

Interference Phenomena in Mastering Foreign Languages and the Methods of Preventing Them

Malahat Akbar Veliyeva¹

¹School of English, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku, Azerbaijan

Correspondence: Malahat Akbar Veliyeva, School of English, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku, Azerbaijan. Tel: 994-055-704-2476. E-mail: malahatveliyeva@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The article attempts to reveal the cases of interference in mastering a foreign language and to suggest possible modern methods of preventing this linguistic phenomenon. While learning a foreign language various kinds of challenges which appear in this process should be taken into consideration. The phenomena of interference on different levels of language most frequently occur in conditions of artificial bilingualism. Modern methodology suggests a number of beneficial ways of effective language teaching and learning. The so-called “mobile learning” as an innovative way of teaching English, is suggested in the article for effective language learning to prevent the phenomena of interference.

Also, the age factor in bilingualism is highlighted in the article and the cases of early bilingualism are regarded as the area of special interest in the study of language interference.

Overall, the learners’ age peculiarities in bilingualism and the methods of teaching the foreign language are crucial in preventing the phenomena of interference.

Keywords: bilingualism, communicative–interactive methodology, interference, language acquisition, mobile learning

1. Introduction

In the XXI century mastering foreign languages is a significant life skill. Specific challenges which to some extent interfere with acquiring foreign language skills appear in studying any foreign language depending on the degree of kinship of the mother tongue and the target language. Undoubtedly, bilinguals whose mother tongue and second language are unrelated languages are more likely to be disposed to the phenomena of interference. The study of interference is really important both in Linguistics and Methods of teaching English for effective teaching and learning the foreign language.

Barriers in mastering the second language might be related, mainly, to psychological and educational aspects of bilingualism. Every foreign language teacher is a psychologist to a certain degree. Since the studying of a foreign language is a complicated psychological phenomenon realized in the process of teaching, the teacher has to take into consideration some important issues while working with students: age characteristics, duration of memory, learning styles (audio style—by means of listening, visual—by extensive use of visual aids and kinesthetic—learning based on students’ personal practice, that is by doing actions in moving and dynamic way), students’ individual characteristics (sociability, inclination to reading, writing activities, shyness, interactive skills, addiction to virtual world, etc).

In investigation of the phenomena of interference the experimental and observation methods were used.

2. The Phenomenon of Interference in Mastering a Foreign Language

Interference phenomenon can basically occur in conditions of artificial bilingualism in studying a foreign language at school and higher educational institution. At a later stage of the foreign language learning when a bilingual individual already completely adapts to phonetic, morphological, lexical and syntactical system of the mother tongue, challenges in “adaptation” to the system of the foreign language if it is possible to express in this way, directly appear.

Depending on phonetic, morphological, grammatical, lexical and syntactical features of the target language phonetic, morphological, grammatical, lexical and syntactical types of interference are distinguished. Phonetic interference is observed in deviations from pronunciation norms, intonation and stress in bilinguals' speech; it is especially expressed in the accent manifested in reverberant speech in cases when there are not equivalent phonemes characteristic to the second language in the mother tongue. In such cases phoneme interference distorts the sound form and the meaning of the utterance, also impedes, and in some cases disrupts communication process (e.g., the phoneme [æ] in the word "track" is pronounced as phoneme [e] by Russian students)

Grammatical interference is manifested in interpenetration of grammatical forms and structures of native and foreign languages. On lexical level interference of lexemes is meant in using both native and foreign languages; in the sphere of syntax transfer of syntactical rules of sentence building is implied, that is the word order characteristic to the mother tongue into the target language. Syntactical interference also implies errors in expressing syntagmatic relations between words (agreement, government) which are manifested in the wrong choice of prepositions in Azerbaijani students' speech who learn English.

For example, the verb "enter" in English is used without any preposition; in students' speech we often observe the usage of the above-mentioned verb with preposition "to", which indicates dative case in Azerbaijani language. In case with the verbs "wait for, listen to" which are used in English only with fixed prepositions Azerbaijani students use without the preposition as the usage of the preposition with Azerbaijani equivalents of these verbs is not characteristic for Azerbaijani language.

Also, the wrong usage of the Complex Object expressed in gerundial, infinitive constructions in the English language can be referred to syntactical interference (e.g., "I expect he comes in time" used by Azerbaijani students instead of the right sentence "I expect him to come in time").

