confused about which preposition to use when or when to drop it. Bengali, like Finnish, is an inflectional language in which sentences usually do not require prepositions as a separate grammatical element unlike English. The following are a few instances from Syed (ibid. p. 76) of wrong prepositions or no prepositions used by Bengali speaking learners of English: 1. *I am listening (to* omitted*) music*. 2. "I will *discuss about* (redundant) the matter soon. More examples of incorrect prepositions used in Bengali: 3. *I am sitting into (*correct: *in) the classroom*. 4. *The plane flew on* (correct: *over) my head*. 5. *The cat is sitting in (*correct: *on) the table*. 4. *The woman walked on (*correct: *across) the road to the bank opposite*. 5. *The cat climbed on (*correct: *up/down) the tree*.

**Syntactic Errors Found By Usha and Kader (2016).** In spite of the overwhelming interference exerted by learners' L1 in SLA with reference to the acquisition of English syntax, it is nonetheless true that L2 developmental factors and non-linguistic influences like learner factors, contextual factors, and affective factors to name but a few also affect second language learning. But as this paper is concerned with first language transfer to SLA, one last and most recent study on English learners' syntactic errors is reported below which establishes the overwhelming interference of L1 in the area concerned. This study was carried out by Usha and Kader (ibid) to find out syntactic errors in the English language of secondary school students in Kerala (India), understand the reasons for the errors, and put forth some teaching suggestions for the remediation of the errors made by the learners. 280 secondary school students and 30 English teachers from the same level were involved. The subjects were asked to write a picture composition, a composition based on prompts, describe a process and narrate an event. The teachers were supplied with a questionnaire to record their perception of the reasons for the errors, namely student attitude, interlingual interference, intralingual interference, teaching methods, exposure to the English language, teacher factor, and the lack of planning for remediation. The following syntactic errors and the percentage of each one's occurrence were recorded.

Table 3

*Types of syntactic errors found*

| Types of errors | Percentage of occurrence |
|---|---|
| Concordance in using auxiliaries | 93% |
| SVO sentence patterns | 88% |
| Use of articles | 88% |
| Use of prepositions | 94% |
| Use of tenses | 92% |
| Use of conjunctions | 89% |

For the purpose of my paper, however, the following causes of errors, as perceived by the participating teachers, are significant:

Table 4

*Causes of syntactic errors perceived*

| Major causes | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Students' attitude | 97% |
| Interlingual interference | 96% |
| Teaching methods | 91% |
| Intralingual influence | 80% |
| Insufficient exposure to English | 75% |
| Teacher factor | 59% |
| Lack of  planning for remediation | 51% |

Note: The tables have been adapted from Usha and Kader (ibid, p.p. 100-101)

The findings indicate that, leaving aside the non-linguistic factors, interlanguage influence emerged as the more tangible reason for errors than intralanguage influence. The study, however, does not offer any plausible explanation and justification as to why 96% of the errors should be blamed on L1 interference. Nevertheless, according to the teachers' perception (revealed from the teacher responses to the questionnaire but not appended to the study report), "interlingual interference is one among the major factors causing errors" (Usha and Kader, ibid. p.101). Clearly, the syntactic errors found by Usha and Kader are attributable to an overwhelming influence of the first language of the subjects involved in the study. Interestingly, the error patterns found in the study and their major linguistic cause (L1 transfer) are likely to be similar to those found in the English of learners living in the neighbouring geographic locations including Bangladesh.

**Discussion**

**Significant Facts about L1 Transfer**

The veracity and universality of the secondary data presented, analyzed and

evaluated (aided by examples) in this paper about L1 syntactic influence on English (L2) syntax should be evidence enough for cross-linguistic negative transfer being the main culprit. The errors made by the learners were the results of influence of their specific first languages. In cases where non-linguistic variables were also reported, L1 interference was still the dominant reason for linguistic errors. Most importantly, the language-learner language represented different levels of proficiency and age but interference errors were found irrespective of these variables. This challenges the notion that early L2 learners mostly suffer interference from their first languages. As negative interference occurs because of differences between two languages (L1 and L2), understanding the differences is likely to help teachers adopt the right approach along with the right materials to remedy linguistic errors.

