

Probe into Language Transfer in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract—Language transfer has been a hot topic in second language acquisition for many years. Generally speaking, there are two types of transfer, positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer results in correct performance while negative transfer results in errors. At first, this paper presents the concept of transfer, and then it analyzes the factors, which affect the language transfer, including kinship, learning environment, teaching method, linguistic knowledge and experience, and learners' cognitive ability. At last, the author puts forward three suggestions for foreign language teaching in order to improve learners' language learning efficiency.

Index Terms—language transfer, foreign language learning, suggestions

I. INTRODUCTION

The term "transfer" is first defined by behaviorist psychologists to refer to the process of automatic, uncontrolled and subconscious use of past learned behavior in the attempt to produce new responses. According to them, the main impediment to learning was interference from the prior knowledge. Proactive inhibition occurred when old habits got in the way of attempts to learn new ones. Psycholinguists use the term to refer to the influence imposed by a learner's possessed linguistic knowledge and skill upon the subsequent learning of new linguistic knowledge or skill. Since the 1950's, experts have controversial ideas about the transfer phenomena. but most of them emphasized the negative transfer in foreign language learning (shortened as FLL), and neglected the positive role of the native language (shortened as NL). However, NL can never be excluded in the FLL process. Furthermore, the study of transfer phenomena in FLL is closely associated with teaching methodology. On the one hand, no pure and isolated research is conducted for only investigating transfer itself in linguistic field, and on the other hand, the improvement of teaching methods always follows the steps of the study development on transfer phenomena (Bright, 1970). This paper tends to give some enlightenments to the perfection of the teaching methods.

II. THE CONCEPT OF TRANSFER

The phenomena of transfer in learning have been universally accepted. But they are initially associated with the interference in behaviorist theories of FLL. However, it is now widely accepted that the influence of the learner's NL cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of habit formation as the behaviorist put it. Transfer has been used by educational psychologists and educators to describe the use of past knowledge and experience in new situations. In FLL, transfer refers to the effect of one language, usually the NL, on the learning of another, usually the FL. This is also a common strategy employed by the FL learners. A good many linguists have various definitions for the term: Kellerman(1987) has suggested that the term be restricted to 'those processes that lead to the incorporation of elements from one language into another'(Kellerman, 1987, p.3). Odlin(1989) offers this 'working definition' of transfer as basis for his own thoughtful treatment of such phenomena: transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and the differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired (Odlin, 1989, p.27).

Positive transfer and negative transfer take place in many dimensions: phonetic, grammar, graphical, lexical and thinking mode and habit. Positive transfer is beneficial while negative transfer is a hindrance to FLL. Transfer can be a two-way process, namely, the linguistic knowledge and skill of the NL may affect the FLL and vice versa.

III. FACTORS AFFECTING TRANSFER PHENOMENA IN FLL

There are many factors affecting the transfer in FLL, which can be classified roughly into three categories: (1) the language, (2) the learning environment and, (3) the learner. Among the three, the learner is the most active, playing a primary role in the learning process. The other two are secondary, because, in the first place, they themselves don't change much in a learning process, and secondly, they affect FLL through the medium of the learner. In other words, the inner conditions of "the learner" may modify their eventual functions realized, just as the optical quality of a refractor makes alterations for the incident ray to the refracted ray, which tells why learners have varied achievements in the same environment when learning the same subject. Therefore the learner should be the central topic of methodology

research in FLL. Briefly, the three aspects can be categorized into the six factors as follows.

A. *Kinship*

Languages that evolve from the common parent language are family languages. For instance, as evolved from Latin, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian are all family languages. Because of their common source, there exist a lot of similarities in sound system, grammar, vocabulary, cultural background and thinking mode and habit between family languages. Learning a non-family language is quite another thing to learning a family language. The remoter the NL is from the FL to be learned in kinship, the harder the learner would feel in learning. The factor of language kinship must be taken into consideration in the evaluation of language learning achievements. A case in point is that the Chinese learners of Japanese have an enormous advantage over English learners because of the similarity of the Chinese and Japanese writing systems.