Taking into account the interference on phonetic, morphological, grammatical, lexical and syntactical levels of language the teacher-methodologist should work out appropriate system of exercises for improvement of students' pronunciation using audio aids vocalizing texts, dialogues, native foreign speech, different real life situations recorded by native speakers. Such exercises are especially necessary when students have limited capacities of practicing the language without natural language environment. Listening to the material recorded by native speakers helps to imitate natural foreign speech by simulation of characteristic sounds. Listening can be provided not only during foreign language lessons, but also outside the class by means of mobile devices: mobile phone, mp3 player, laptop, I-pad, I-pod, I-phone.

3. Methods of Preventing the Phenomena of Interference

Recently in western methodology of teaching English so-called "mobile learning" is practiced. "Mobile learning" is a constituent part of electronic learning based on using easily portable devices.

In opposition to traditional skeptical attitude of the majority of teachers, we suppose that it is quite possible to make the usage of mobile devices at the lessons of a foreign language useful and effective.

There are following types of mobile learning: individual, peer-to-peer or peer-to-instructor and group sharing mobile learning. It is a kind of learning in which the learner is not in some fixed preconditioned location, but he is more independent of the circumstances of the actual reality. Such kind of learning might be useful for students having definite challenges in the learning of a foreign language: challenges in pronunciation unfamiliar sounds, in learning new grammatical forms, in practice of communication in a foreign language.

Due to modern versions of mobile devices students learning English have a unique opportunity of learning the language, in particular, practicing listening, speaking, reading, writing skills outside the English lesson that makes teacher's job much easier, and at the same time motivates students, makes the language learning more accessible as they use their own mobile devices, also creates though artificial, but language atmosphere outside the English lesson.

The application of mobile learning in Methods of teaching a foreign language alleviates foreign language learning a lot, makes it more effective, practical and convenient for learners. In the future with the development and amelioration of mobile devices mobile learning will improve that will promote to self-study of languages and will create the opportunity for intensive learning of foreign languages and significant reduction of efforts and time consumption for their mastering. At the same time regular extracurricular listening, Skype communication with native speakers, doing online language trainings very much improves the quality of language acquisition and to some extent helps to overcome different kinds of challenges for bilingual individuals learning a foreign language and remember new vocabulary not by translation, but within the actual word

combinations and phrases. In such cases unfamiliar words are memorized much better and it is relatively easier for learners to overcome the challenges of the learning process.

For natural prevention of the challenges in the process of mastering a foreign language a lively communication with native speakers, online correspondence, communication with bilingual friends, mates speaking a foreign language is important.

Also, watching films in a foreign language, if necessary with subtitles depending on the level of language learning has a significant impact on prevention of the language learning challenges. It improves and develops reading skills, pronunciation and perception of different speech patterns.

Thus, apart from traditional grammar translation method the use of communicative–interactive methodology in teaching a foreign language is the most effective, intensive and overcoming learners’ psychological barriers. Using this methodology not only the teacher but also the learners themselves directly get engaged in the process of communication with each other, and the learner has an opportunity to express himself fluently in the target language bearing in mind that nobody will interrupt and stop him because of slight mistakes and errors in speech. In such conditions learners can easily overcome psychological and linguistic challenges appearing in learning a foreign language and master the language more effectively. Focusing not on mistakes in speech, but on the process of communication itself, the learners do not face with so-called “language barrier”.

When speaking about challenges of mastering 2 languages, there is also an opinion about mutual inhibition of languages in conditions of bilingualism. According to L. V. Sherba, “some inhibition to a foreign language from the direction of the mother tongue is unavoidable and quite normal: it is a natural challenge of learning a foreign language. If both languages are learned well and regularly used, mutual inhibition is not observed; some phenomena in this regard appear only in cases if any of the languages is not used any more” (www.philology.ru/linguistics/1/shcherba-74f.htm).

Actually, language is a social phenomenon, linguistic ability of the individual is realized only when appropriate language skills of any languages—native or foreign are actively shown up and used in appropriate language environment. Otherwise, irrelevant of being native or acquired if the language has not been in use for a long time, it remains in bilingual individual’s passive memory, that is hardly called mutual inhibition of languages.

