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CROSS-LINGUISTIC SIMILARITIES. LINGUISTIC PARALLELS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Annotation

Learning, including language acquisition builds upon prior knowledge, as new linguistic elements are understood by connecting them to existing cognitive structures. What matters to the language learner is language proximity. Both single language and cross-linguistic awareness play a crucial role in acquiring another language. One significant aspect of this process is cross-linguistic transfer, where similarities between L1 and L2 influence learning. Moreover, passive understanding of language does not automatically lead to active use. Learning requires structured practice, and a deeper understanding of linguistic parallels in the cognitive process behind it. This study explore various aspects of similarities and how these parallels can affect FLA and examines connections that help learners to support language transfer, with particular focus on Spanish, Russian, Uzbek, Arabic and Japanese in relation to English.

Key words

Cross-linguistic transfer, proximity, linguistic parallels, acquisition, passive and active use, linguistic similarities, cognitive process, language learning, grammar, cognitive skills, language connections.

Introduction

Learning is not an isolated process that starts from zero; rather, it builds upon what the learner already knows. This concept aligns with Ausubel's (1968) principle, which is worth quoting as a supportive concept: "*If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly.*"[93] This point emphasizes that language learning is not only a process of memorizing existing information but rather an active construction based on prior

[93] Ausubel, D. P. 1968: Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View. Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc. New York.

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knowledge. Research suggests that when acquiring a new language, learners naturally look for similarities and connections between their L1 and L2 to facilitate comprehension. This is a cognitive process known as cross-linguistic transfer, which allows individuals to rely on their background knowledge to avoid potential misunderstandings and enhance learning. Cross-linguistic transfer refers to how knowledge of one language influences the learning of another as a natural procedure of mind that connects new task or information with what already exists in the mind. This phenomenon is particularly evident when comparing languages with different structures.

Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982)[94] further supports this idea that input language development depends on comprehensible input, or linguistic content which is just a little bit above the learner's current proficiency level. Similarly, Jim Cummins' interdependence hypothesis (1979)[95] that states L1 proficiency can facilitate L2 acquisition. The role of language proximity in FLA varies depends on phonetics, grammar, and lexical structures. As an example, speakers of languages with similar structures to English would acquire easily than speakers of distant languages, such as Japanese, Russian, or Arabic. The paper examines how these connections shape foreign language acquisition, and how they can make the learning process smoother and more intuitive process.

Methods

This study employs comparative analysis and observational analysis to examine cross-linguistic transfer and the role of linguistic similarities in foreign language acquisition. Through comparative analysis of close and distant languages, the study investigates grammatical, phonetic, and lexical transfer processes and their effects on learning English. A Japanese native speaker and a Spanish native speaker, both learning English as an L2, were tested on their comprehension and usage of Present Tense structures. Phonetic and lexical similarities between English, Spanish, Arabic and Japanese were examined to assess their impact on pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition.

Linguistic comparisons were drawn using phonetic analysis, sentence structure evaluation, and vocabulary cognates to determine facilitative and interfering effects in FLA.

Facilitative and Interfering Effects of Cross-Linguistic Similarities in FLA

The role of Cross Linguistic Similarities in FLA is complicated, as it generally involves disentangling genetic relationships, contact-induced changes, universal tendencies while considering how history, the way people think across languages.

[94] Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Pergamon Press
[95] Cummins, J. (1979). Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters. Working Papers on Bilingualism, 19, 121-129.

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The distance between one's L1 and L2 serves as fundamental determinant for FLA process in terms of grammar, phonetics, and vocabulary.

•***Facilitative effects****: When L1 and L2 share phonetic, grammatical, or lexical similarities, help learners transfer knowledge, making acquisition easier and faster.*

•***Interfering effects****: When L1 and L2 differ significantly, learners may struggle with new sounds or structures, require more practice and adaptation.*

For example, the research[96] on one Japanese native speaker (L1) and Spanish speaker (L1) who learning English as a Second Language (L2) and both are studying the Present Tense in English. The Spanish speaker performed English controls on definite singular, indefinite singular and bare plurals and going to understand the process of conjugation, absorb rules easily. In contrast, Native Japanese speaker performed well on singulars and bare plurals more effectively but faced challenges when expressing generic references at the noun phrase. Japanese learner(L1) would need more time to comprehend this particular process and this speaker have a greater difficulty than Spanish learner due to semantic mapping of definite singular in the morphological case. This is also because, English, Spanish or Italian learners may find it easier to acquire each other's languages due to shared Latin roots, yet Japanese or Arabic speakers may struggle due to significant differences in structure, grammar, and phonetic patterns. Because of shared linguistic ancestry and language influences, many Indo-European languages follow similar grammatical structure: subject-verb-object (SVO), whereas Arabic has a complex, root-based, and linear morphological system, and Japanese is structured with entirely different word order: subject-object-verb (SOV), making these languages fundamentally unrelated. For instance, Japanese speaker might say, "I apple eat" influenced by the Japanese sentence structure, instead of the correct English sentence, "I eat apple".

Phonetic and phonological similarities; the influence of L1 on L2

Foreign language learners always face the problem of learning language while lacking certain phonemes in their native language needed for proper English pronunciation. This can lead in some cases to noticeable accents, which may give a wrong impression about FL learners. This challenge equally valid for relatively close languages like German, English, Spanish, French, but as it is for distant languages such as Japanese, Arabic or Korean. This is a common linguistic barrier that needs to be dealt in order to achieve accurate pronunciation.