B. *Learning Stages*

FLL is a long transitional process from NL-thinking to FL-thinking, in which the role of NL alters frequently. Generally speaking, the process consists of three stages: the elementary, the intermediate, and the advanced (Klein, 1986). In the elementary stage the learning task is mainly to achieve a general understanding of the foreign language to be learned by means of transitional medium, as the learner's thinking must depend on his NL during this period. Therefore the support of NL is indispensable in this stage, and consequently the transfer of NL inevitable (Gloria, 1978). A marked feature of the transfer in this stage is the devastating influence in the orientation from NL to FL.

Generally, the task of the intermediate stage is to further expand and deepen the language knowledge already acquired about the specialty the learner is interested in, meanwhile to promote skillfulness in using them. The support of NL is still important, yet not so indispensable as in the elementary stage. In this stage one may separate his thinking partly from his NL. Yet NL is still indispensable beyond the limited sphere. As a result, the transfer in the direction from NL to FL begins to decrease in some spheres, and at the same time, in the reverse direction, it starts to increase. As a marked feature of this stage, it is frequently observed that there are quite a few traces of FL when the learner is speaking in his mother tongue and of NL when he is speaking in the foreign language.

The task of the advanced stage is, on the one hand, to expand the spheres the learner can tackle completely in FL from his specialty of the sphere he is concerned with to every sphere related to his occupation and life, and on the other to approach gradually to the level of using the foreign language automatically, so as to achieve complete freedom in using the new language. As a result of lone actual use of the foreign language he is learning, and consciously or unconsciously comparing the FL with his NL along with the use of the two languages, the learner will gain more and more insight into the similarity and dissimilarity between the two, which helps to reduce negative transfer while promoting positive transfer in both orientations. In short, as a marked feature of this stage, the negative transfer is far from so striking as at the other two stages, that is, the positive transfer is superior to the negative transfer in influence.

C. *Learning Environment*

Learning environment is proved decisive to the transfer of NL, for it provides a pivotal condition for reinforcement of FL or NL (Krashen, 1976). For teachers and learners of a foreign language, learning situations may be classified roughly into two distinct types: SL and FL. SL refers to that of those abroad in which the language to be learned is the local native language. FL mainly refers to the domestic learning situation, in which the language to be learned is not the local native language.

The most outstanding favorable condition of SL is the ideal language atmosphere, which provides innumerable chances for students to hear, speak, read and write the target language. Second, the accord between the language and the natural, social and cultural environments where it is used saves a great deal of misunderstanding and misconception. Of course, there are many disadvantages to SL, for instance, how to communicate in class between the teacher and the student always stands as a disturbing problem. It is almost difficult to spot where a misunderstanding lies and make clear how it occurs.

In FL, the teacher and the student usually share a common native language, thus have no difficulty in discussing problems at various academic levels. Spotting and clarifying misunderstandings and misconceptions will be no problem either, provided the native language is not rejected. As for its disadvantages, FL learning lacks the necessary foreign atmosphere, and also lacks the accord between the target language and the local, natural, social and cultural contexts. Of course, the lack of FL atmosphere is the toughest problem. Apart from classroom teaching and home reviewing, the student has no other access to the FL. The lack of FL atmosphere not only prevents the correct understanding of the target language but also prevents the FL knowledge already possessed from turning into useful language skills.

D. *Teaching Method*

A good method in FL teaching must be able to help the learner realize clearly similarity and dissimilarity between the foreign language and his own language and to avoid the negative transfer of NL, meanwhile make full use of positive transfer of NL. Therefore FL teaching in elementary stage and intermediate stage should be set up according to the principle of the native-foreign language comparison.

