The Impact of Native Language Use on Second Language Vocabulary Learning by Saudi EFL Students

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Abstract

This paper strives to explore the impact of Native Language use on Foreign Language vocabulary learning on the basis of empirical and available data. The study is carried out with special reference to the English Language Programme students in Buraydah Community College, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The Native Language of these students is Arabic and their Second Language is English. The participants in this research study are the post-secondary students of Buraydah Community College in Intensive Course Programme. The instrument used in this study was in the form of two tests. It is well known that in language assessment tests play a pivotal role in evaluating the EFL learners' language proficiency. The use of native language as a semantic tool for assessing second language learners' understanding shouldn't be rejected altogether especially for the undergrad Saudi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. The outcomes of the study show that in learning the vocabulary of target language is significantly helped by the use of translation method of native language (Arabic) in understanding the meaning of novel words and expressions of foreign language (English). This method is widely welcomed by majority of the students of Buraydah Community College. It's recommended to use this method in order to take the students directly to the core meaning of the word or expression. It also, sometimes, gives a sense of accuracy of the meaning of native language equivalents.

Keywords: native language, native language equivalents**,** second language, vocabulary learning

1. Introduction

Normally the process of second language learning is different from the first language or native language acquisition (e.g., Atwill, 2007; Bley-Vroman, 1990), but it is mostly understood that aspects affecting someone's ability to acquire a second language (e.g., motivation) do not play a role in native-language development (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001). On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that knowledge of second language influences the ability to manage the information in the first language (e.g., Marian & Spivey, 2003). The instant cognitive and psycholinguistic models of bilingualism vividly displays that the two languages interact with each other, even during language-specific processing (e.g., Dijkstra & Van Heuven, 2002). Aspects of early age learners and immersion in the second language are very important in the EFL learning process. The current study exhibits that native language translation of words play a pivotal role in the second language learning especially the different horizons of native and target language transfer patterns. By integrating these two lines of research, the current study tested whether factors that have been linked to successful L2 acquisition influence native-language vocabulary of the bilingual speakers: English-Arabic.

1.1 The Impact of Native Language on Second Language Acquisition

The role of native-language (L1) knowledge in second language (L2) acquisition is well-established, and development of second-language phonological inventory (e.g., Harrison & Kroll, 2007), lexical skills (e.g., Proctor et al., 2006), EFL vocabulary learners can face problems both with regard to the number of vocabulary words to be acquired, and the improvement of in depth semantic understanding of such lexical representations. Earlier studies displayed that EFL learners differ from native speakers in both the size of their lexicon and in the richness of semantic representations associated with the lexical items (e.g., Verhallen & Schoonen, 1998). For instance, it has been observed that bilinguals often utter less sensible responses in in in their word-association assignments in second language than monolingual speakers while having little semantic comprehension than monolinguals do (e.g., Verhallen & Schoonen, 1998). It is, however, a fact that bilingualism affects L1

vocabulary skills, where relatively little work has been conducted on the relationship between L1 and L2 vocabulary skills in bilinguals. Generally, it has been shown that strong native-language vocabulary skills were associated with better second-language performance (e.g., Proctor, August, Carlo, & Snow, 2006). These results showed that the vocabulary skills transferred from participants' native language i.e. Arabic to target language i.e. English was correlating highly. Yet, it has been remarked by Gottardo and Mueller, (2009); as the breadth of vocabulary knowledge in one language (i.e., the number of words known in a language) was inversely related to breadth of vocabulary knowledge in another language. Other studies, however, did not find significant relationships between L1 and L2 vocabulary knowledge. Thus, the work on the relationship between L1 and L2 translation of vocabulary skills is quite limited, and it remains a bit debatable if L2 acquisition can influence L1 vocabulary skills.

The prior aim of the current study was to investigate the influence of native-language vocabulary functioning on L2-acquisition-related factors. To know this if different combinations of L1 and L2 would yield similar patterns of relationships between L1 vocabulary skills and L2 acquisition history, the testing of the two distinct groups of bilingual participants allowed us to test the use of translation methods. In formulating this aim, we relied on evidence suggesting that there are differences in cross-linguistic transfer patterns for vocabulary skills depending on the specific combination of languages known to a bilingual.