**Implications of L1 Transfer for Teaching English**

The discovery of grammatical errors needs remediation. Because errors result from difficulties which in turns result from differences, a study of differences or Contrastive Analysis is helpful and an effective component of what is known as form-focused teaching which is described, analyzed and illustrated in the section below. Old habits die hard! Sufficient practice is necessary to unlearn and grow out of old L1 habits and grow new habits (contrary to the popular belief that habit formation is insignificant in language learning); fortunately, the need for practice after presentation is considered a necessity in communicative language teaching (note the PPP procedure explained below), which is a buzzword in SLA nowadays.  It follows that teaching language forms along with meaning and giving students enough time to practise language forms is useful in enhancing learner awareness of the target language form; this issue is discussed in detail below.

**Form-focused Instruction for the Remediation of English Linguistic Errors**

**Form-Focused Instruction Versus Focus on Form**

Long (1991, pp. 45-46) views "form-focused" and "forms-focused" as oppositional. To him, focus on form is to draw students' attention incidentally to the linguistic features of an L2 as they arise along meaning- or communication-focused activities followed by teacher  intervention or corrective feedback, whereas focus on forms means   teaching linguistic forms separately and systematically, discretely, explicitly, preemptively, directly or intentionally in  separate lessons. To Sheen (2002, p. 304), to the contrary, there is no difference between the two; they would refer to any approach which includes grammar instruction. As Ellis (2015, p. 9) sees it, performing communicative tasks can contribute to linguistic development but that

does not occur automatically; it requires focus on form, both preemptively and reactively. Communicative activities should have a dual purpose, he further claims. He adds that learners can benefit from intentional as well as from incidental learning. Drawing learner attention to linguistic forms is necessary besides equipping then with communicative competence. I believe the conflict between *form* and *forms* is unwarranted; focus on the linguistic features of an L2, including its syntax, is what should be considered form-focused instruction conducive to its learning.
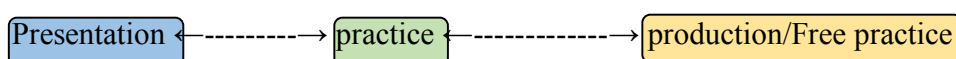
**Why Form-Focused Instruction**

As Prabhu (1987, p. 27) puts it, form-focused activities facilitate subconscious assimilation of the form and promote automaticity in language use. The teaching of meaning is not enough when problems arise with respect to L1 interference or transfer at the level of syntax, for example. Schmidt (1994) argues that no learning takes place without attention to specific forms. Schmidt, however, does not mean that attention to form refers to an awareness of grammatical rules but to the noticing of specific linguistic items. I have a different view that in the process of remediation, metalinguistic explanation of rules of the L2 is not unhelpful but may be employed in tandem with other remedial techniques and procedures. I share Ellis's (2015, p. 4) stand: "'focus on form might be assumed to refer to awareness of some underlying, abstract rule." Lyster (2004, p. 337) supports form-focused instruction on the ground that merely communicative activities make interlanguage reach a development plateau in terms of accuracy. To push interlanguage development above the plateau and enable learners to proceduralize their knowledge of L2 forms, form-focused options including noticing and language awareness activities are necessary. Instruction based primarily on communication strategies, may lead learners to bypass target forms and use unanalyzed non-target representation of the TL to achieve mutual comprehensibility at the expense of accuracy (Skehan, 1998). Because form-focused teaching is inherently remedial, as Ellis (ibid) puts it, it helps learners and teachers alike to address the problematic issues through learner utterances or the teacher and/or the learner's wish to clarify the understanding of a linguistic feature; however, he does not distinguish between form and forms; instead, he claims that linguistic forms may either be taught extensively, inductively, incidentally or intensively, deductively, and intentionally. However, Ellis (ibid. p.6) holds the view that some structures may require in-depth practice before they can be fully acquired. In a nutshell, form-focused instruction, either extensive (incidental, reactive, covert) or intensive (intentional, preemptive, overt) or both are useful for teaching language for meaning. The fact is, focus on form does not negate focus on meaning; rather, learners simultaneously

attend to both form and meaning during a cognitive event (Doughty, 2001, p. 211). It helps students notice TL forms and thus it raises learners' awareness of the TL by providing sufficient practice opportunities for a linguistic feature in question. According to Ellis (2005, pp. 7-8), the interface position, one of three positions held by the **Interface Hypothesis,** holds that a grammatical structure should be first presented explicitly and then be practised until it is fully proceduralized; thus, it supports the PPP (presentation, practice, production) approach even usable in Communicative Language Teaching. However, unlike the traditional PPP approach, form-focused instruction is not necessarily unidirectional but it may involve a back-and-forth movement along a continuum as Lyster (ibid. p. 334) and I propose:

Noticing ←--------→ Awareness ----------------→ Practice
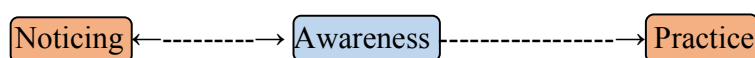
How this approach relates to PPP is seen in the figure below:

Presentation ←--------→ practice ←-------------→ production/Free practice

*Figure 1*. Flexible form-focused instruction supported by a flexible PPP approach

The above figure shows, form-focused instruction is not fixed but it moves along a continuum; unlike a traditional, fixed and stereotyped approach, a flexible PPP approach, the vehicle for the implementation of form-focused instruction, allows movement back and forth at any of the three stages. Thus, instead of being fixed and rigid, form-focused instruction has a scope for being flexible, adaptable and eclectic.

**Form-Focused Instruction Techniques**

Now that it is confirmed that instead of wholly relying on communicative activities which focus on fluency alone, focus on form, either consciously or unconsciously, may be useful in the remediation of errors at the syntactic level and others for that matter followed by direct teacher feedback (supported by Ellis, 2000, pp223-236; Ellis, 2001, pp1-46) and also by metalinguistic explanation (mentioned earlier) and feedback to remedy syntactic, lexical or any other L2 linguistic features. Ellis (2015, pp. 8-9) has it that form-focused activities are of two types: a) reactive and preemptive. **Reactive focus** on form: 1. Negotiation: a) conversational (teacher responds to learner response because he does not understand student errors) or b) didactic (Teacher explicitly explains grammatical features without involving a communication breakdown) 2. Feedback is either: a) Implicit (recasts): No direct

indication of errors or b) Explicit: Direct indication of errors; formal error correction; and metalinguistic explanation. **Preemptive focus** on form is either: 1. Student initiated (the student asks questions about a form or 2. Teacher initiated (the teacher gives advice, explanation or asks questions regarding an error).

Thornby (1997) proposes reformulation, reconstruction and dictogloss, among other things, as awareness raising activities. Thornby (ibid. p. 333) proposes distinct awareness-building activities for the remediation of L1 syntax like: 1) providing opportunities for reflection, 2) teaching the use of words in different contexts, 3) playing a tape with words in focus and asking students to count the occurrence of each word, 4) training students to find the differences between two similar texts, 5) developing proof-reading skills of students, 6) asking students to compare drafts of texts, and 7) supplying students with dictionaries and grammar books to find differences between their versions of a syntactic element and that in the dictionary.

Lyster (ibid. p 334) proposes noticing, language awareness and practice activities as instructional options along a continuum as shown above. Following the same line of thought, Yu (2013, pp.21-29) reports these techniques which move along an implicit/incidental---explicit/intentional continuum as shown below:

**Most implicit**←-------------------------------------------------------------------→**Most explicit**

| |
|---|
| 1.1Input flood |
| 1.2Task-essential language instruction |

| |
|---|
| 2.1Input enhancement |
| 2.2 Negotiation |

| |
|---|
| 3.1Recast |
| 3.2 Output enhancement |

| |
|---|
| 4. Interaction enhancement |

| |
|---|
| 5.1 Dictogloss |
| 5.2 Consciousness raising tasks |

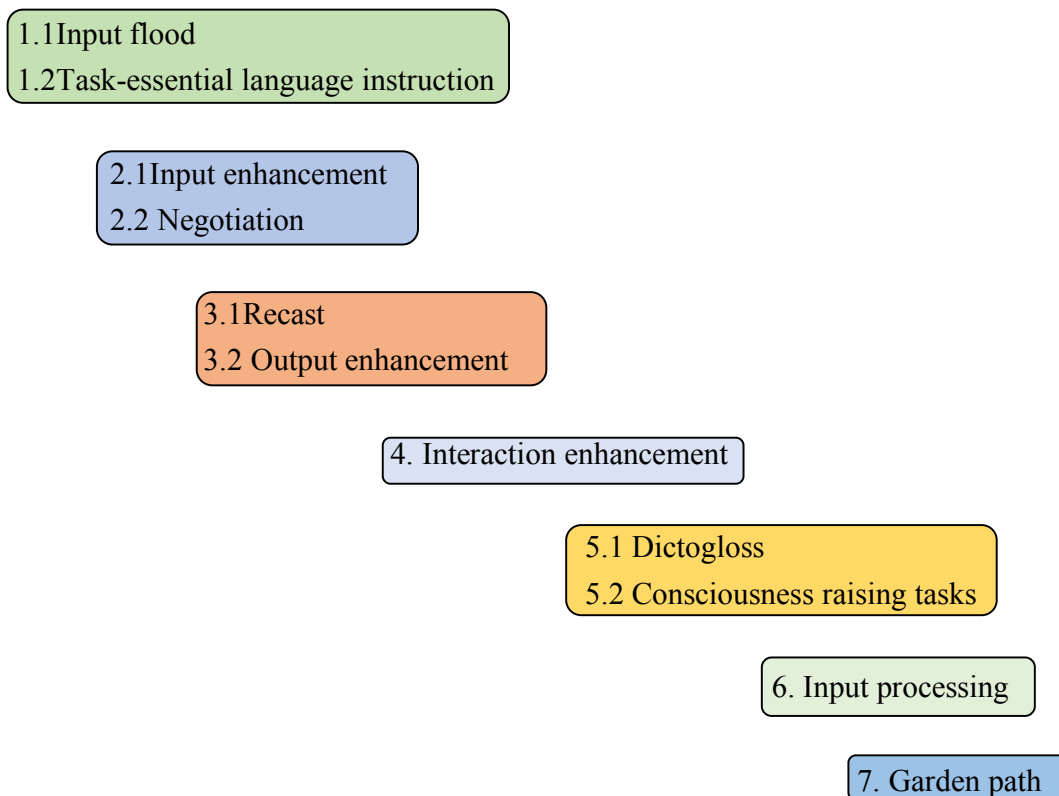| |
|---|
| 6. Input processing |

| |
|---|
| 7. Garden path |

*Figure 2.* Form-focused instruction activities along a continuum
(Adapted from Doughty and Williams, 1998. For a detailed description and examples of each option, see Yu, ibid.)

Among the activities placed at varying levels of the implicit-explicit continuum, *Input flood* and *Task-essential language instruction* are the most implicit while *Garden path* is the most explicit form of form-focused instructional option; remedial teacher intervention may start at any point, and then move in either direction to stop at any other point and beyond. Because form-focused teaching is primarily remedial, it can be preemptive, intentional, direct, or reactive, incidental, indirect according to learner needs. These techniques and activities are for use to teach deviant L2 syntax or any other features of it for that matter. It is worth remembering, instead of heavily relying on meaning-focused activities, form-focused instruction in English or any other L2 is essential for learners to be able to produce not only fluent but also error-free sentences (in writing) and utterances (in speaking).

## Conclusion

### Summary

This paper has reviewed relevant research literature and cited examples of the influence of various first languages on the learning of English as a foreign or a second language as well as on its use by people representing diverse non-native English speaking contexts. The convincing evidence and clear examples of L1 syntactic influence on the acquisition and the use of English syntax strongly support the notion that interlanguage errors or deviant L2 linguistic features across cultures (English being the case in point) are overwhelmingly L1 driven notwithstanding the developmental factors within the L2 playing some role though. Having said that, the overwhelming evidence presented from varied non-native English contexts for L1 interference in learning and using English as a second- or foreign language has surely minimized the impact of the L2 developmental factors in learner interlanguage.

### Pedagogic Implications

The paper has made it clear that in order to remedy English syntactic errors, overt and/or covert grammar teaching in tandem with meaning-focused communicative language teaching may occur along an implicit-explicit continuum. Form-focused remedial techniques have been discussed preceded by the removal of confusion resulting from the conflicting notions of 'form-focused' and 'forms-focused' instruction, with the proposition that focus on linguistic features of L2, either covertly or overtly, incidentally or intentionally, aids SLA. I firmly believe that there is no issue between *form* and *forms* but linguistically focused instructional intervention is what should be part of a remedial teaching procedure moving along a continuum.

### Limitation/Future research

One weakness of this paper may be the lack of primary data on the topic in question from my own context. Nevertheless, this should not belittle the appeal of the paper because the evidence for L1 syntactic transfer, influence or interference, collected from a variety of SLA contexts, is generalizable to any other similar contexts. Sinha et al (2009, p. 121) aptly claim, "…first language interference in the acquisition of a second language is applicable universally." That said, the need for primary research on L1 negative syntactic interference in the learning and the use of English in my own context should still be useful; such a study would be a feather in the cap of the argument and the evidence that L1 influence is indeed a force to be reckoned with in SLA.

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