A prominent feature, with which language learning differs from the learning of other subjects, is: Language learning

demands much higher level of skills in employing. The level is so high that the employment of a language seems beyond control of consciousness. Therefore a good method in FL must include a great amount of instructed practice in using the foreign language so that language knowledge may be turned into language skills. Traditional teaching method ignores the significance of sufficient practice in language learning and lays stress on grammatical comprehension of linguistic knowledge and translation exercise, which are far from enough in amount and variety. Consequently, it dwells on the mere translation from NL into FL. The foreign language knowledge that the learner has mastered in this way fails to leap onto the level of language skill. Therefore, prompt practice after the learning of linguistic knowledge is of key importance in assisting the learners to internalize what they have learned. Both linguistic knowledge and skill should be emphasized, including comprehension and production, language input and output.

E. Linguistic Knowledge and Experience

At the outset of FLL, quite a number of people assume that meanings are not only the same in all languages but they will be classified in the same way, namely, languages differ only in the forms used for those meanings. As a result, they tend to transfer the knowledge and skill of NL into FLL without any adaptations, inviting great amount of negative transfer of NL.

However, some people who know their mother tongue better, or learned FL previously, make fewer mistakes of this kind. As they understand more or less the peculiarity of an individual language, they are always on guard against inappropriate equalization. Those who know their NL better are usually able to sense fine shades of difference in the usage and meaning of an individual word, an expression or a sentence pattern. Transferred into FLL, this ability tends to save them a lot of mistakes of negative transfer, while those who have studied linguistics or some FL previously know from linguistic theory or personal experience that it is dangerous to transfer anything of NL mechanically into FLL. Thus they are also able to avoid errors of negative transfer. In short, the more linguistic knowledge and experience the learner has, the less negative transfer of NL he has in FLL.

F. Learners' Cognitive Ability

Under identical learning conditions, learners' achievements usually vary greatly. This difference is generally attributed to the memory of the learner (Littlewood, 1984). Memory is of course of importance to learning. But it is not the decisive factor in language learning. Mechanical memory helps little in the creative use of language knowledge, whereas abilities to analyse, generalize and comprehend are most important for adult learners. Learners strong in these respects may, more often than not, perceive the similarity, dissimilarity and inner associations between languages, which will guide them to grasp the FL by means of linguistic laws rather than mechanically memorizing and inappropriate equalization.

IV. SUGGESTIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

From the above analysis of the transfer phenomena, we can see that the learner's native language does not, as often thought of, interfere with FLL all the time. As a language already possessed, it has double functions: on the one hand, it contributes positive transfer to FLL. On the other hand, it interferes with FLL with its negative transfer. Here, the author puts forward three suggestions for foreign language teaching:

Firstly, strengthen the training of basic knowledge and skills (Ellis, 1987). There are more or less common elements and regularities among various kinds of knowledge and skills. The more knowledge and skill one mastered, the easier the new knowledge and skill would be commanded. Thus, helping learners lay a good foundation about essential concepts, basic awareness and necessary adaptation capabilities is very important in FLL in the elementary stage. The stronger the basis is founded, the more efficient the learner's learning result will be.

Secondly, take full advantage of comparative and contrasting methods in FL teaching. The teacher ought to guide students to review relevant knowledge and skill already learned before new exploration so as to make a good psychological preparation. Then, comparative and contrasting methods are proposed to check out similarities and differences between the old and the new material, and to pick out those interfering elements. One point needs particular attention: comparative and contrasting method must be utilized on the basis of firm consolidation of previous learning. Otherwise, negative transfer rather than positive one would certainly occur.

Thirdly, Instruction needs to be provided for directing students' exercises. Generally speaking, the more exercises are designed and done, the more solid the newly acquired knowledge will be, the more possible positive transfer will be achieved. Yet the training exercises must be arranged scientifically and logically, or the ideal effect won't be guaranteed. Therefore, the teacher should furnish the learners more specific guidance in order to get them catch hold of the correct method and avoid random trials. Surely, students also need to be given more opportunities to develop their power. Only when the adequate language input and the proper teaching method are ensured can learners accumulate more actual language and experience and polish their lingual perception and thus achieve the maximum positive transfer.

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