1.2 Previous Research Study

Lot of research has already been conducted on native language effects on second or target language. Dulay et al (1982) has defined interference of first language as the automatic transfer of the surface structure onto the surface of the target language due to habit. Ellis (1997: 51) refers to interference as 'transfer', which he says is 'the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2'. He argues that transfer is governed by learners' perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in L2 learning. In learning a target language, learners construct their own interim rules (Ellis, 1997) with the use of their L1 knowledge, but only when they believe it will help them in the learning task or when they have become sufficiently proficient in the L2 for transfer to be possible.

1.3 The Native Language Use and Language Focused Learning

To know the meaning of an unknown word in the target language has many ways such as L1 translation, L2 context clues, a demonstration, a picture description. However, various research studies have compared the effectiveness of different methods in terms of the accuracy of conveying meaning for learning always come up with the result that an L1 translation is the most effective (Laufer & Shmueli, 1997). This is probably because L1 translations are usually clear, short and familiar, qualities which are very important in effective definitions. When the use of an L1 translation is combined with the use of word cards for the initial learning of vocabulary, then learners have a very effective strategy for speeding up vocabulary growth. Although there are frequent criticisms raised of learning L1-L2 word pairs, these criticisms are not supported by research. The research shows the opposite, the direct learning of L2 vocabulary using word cards with their L1 translations is a very effective method of learning. This finding also receives some support from studies of dictionary use. Learners' dictionaries can be classified into two major types - those that only use the L2 (monolingual dictionaries like the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, the COBUILD Dictionary, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the Cambridge Learners Dictionary), and those that make use of the L1 (bilingual or bilingualised dictionaries). A bilingualised dictionary is a monolingual dictionary with L1 translations included. Most learners of English as a foreign language do not achieve this until they have been studying English for five to six years. It is not surprising then that surveys of dictionary preference and learner use show that learners strongly favour bilingual or bilingualised dictionaries. To effectively use a monolingual dictionary, learners need to have a large enough vocabulary (at least 2000 words) and need to be able to interpret definitions, which are much more difficult than L1 synonyms. The L1 clearly has a very important role to play in the deliberate learning of vocabulary.

It's pertinent to mention here that according to intralingual strategies, the learners of L2 should know the linguistic tools of L2, for example, definitions, antonyms and synonyms etc. Similarly, the interlingual strategies may also be used, like the use of bilingual dictionaries or translation of L2 vocabulary into L1 equivalents. The norms of communicative language teaching and learning should be pedagogically consistent with intralingual strategies. It has been observed that in recent teaching methodology of teaching and learning a second language, native language role is completely neglected in a language classroom. In a Saudi EFL student situation, complete avoidance of Arabic language in the learning process of English is not desirable and feasible (Schmitt, 1997). The EFL teachers should also practice the use of interlingual strategies (i.e. the use of bilingual dictionaries,

Arabic translation of English words and explanations) that could be an efficient and faster way of semantization of a new word.

The relationship between L1 and L2 learning is very deep and has turned into a concern for second language acquisition researchers ever since this discipline has become independent. Merrill Swain and Sharon Lapkin (2000), quotes Cummins in their article that research examining the relationship between native language (L1) and second language use in the context of bilingual education for minority language children (see Cummins, 1981, 1993; Abu-Rabia, 2002) makes it quite clear that the development and maintenance of the L1 supports the development of the second language. This leads to the seeming paradox that the more use made of the L1, the higher becomes the learners' L2 proficiency. A socio-cultural theory of mind suggests that the L1 serves as a tool that helps students as follows: to understand and make sense of the requirements and content of the task; to focus attention on language form, vocabulary use and overall organization; and to establish the tone and nature of their collaboration.

Fawzi Al Ghazali (The Centre for English Language Studies (CELS) / July 2006) has referenced in his article that Brown (1994: 48) argues as both learning and acquisition are necessary for communicative competence, particularly at higher skill levels. For these reasons, it can be argued that a learning acquisition continuum is more accurate than a dichotomy in describing how language abilities are developed. Fawzi Al Ghazali (The Centre for English Language Studies (CELS) / July 2006) further elaborates that the learners' first language can also influence the acquisition of a new language. Learners sometimes become confused because they are affected by the notion that a word or a structure that works in their first language can be used similarly in the new language.

