Language Transfer and Multilingualism in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract: Multilingualism have been discussed in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. More and more learners are encouraged to acquire second or third language. Obviously, previous researches have turned out a rather definite fact that multilingual learners have an advantage over monolingual learners in different angles. However, language transfer have positive and negative impact on multilingual acquisition, specifically, in foreign language learning. This study focuses on the relationship between language transfer and multilingual acquisition. It is unfolded from the role of language transfer in language acquisition, the impact of multilingualism on students' learning ability and the measures of improving multilingual competence with language transfer.

Key words*:* Language Transfer, Multilingualism, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

1. Introduction

With the need of the globalized society, multi-lingual language has been a concerned topic recently. It means that one language learner has to acquire more than one language to communicate with other people from different countries. It is estimated that people with multilingualism have a greater advantage over those with monolingual language in study or work fields. As a result, so many language learners tend to choose additional languages except native language. Language acquisition, as a process, shows how humans master and understand a language.

Many researchers have studied second language acquisition from different perspectives, such as linguistics, applied linguistics, psychology, education, and anthropology. Stephen Krashen mainly focused on language acquisition, especially second language acquisition. Krashen (1988) pointed out five main hypotheses, including the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis, the Input hypothesis, the Affective Filter hypothesis and the Natural Order hypothesis. It is also paid more attention to individual differences (Segalowitz, 1997), variation (R. Ellis, 1999; Johnston, 1999), and the linguistic environment for language learning (Doughty, 2000; Long, 1996). Some researchers studied second language acquisition with language transfer. However, a few researchers are concentrated on the impact of language transfer on multilingual acquisition.

This study highlights the relationship between them. In details, three specific questions will be explored within this paper. (1) What is the role of language transfer in language acquisition? (2) To what extent does multilingualism affect students' learning ability? (3) How to improve multilingual competence with language transfer?

2. The impact of the language transfer on language acquisition

The concept of "transfer" is not actually first proposed in the field of SLA, it is actually an important concept in psychology. Although people have been concerned about language transfer for a long time, it is not easy to define language transfer accurately. Before delving into the meaning of language transfer, we must clarify two concepts, namely borrowing transfer and substratum transfer. Language transfer is usually mentioned in the influence of the native language in SLA studies.

In the studies of language transfer, although it is difficult to quantify the impact of various factors on the degree of transfer, it is undoubted that differences between the two languages in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics have a direct impact on language transfer. Generally speaking. language transfer in phonetics is more significant, as the "foreign accent" of second language learners is the best explanation. The main reason for the "foreign accent" may falls into the differences in phonetics between the mother tongue and the target language, or the two languages show different pronunciation characteristics. For example, the lack of consonant concatenations in Chinese makes it difficult for Chinese students to pronounce words such as sixth, spring, green etc.. The impact of mother tongue transfer in syntax is also obvious. For example, English is a typical right-branching language, while Chinese is just the opposite, often adopting a left-branching structure. For example, in English it is said that "The bread that the rat ate was rotten." In

Chinese, the modifiers are mainly placed before the central word. This difference in syntax may cause trouble to Chinese students in the acquisition of attributive clause.

3. The impact of multilingualism on students' learning ability

China is a country with hundreds of dialects. Internationally speaking, more than half of the world's population uses multiple languages, and more people often have access to multiple languages (Grosjean, 2010). In some researches, it is shown that the ability of solving problems of different participants reflects that bilingual children perform better in mental theoretical tasks than monolingual children (Kovacs, 2009; Rubio - Fernandez & Glucksberg, 2012). The daily contact with people who speak different languages provides a formative communication environment for children, which is totally different from that of monolingual children. In different social language environment, children can understand the differences of people's views and naturally improve their communicative ability.

Canada's immersive bilingual teaching model is hailed as "the deepest, most extensive, and most detailed project in Canadian teaching history". In immersive education classrooms, teachers not only use the second language to teach the second language itself, but also the subject content is taught in a second language. Therefore, the second language is not only a learning content or a learning tool, but also cultivates talents who are as proficient in the native language as the second language. In immersive education, language learning is carried out in a certain context.

Some policies have been taken to encourage multi-linguistic speakers. Australia's National Policy on Language Issues ensures the dominance of English, protects other languages, and provides various services and learning opportunities for the study of other languages. In order to encourage students to learn various languages, the Australian Federal Government even provides a special allowance of AUD 300 per language. In our country, ethnic minorities with multilingual backgrounds also have different language usages among students.

The language environment is very important to the acquisition of second language and even third language. Studies have shown that the bilingual environment is conducive to students' English learning, especially the development of reading ability. The bilingual language environment will produce functional enhancements in advanced cognition. Therefore, in a multilingual environment, the innovative research on college English teaching methods is conducive to training high-level multilingual talents.

4. The measures to improve multilingual competence with language transfer

Multilingualism is a diversified phenomenon. Children and adults adopt different models or methods to develop multi-lingual language competence. A considerable number of people speak more than two languages in their everyday life due to historical, social, or economic reasons. They may live in a multilingual community as a result of colonialism and immigration, or they might be in constant contact with different monolingual communities because of globalization (Kemp, 2009). Multilingualism is used exclusively to refer to the learning of more than two languages (Feisen Hu, 1998). This study deals with multilingual acquisition which is not the same with monolingual processing.

However, when we try to define multilingual competence, we find out it's not a simple task. Cenoz and Genesee (1998) proposed that multilingual competence involves using "several languages appropriately and effectively for communication in oral and written language". No matter what form the speaker uses, language transfer always accompanies with the process.

Language teachers and students should pay more attention to the important impact of mother tongue on multilingual competence and take advantage of the positive transfer of mother tongue. When multilingual vocabulary is the same origin with the vocabulary of mother tongue, the multilingual can well understand the other languages with the help of their mother tongue. The language speakers maybe meet some problems because of the negative transfer of the mother tongue. So it is truly necessary for the learners to master and use native expressions. In this way, they are likely to avoid the negative language transfer and correct the linguistic mistakes. Changing the learning or thinking model is a great method to improve multilingual competence. Different languages present different thinking ways. With comparative approach among a variety of languages, students can summarize the similarities and differences between them. Language is also a collection of culture. For multilingual speakers, culture plays a vital part in acquiring a new language. They should absorb actively native culture to develop comprehensive language proficiency in oral and written language. The multilingual gradually highlight the subjectivity of multilingual learning, and then constantly improve the language sense and form a cross-cultural consciousness.

5. Conclusion

The present theoretical study has attempted to offer an overall picture of multilinguals acquisition, while emphasizing the impact of language transfer, including positive and negative transfer. On the one hand, multilingual learners make full use of positive transfer as well as keep away from negative transfer. On the other hand, considering differences in language proficiency and abilities of other aspects

between monolinguals and multilinguals, it is so clear to know the reason why there is a greater number of multilingual learners all over the world, though the proficiency that multilingual learners aspire to should not be equivalent to the proficiency of a native speaker. Achieving native-like competence need not be the goal of multilingual education. Rather, the goals would differ in each language and should be based on learners' needs in a language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011).

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