

Source language of transfer in multilingual learners

A number of studies have shown that the source language of transfer can be related to the following four factors: proficiency, L2 status, recency, and psychotypology (Williams & Hammarberg, 1998; De Angelis & Selinker, 2001; Cenoz, 2003; Bohnacker, 2006). Most of these studies focused on one individual or a small group of participants and employed a qualitative approach. Furthermore, the majority of studies collected data from oral production, with few studies investigating whether the same factors are relevant in written production. The aim of this study then was to statistically investigate how much of the variation in transfer can be explained by the above-mentioned factors in oral versus written production. Data were collected from 13-14-year-old multilingual learners in their second year of English instruction in Luxembourg. Multinomial logistic regression was used to test the relationship between the four factors and the source language of transfer.

The results revealed the expected differences between spoken and written production. All four factors had a significant relationship to the choice of source language and model fit in both speaking and writing showed significant improvement from the null model. However, model fit was better for the spoken data than the written data.

The discussion of the results thus focuses on writing as a more controlled process, allowing time to think and to scan all available options before making a careful decision in choosing the best possible lexical item. These considerations are then considered in relation to Kellerman's (1978) concept of transferability. In his work, the learner is described as an active decision-maker on what linguistic structures may be transferable (an aspect especially relevant in writing). Similarly, Bouvy (2000) found that her Dutch learners of English were more reluctant to transfer [Dutch] *bezuinigen* into English than [Dutch] *sparen* (both mean "to save money" in English) and this due to their differing degrees of orthographic markedness in (or for) Dutch. I will suggest that the same reflection may potentially occur across languages in the case of multilingual learners. Item-specific transferability and cross-language comparison are consequently discussed as integral parts of transfer strategies in third language acquisition.

References

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