In our opinion, to avoid the shown difficulties in mastering the second language it is more expedient to provide the atmosphere of pure bilingualism in which mutual distortion of languages is brought to minimum. However, it does not imply that a foreign language should be taught in mother tongue.

For many years Grammar Translation method which was based on learning grammar rules by heart and reading the texts with mandatory translation into native language, dominated in one of the most important applied aspects of Linguistics—Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages. This methodology teaches only some structures not taking into consideration learners’ communicative skills. In such cases native language is a means of mastering a foreign language, that, certainly, prevents learners from full and comprehensive second language acquisition.

The so-called direct method excluding the learner’s mother tongue is applied in modern methodology of teaching foreign languages. That is, the learner completely gets in foreign language environment and it is possible to avoid the influence of the mother tongue which, according to the scientists supporting the direct method, inhibits the development of the second language skills (Baranov, 2001). The teacher’s role in such methodological approach from psychological as well as professional point of view is great.

On one hand, the teacher has to resist the temptation of the learners to use their native language in the process of learning and manage to create “artificial language environment”.

On the other hand, the teacher has to demonstrate high level of professionalism: exemplary pronunciation, clear and distinctive speech, designing communicative types of exercises for developing speaking skills.

Linguistic and psychological aspects of bilingualism scientifically substantiate audio-lingual and audiovisual methods of teaching a foreign language in which both the teacher’s and learners’ aim is to develop students’ speaking skills (Baranov, 2001). The more the student perceives the foreign speech by listening the more successful from psychological point of view takes place the process of reproduction of foreign speech and the less challenges appear in mastering the second language.

One of the effective and modern methods of teaching foreign languages is communicative approach which has dominated in western methodology since the 1970s of the past century.

For the last decades communicative methodology has been widely spread both in secondary and tertiary education. According to this methodology, language teaching is realized in the process of communication, in other words it means “learn to speak the language by speaking”. The main focus is on learners, their maximum activeness and autonomy during the lessons.

In communicative approach the presentation of the new material is initially supported by the practice controlled by the teacher: knowledge anticipating potential mistakes and challenges for bilingual students, on the next stage the students are offered tasks on simulation of the acquired material: to make up situational dialogues in groups and pairs, to conduct role-plays, simulations of real life communication. In such conditions from psychological point of view, students feel more relaxed do not get embarrassed making any mistakes in speech that strongly inhibits foreign language acquisition.

4. The Age Factor in Bilingualism

The cases of early bilingualism are of special interest, however according to David Singleton second language acquisition can be successful at any age (Singleton, 2014).

In scientific and methodological research about bilingualism we can come across the opinions that learning a foreign language in childhood can promote to native like language acquisition because the individuals at an early age perceive the skills of the second language unconsciously and have fewer problems with the phenomena of interference (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008). There are also opinions that parallel learning of two languages when the bilingual is disposed to the influence of both languages simultaneously, makes the child less mentally capable, leads to logopaedic problems, as speaking two languages alternately the child starts confusing them and loses confidence in both language environments (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013).

It is impossible to completely agree with this opinion as in childhood the brain is more receptive for receiving information, especially, if this language information is perceived during the period of formation of language skills. Very often children’s bilingualism is observed in children growing in bilingual families. At an earlier age while communicating with father and mother speaking different languages the phenomenon of lexical and phonetic interference is possible, but by the time this phenomenon is converted into normal bilingualism.

Logopaedic disruptions can appear not in natural, but in forced bilingualism, pushing the children to speak unfamiliar language that can cause opposite reaction from the child’s side and affect his mental state. Undoubtedly, in learning a foreign language the cognitive processes should not be ignored. As the second language acquisition definitely involves and is regulated by cognitive processes (Alimohammadirokni, 2015).

The children learning a foreign language at an earlier stage of their development have a unique opportunity to think in both languages depending on the language environment. To make a foreign language learning easier in childhood it is important to motivate the child: to create artificial language atmosphere, to conduct role plays during the classes, to encourage the child for good results, to use Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and necessarily considering age features not to overload the child to avoid psychological stress.

Bilingualism at an early age has favorable influence on the development of the child’s memory: such children perceive the information more effectively, understand, analyze and discuss different language phenomena, quickly react to various language situations, they are more reasonable and developed from logical point of view. Their parents, who mix the languages of communication with children, are responsible for challenges appearing in their speech. To avoid such challenges which lead to mistakes in speech, parents have to create for children two language atmospheres which could be associated with one or another language. Although we deal with the phenomenon of bilingualism, even in such cases it is difficult to speak about equal command of two languages.