1.4 Research Problem

English language teaching was started to Saudi students from elementary 6th grade onwards in 2004 (Ministry of Education and Training, Saudi Arabia). They started learning vocabulary through bilingual approach. Most of the students at this stage don't even know the basic vocabulary. However, the students read the same textbooks across Saudi Arabia, with similar type of vocabulary and resembling exercises in these textbooks. The teaching of vocabulary skill has never been given a serious thought due to which the students are unable to improve the basis of EL for other skills like reading, writing and speaking.

1.5 Research Question

The present study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1)   How does the native language vocabulary facilitate the learning of the target language vocabulary?

2)   How does the target language vocabulary come into conflict with the native language vocabulary in the process of EFL learning and teaching?

1.6 Purpose of Study

The study intends to explore the pertinent use of L1 in learning L2 vocabulary. L2 vocabulary was seen to have a significant effect on developing other skills in the target language, mainly the integrated skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The ELP learner-participants were chosen according to their results in Intensive Course English Program (ICEP). They're a (G-40) divided into two groups of 20 in each. The participants are IECP students of approximately 18 years age group. Each group underwent sixteen weeks of study for five skills, namely vocabulary, academic writing, grammar, reading and listening and speaking. These students scored 60% of the total grades, being a basic requirement, in order to enter the English Language Program (ELP). A record of vocabulary learning was kept for these two groups as control group and experimental group. It has been observed that both the groups have the same English proficiency and roughly having the same size of English vocabulary. Two different teachers taught vocabulary. First one by a native Arab English speaking teacher while the second one by a non-Arab English speaking teacher, both having rich teaching experience, from 10 to 15 years, in English language, English literature and linguistics.

2.2 Instruments

The instrument used in this study was in the form of two tests. In language assessment tests play a pivotal role to evaluate the EFL learners' language proficiency. Two vocabulary tests were given to the subjects in their

classroom within two weeks. The participants were asked to answer test paper having 30 new vocabulary words asking them to write their equivalents in Arabic. The results of these tests were collected, graded and analysed to know if these new words retain longer in their memories. Certain English passages were selected, roughly having 400 words, from Keep Writing 1&2 and Interactions Access (Reading Skills). 30 new words or expressions were picked from these words probably unknown to the subjects. These words were given in a test paper to the subjects who were asked to decide which word(s) or expression(s) are known to them and write down their corresponding Arabic meaning within thirty (30) minutes. These papers were collected after completion.

2.3 Procedures

Some 200 words selected from the ICEP out of which 30 words or expressions were chosen those may be unknown to the participants for using these words or phrases in reading passages as short tests or exams. The first reading passage was given to them in normal way in classroom asking the participants to write down the words and expressions from the passage known to them. Simultaneously, they were also asked to write down the Arabic translation of these known words and expressions within fifty minutes of the normal class lecture time. The tests were collected from all of the participants after fifty minutes.

Now, the whole class of participants was divided into two groups- Normal and Controlled. A second test was given to them including the 30 selected words/expressions. The teacher intentionally, explained the meaning of all these words in English to the normal group. But the same test was administered by another teacher in another room to the controlled group not only explaining the meaning in English but also in Arabic. These participants were also asked to write down the meaning in Arabic translation while underlining such words and expressions.

After two weeks the same test was conducted again with slight changes but the same words and expressions. Now, all the participants of both groups were given the same test. They were asked to write down its Arabic translation in order to know the remembrance capability of both normal and controlled group.

2.4 Data Preparation

In order to have a qualitative study of the research for the statistical analysis, a few steps were followed to prepare the data. The first step was to score zero for an unattended answer by a participant in the test as "wrong" but included in the statistical data. However, if a participant has left blank all or part of the test will be considered as "missing" and be dropped out from the data. The rest of the tests were properly marked and checked by the researcher and English teachers for further analysis.

In the first test the Saudi EFL students were required to translate the selected new words and expressions into Arabic, where each correct translation was marked one showing it was known to the participants of the test. For incorrect translation, it was to be unknown to the participants. In the second test the normal group scored 25 while the controlled group scored 27, though their result was almost equal in the first test.

