Teacher’s Name: **Dr El Ouchdi-Mirali Ilhem**

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Module: **Psycholinguistics**

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Course Title: **Language Transfer**

1. ***Introduction***

* One question frequently debated by researchers and language teachers in the past was whether the L1 (one’s native language) is an aid or an obstacle to the learning of another language. Today there is widespread agreement that the L1 clearly helps, not obstructs, the process of learning. To what extent it actually helps depends on many factors, above all the relationship between the L1 and L2 (a foreign or second language). If the learner can perceive many cross-linguistic similarities, the process is facilitated: there is a lot of positive transfer.

1. ***Positive Transfer***

* Learners who have an L1 closely related to the target language (TL) can thus start out from a high platform at the beginning of the learning process, since they can make use of easily perceived formal similarities.
* However, languages unrelated to the TL also influence learning. Even if learners cannot perceive cross-linguistic similarities to the L1, they tend to *assume such similarities. In many cases, assumptions of similarity cause errors, especially in production.*
* What is important to note is that transfer does not occur only across related languages; it is part of a universal phenomenon where learners try to facilitate the learning process by making use of any prior linguistic knowledge they have. This is particularly important at early stages of learning, when linguistic knowledge other than the L1 is very limited. Transfer can be described as a process making use of perceived and/or assumed cross-linguistic similarities, and its effects may be either positive or negative.

1. ***Negative Transfer***

* Negative transfer either inhibits the learner from learning how to use new words appropriately or, more conspicuously, leads to inappropriate use of L1-based items and structures. Positive, or facilitative, transfer, on the other hand, is the application of at least partially correct perceptions or assumptions of cross-linguistic similarity. The positive effects, which are hard to notice for an outsider, clearly dominate, and a good strategy for teachers would be to encourage learners to make use of any cross-linguistic similarities as much as possible.
* Extensive research has already been done in the area of native language interference on the target language. Dulay et al (1982) define interference as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. Lott (1983: 256) defines interference as 'errors in the learner’s use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue.
* 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 (Selinker, 1971, Seligar, 1988 and 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.
* Ellis (1997) raises the need to distinguish between errors and mistakes and makes an important distinction between the two. He says that errors reflect gaps in the learner’s knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Mistakes reflect occasional lapses in performance; they occur because, in a particular instance, the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows.
* It appears to be much more difficult for an adult to learn a second language system that is as well learned as the first language. Typically, a person learns a second language partly in terms of the kinds of meanings already learned in the first language (Carroll, 1964; Albert & Obler, 1978 and
* Larson-Freeman & Long, 1991). Beebe (1988) suggests that in learning a second language, L1 responses are grafted on to L2 responses, and both are made to a common set of meaning responses. Other things being equal, the learner is less fluent in L2, and the kinds of expressions he/she uses in L2 bear tale traces of the structure of L1.
* Dechert (1983) suggests that the further apart the two languages are structurally, the higher the instances of errors made in L2 which bear traces of L1 structures. In both cases the interference may result from a strategy on the part of the learner which assumes or predicts equivalence, both formally and functionally, of two items or rules sharing either function or form. More advanced learning of L2 may involve a greater number of rules or marking features for distinguishing between the two languages. This then raises a pertinent question - does the L2 text have to be syntactically correct for its meaning to be understood? Do the identified errors in the written text reduce 24 Native language interferences in learning a second language semantic and syntactic acceptability?
* The answer lies in several domains: the L2 learner’s purpose in learning the target language, the learner’s L2 proficiency level of the target language and the knowledge state of the learner in L1 and L2.
* Ellis (1997) defined an error as a gap in the learner’s knowledge and occurs for the learner does not know whether it is correct or not. Whereas, a mistake reflects lapses in performance and occasionally occurs when the learner is unable to perform what he knows.