In reality, it is practically impossible to have identical skills of mastering both languages as second language acquisition happens either in the family in parallel way with the first language with dominating of one of the languages in the future, or at school in the process of education.

In our opinion, the language of education becomes dominating even if the first or native language is used in the family with close relatives. Because the individual’s language of education is studied on academic level and the range of vocabulary of this language very often exceeds the lexicon of the mother tongue.

The second language acquisition at school age is associated in Linguistics with the so-called successive bilingualism, which implies constant comparison of two languages by bilingual individuals: sound perception “by contrast” with the sounds of the first language, also grammatical aspects of two languages (www.russian-russich.info). While teaching such children in school education it is necessary to follow systematic teaching for maintaining their grammatical knowledge, expand their vocabulary stock by involving them to reading, to control writing skills (by dictations, reproductions, essays and other writing tasks). At

relatively higher levels of language acquisition, learning idioms also can be effective for developing bilinguals' communication skills which provokes critical thinking. (Samani & Hashemian, 2012). At the same time for preserving the skills of the mother tongue it is important to practice it at least on the level of colloquial speech, to watch films, to communicate with relatives. Also, it is crucial to follow the psychological strategy of regular encouragement and approval of the child's bilingual development. In such conditions the second language acquisition is a more motivated, pleasant and positive phenomenon promoting to the child's comprehensive development.

However in practice we face both with negative consequences of bilingualism and familiarizing with foreign culture. A twelve year old boy Russian by nationality was taken out from Russia to Belgium by his parents and had to study French language (www.russian-russich.info). The result was quite unsuccessful. The boy couldn't adapt to new foreign language society, refused to make friends and communicate with Belgians that negatively affected his mind. Ultimately, the child had a desire to die because he felt as a stranger in new society, new culture. Naturally, in spite of his family's efforts to have him integrated into foreign language society, they failed to make him a bilingual individual.

Bilingualism can appear and develop only in conditions of individual's good will. Under violent coercion it is not only impossible to achieve desirable results, but also it can cause complete loss of psychological balance. To avoid similar situations at secondary schools it is necessary to propagandize the strategies of integration and multiculturalism that is on condition of knowledge of native language and culture to arouse interest to universal culture as well, form students' more global outlook inculcate such human qualities as tolerance to strange culture and positive perception of national cultures. These qualities are more favorably to develop in international schools where children of different nationalities study and willingly learn foreign languages as well as foreign culture. Such children have developed social-communicative skills, friendliness and inclination to communication.

In Azerbaijan, where the representatives of different nationalities reside, alongside with national schools there are educational institutions in which education is conducted in Russian, English and Turkish languages. Due to this fact multilingualism and multiculturalism are simply necessary in our Republic.

For instance, in Kabardino-Balkaria due to its magnitude Russian carries out integrating and consolidating functions (Musukayev, 2004). Here natural striving of local population (kabardins and balkars) to master Russian is observed, because Russian is a dominating language and leading in many spheres of life, it is the language of the intellectuals.

However in Azerbaijan the English language, which is taught both in Azerbaijani and Russian schools, has similar popularity. For improving the methodology of teaching English the textbooks, methodological aids, didactical materials are published in view of features of Azerbaijani language. At the same time methodologists successfully apply the practice of teaching English based on the experience of western methodologists.

5. Conclusion

Any process of learning a foreign language is accompanied with certain challenges. The phenomenon of interference in mastering foreign languages is unavoidable fact. Interference on different levels (phonetic, morphological, grammatical, lexical and syntactical) takes place; it is determined by the peculiarities of bilinguals' mother tongue and the degree of kinship between L1 and L2.

As well as investigating the cases of interference it is crucial to search the ways of preventing this linguistic phenomena using modern methodology of teaching foreign languages. Modern teachers should be open to innovations offered by Information Communication Technologies such as Mobile learning and various kinds of online facilities. Besides that the language should be taught in absolute language environment and using up-to-date methodology.

The age peculiarities should also be considered in teaching a foreign language. Although in early childhood it is much easier to learn the second language and avoid the phenomena of interference, the exposure of young bilinguals to a foreign language environment should be gradual and with some language background.

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