[96] Chen, Y. (2022). The role of cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition. University College Dublin.

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In recent research[97], Spanish and Japanese were chosen as examples of languages that are close (Spanish) and very far (Japanese) from English. The comparison shows that Spanish and Japanese against English language and found that both languages have fewer vowel and consonant sounds than in English, but Spanish has less struggles than Japanese.

	Consonant distribution	Vowel distribution
English	60.78%	39.22%
Spanish	56.51%	43,49%
Japanese	48.00%	52.00%

[98]

Consonant vs. vowel distribution chart for English, Spanish and Japanese

Regarding the frequency of occurrence of vowel phonemes, Spanish and English have a somewhat similar occurrence (43% for Spanish and 39% for English). Japanese however due to the fact that consonants have to be accompanied by a vowel (with the sole exception of /n/) has a much higher vowel occurrence (52%). Unlike Spanish and English, Japanese does not have diphthongs. Whenever two vowels in a row occur they are just two different syllables. This lack of diphthongs has phonological side effects for Japanese EFL learners as gliding vowels are unknown to them and as such have never been practiced before. Additionally, Spanish and Japanese both lack certain English phonemes, leading to substitutions: Spanish speakers may replace /θ, ð/ with /t, d/ (e.g., this → dis). Japanese speakers may substitute /ɹ/ with /ɾ/, causing confusion between words. (Juan Checa,2017,p.12)[99]

Lexical similarities

There are lexical similarities between languages arise due to shared ancestry, borrowing, or linguistic influence. For instance, many languages such as Persian, Turkish, and Urdu has influenced by Arabic, and learners with background in Arabic loanwords can acquire these languages more effectively. In the case of

[97] Juan Checa, J. J. (2017). Comparing phonetic difficulties by EFL learners from Spain and Japan. Retrieved from www.researchgate.net
[98]Chart adopted from Comparing Phonetic Difficulties by EFL Learners from Spain and Japan by J. J. Juan Checa, 2017. P.g.12
[99] Juan Checa, J. J. (2017). Comparing phonetic difficulties by EFL learners from Spain and Japan. Retrieved from www.researchgate.net

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English, Spanish, and Japanese, their lexical connections vary significantly. English and Spanish, both influenced by Latin, share numerous cognates, such as nation – nación and university – universidad, making vocabulary acquisition easier for Spanish speakers. In contrast, Japanese, with its unique linguistic roots, has fewer natural cognates with English but has absorbed many English loanwords (gairaigo), modifying them to fit Japanese phonology, such as computer -konpyuutaa and bus- basu. English has borrowed many words from Spanish (patio, plaza, fiesta), while Spanish has also adopted modern English terms, albeit in smaller numbers (email → correo electrónico). Beyond individual words, word formation also differs. English and Spanish rely on Latin and Greek roots for academic and scientific terms, providing Spanish speakers with an advantage in technical vocabulary. Meanwhile, Japanese relies on kanji-based compounds, making its vocabulary structure distinct. Overall, lexical similarities give Spanish speakers an edge in learning English vocabulary, while Japanese learners face greater challenges due to structural and phonetic differences, despite the growing influence of English loanwords in Japanese.

Discussion

Findings confirm that linguistic background significantly shapes FLA. Speakers of languages structurally similar to English (e.g., Spanish) benefit from grammatical and lexical parallels, while those from distant languages (e.g., Japanese, Arabic) face greater challenges.

Theoretical Framework: Chomsky, Krashen, and Cummins

•Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG) suggests that all humans have an innate ability to acquire language. This explains why Uzbek, Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish speakers naturally apply their native grammatical structures when learning English. For example, Japanese learners might transfer their SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) structure into English, while Spanish speakers benefit from shared Latin roots with English.[100]

•Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis emphasizes that learners acquire language through comprehensible input. This explains how Spanish learners can recognize cognates (e.g., nación → nation), while Uzbek and Arabic learners may relate loanwords in English (kitob → book).[101]

•Jim Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis argues that strong L1 literacy enhances L2 development. Uzbek, Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish learners with high proficiency in their native language can transfer reading, writing, and analytical

[100] Noam Chomsky: Universal Grammar (Chomsky, 1965)
[101] Stephen Krashen: Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982)

skills to English. This is especially beneficial for Japanese and Spanish speakers, who rely on orthographic depth in their L1, supporting literacy in English.[102]

These linguistic theories highlight the importance of recognizing how a learner's linguistic background shapes learning journey and deeper mechanisms. Every individual of FLA has own strategies and linguistic journey. The mind does not simply absorb new language in isolation; rather it filters new information through pre-existing linguistic frameworks.

Conclusion

From above, we discover deeper understanding of how Cross-linguistic similarities shape Second language acquisition (SLA) through linguistic parallels. Language learners unconsciously rely on their L1 knowledge when acquiring L2, leading to both facilitative and interfering effects. Phonetic similarities affect pronunciation, grammatical parallels influence sentence structure, and lexical similarities aid vocabulary acquisition. Understanding cross-linguistic similarities allows for more efficient language learning by addressing potential difficulties and maximizing existing cognitive resources. Linguistic theories such as Universal Grammar, the Input Hypothesis, and the Interdependence Hypothesis provide a theoretical framework for understanding these processes, emphasizing both cognitive predispositions and the importance of meaningful exposure. Effective language acquisition requires balancing the advantages of cross-linguistic transfer while minimizing its challenges, ensuring a smoother and more adaptive learning process.

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[102] Jim Cummins: Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979)

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