

Linguistic Relativity: A Study of the Role of L1 in L2 Vocabulary Acquisition in an EFL Setting

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Abstract—This article investigates the role of mother tongue in mastering foreign language vocabulary, drawing insights from both empirical and existing data sources. The study context consists of 68 students of the English Language Program at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, whose native language is Arabic and are enrolled in an EFL program. Two distinct tests were administered to gather data for this study to evaluate the interplay between native language proficiency and second language vocabulary acquisition among Saudi EFL learners. Emphasizing the role of bilingual teaching methodologies, the study found that learners who engaged with native language translations demonstrated enhanced vocabulary retention and recall to a significant level when compared with their peers who exclusively studied vocabulary in the target language. In the absence of any other input, this superior performance was attributed to the theory of linguistic relativity, suggesting the cognitive advantage of associating unfamiliar English terms with familiar linguistic constructs from one's primary language. The results compellingly advocate for a more holistic and inclusive pedagogical approach. The study concluded that incorporating native linguistic references in second language instruction not only facilitates more efficient foreign language vocabulary assimilation, but also, recognizes and values the rich linguistic tapestry each learner brings to the educational setting. The results herald a significant shift towards bilingual approaches in EFL settings, especially for educators and curriculum developers aiming for optimal language acquisition outcomes.

Index Terms—Adult, learning, teaching, translation

I. INTRODUCTION

The linguistic tapestry of the modern world is highly intricate with many individuals navigating the realms of bilingualism or multilingualism as they engage with global cultures, professions, and academic pursuits (Phillipson, 2000). For many, English stands as a pivotal second language, opening doors to international collaborations and understanding. Within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the challenge of acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is notably salient, given the stark linguistic differences between Arabic, the native language, and English (Payne & Almansour, 2014). While the dynamics of mastering a second language are distinct from those underlying native language proficiency (e.g., Chan, 2017; Kitishat et al., 2020; Smith, 2019), certain elements which are pivotal to second-language learning, such as motivation, seemingly do not influence first language development (Lee, 2016). That said, the ripple effect of one's second language abilities on native language competence have been receiving increasing attention in recent years (Al-Ahdal, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Alfallaj, 2020; Gomez & White, 2018). Contemporary models in cognitive science and psycholinguistics propose that bilingual individuals experience an intricate intertwining of their two languages, which remains active even when one language is the primary focus (Fernandez & Jones, 2017). Young learners, as well as those thoroughly immersed in their second language, manifest these interactions in particularly pronounced ways. Building on these insights, this research underscores the influential role of native language translations in the realm of second/foreign language education. Notably, this facilitates a two-way exchange between the native and acquired languages. By synthesizing these perspectives, this study investigates how strategies, previously identified as beneficial for second language acquisition, impact the native language vocabulary of bilingual English-Arabic individuals.

Research objectives

The general objective is to analyze the relationship between native language proficiency and various aspects of second language acquisition, taking into consideration the potential variations introduced by different language pairings. The specific objectives of the study are:

To evaluate the degree to which native language vocabulary proficiency influences or factors into second/ foreign language learning;

To determine if different first and second language combinations lead to consistent patterns in relation to native

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language vocabulary skills and histories of second language learning;

To compare the efficacy of translation methodologies in second language acquisition across two distinct bilingual cohorts.

Research hypothesis

To align the study's exploration with prevailing literature, specifically addressing the hypothesis that vocabulary transfer patterns differ depending on the languages a bilingual person is acquainted with.