2.5 Marking of the Tests

In preparation of data analysis, all the two tests were graded objectively by the researchers and another English teacher in accordance with the key of the exams. In the first test the participants of the test were asked to translate the possible words and expressions in Arabic where each correct answer was graded as 1, seeing that it was known to the participant(s). Similarly, the wrong answers for the words and expressions were considered to be unknown to them. In accordance with the score of each participant a mean of the total group was figured out for known and unknown words and expressions.

As the participants were asked, to translate the 30 chosen words in their second test, in order to know whether the participants remembered these specific expressions and words or otherwise; where the correct translation was graded as 1. This gave the researcher the information that after three weeks how many words were remembered by the participants of these tests.

3. Results

A T-test analysis has been carried out to feed the results into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for an independent evaluation. Table 3.1 reflects that in the first test normal and controlled group are almost the same in their means (Normal Group 8.05 and Controlled Group 8.45). Whereas Table 3.2 shows that in the second test the means of normal group is 9.4 while controlled group means is 12.15. It's vivid from the result that how the students of controlled group scored higher with the help of Arabic translation of the selected vocabulary words.

Table 1. Means comparison Test 1

Groups	No of Students	Average Grades	Mean	Std. Dev.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Normal Group	20	0.268	8.05	4.260899	-2.629	0.017
Controlled G	20	0.314	8.45	4.88257		

In Table 1 above the mean result of the normal group is 8.05 and controlled group is 8.45 which shows a balance in the first test results of the two groups since both the groups didn't take any assistance of the translation method. Whereas the results in the second test are different due to the use of native language equivalents for comprehending the meaning of the specific vocabulary used in the test.

Table 2. Means comparison Test 2

Groups	No of Students	Average Grades	Mean	Std. Dev.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Normal Group	20	0.395	9.4	7.12593	-4.858	0.000
Controlled G	20	0.533	12.15	6.68285		

In Table 2 above the mean result of the normal group is 9.4 and controlled group is 12.15 which shows a great difference in the second test results of the two groups as the controlled group which took assistance or adopted translation method.

From the above it can be seen explicitly, the difference in learning vocabulary is the factor that affected the performance of participants in learning new expressions and words, which is, the bilingual translation method (both English and Arabic translation) have facilitated the participants in L2 vocabulary acquisition.

4. Discussion

One of the main purposes of the current study was to highlight the use of native language in comprehending the L2 vocabulary. The results of the second tests show a significant difference between the two groups learning of vocabulary means 12.15 by controlled group as compared to 9.4 of the normal group. It is obvious that the performance of the participants in controlled group was significant because of adoption of the translation method in learning vocabulary of L2. Thus, we can say that Saudi EFL students if exposed to vocabulary learning with translation method would perform better than those who are taught without the help of translation methodology especially in a pure Arabic culture where English is only present in higher educational institutions. The current study also displays that the translation method wherein the two groups conducted the two different tests by participants, although partially dependent on the language proficiencies of these participants in each group, were also dependent on a number of other characteristics of vocabulary learning which at this point we can only guess at: the students' perception of the test, of learning English (and their motivation to continue to do so), of the researchers, of the EFL teacher, and of the assessment tools etc.

Various researches have shown that native language plays a beneficial role of these efforts where the purpose of the current article is to look at some of this research clearly identify those parts of a language course where there is value in using the L1 vocabulary. The role of L1 in classroom can be minimized by an effective classroom management strategy where the useful use of academic vocabulary and grammatical structures may maximize the role of L2 inside language classroom.

5. Conclusion

There are many benefits of translating equivalents of L2 vocabulary into L1. It's an easy way to take the students directly to the core meaning of the word or expression. It also gives a sense of accuracy of the meaning of L1 equivalents. Retaining the meaning of the word for a long time in the memory is another advantage of translation method. For adults, it might be more important to understand the meaning of L2 vocabulary more accurately." In order to establish a well-understood meaning of L2 vocabulary with its semantic and linguistic structure may help the learner retain the word in a better way. The findings of the study may be beneficial in particular to EFL learners and EFL teaching in general. EFL teachers can make use of the translation method in a proper way to improve deep understanding of L2 vocabulary, thus, improving a better comprehension of the second language acquisition.

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