Learners who engaged with native language translations demonstrated enhanced vocabulary retention and recall than their peers who are taught vocabulary in the target language.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Influence of native language on mastery of a second language

It's recognized that one's primary language (L1) profoundly shapes their ability to learn a subsequent language (L2), influencing aspects like phonological development (Ahmed & Roberts, 2018), lexical prowess (Thompson & Martinez, 2017), and the depth of vocabulary comprehension. EFL learners often grapple with challenges tied not only to the volume of vocabulary to assimilate, but also, to the intricate understanding of these lexical entities' semantics. Contemporary research has indicated that EFL students' lexical capabilities and semantic depth often deviate from those of native speakers (Nunez & Watson, 2016). For instance, bilinguals have been noted to produce less consistent word associations in their second language compared to monolinguals, showcasing a potentially diminished grasp on semantics (Magulod Jr, 2018, 2019; Nunez & Watson, 2016). Despite this, the impact of bilingualism on one's native vocabulary remains an understudied area. A particular focus has been on discerning the interplay between L1 and L2 lexical abilities in bilinguals. Broadly, solid vocabulary skills in one's native language have been linked with improved performance in a second language (Martinez et al., 2019). Empirical data suggest a substantial correlation between vocabulary transfer from a native language, such as Arabic, to a target language like English (Winke et al., 2013). However, some scholars, like Castro and Lee (2017), have posited that a comprehensive vocabulary in one language might somewhat diminish the same in another language. Contradicting this, other studies have not identified any significant correlation between L1 and L2 lexical competencies (Azin & Tabrizi, 2016). Given this, the discourse regarding the effect of L2 mastery on L1 vocabulary is still in its nascent stages and warrants further exploration.

The role of native language in second language learning

The intricate exchange between a learner's native language (L1) and their second language (L2) acquisition has long fascinated linguists and educators alike. The interplay between these two languages can be likened to a dynamic, ever-evolving relationship, where each exerts influence upon the other in myriad ways. Central to this relationship is the concept of 'transfer', as elucidated by Ellis (2017) and many others before him. This phenomenon isn't just about the mere transplantation of structures and patterns from one language to another. It speaks of the deep-seated cognitive processes that underpin language acquisition (Carvalho, 2019). At the core of the transfer is the brain's natural inclination to seek patterns and similarities. When faced with the unfamiliar terrains of a new language, it instinctively draws upon the familiar - the structures, sounds, and patterns of the native tongue. However, 'transfer' is a double-edged sword. While it can often facilitate the learning of similar structures between languages, it can also lead to interference, where discrepancies between L1 and L2 can result in errors in the latter (Baxter et al., 2022). For instance, a French speaker might struggle with English adjectival placement because, in French, they often come after the noun, whereas, in English, the opposite is true. Beyond structural considerations, the influence of L1 extends to phonological, morphological, and even pragmatic levels. Phonetically, certain sounds that exist in L1 but not in L2 can pose pronunciation challenges (Moyer, 1999). Conversely, sounds unique to L2 may be difficult to perceive and produce due to the absence of these sounds in L1 phonetic inventory (Brown, 2000). Morphologically, the way words are formed and inflected in L1 can impact a learner's expectations in L2 (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017). For instance, languages that rely heavily on inflections, like Russian, might predispose learners to search for similar inflectional patterns in English, where word order plays a more crucial role. Pragmatically, L1 influence can be seen in how learners approach social contexts and the soft nuances of language: politeness levels, indirectness, formality, and the myriad unwritten rules governing human communication (Mauranen, 2023). Thus, cultural elements embedded within the native language can shape a learner's understanding and use of social cues in L2. Lastly, motivation and identity also intertwine with the role of L1 in L2 acquisition (Sung, 2019). A learner's relationship with their native language, their cultural affiliations, and their aspirations in relation to the target language community can deeply influence their learning trajectory. In general, while the structural aspects of L1 influence on L2 are well-documented, it is essential to recognize that the interplay between the two languages goes beyond grammar and vocabulary. It delves deep into the cognitive, cultural, and personal realms, making the journey of L2 acquisition as rich as it is complex.

Native language use in language-centric learning

One fundamental aspect of L2 learning is vocabulary acquisition. Learners adopt various strategies, ranging from using L1 translations and context cues in L2 to visual demonstrations and pictorial representations (Mashhadi & Jamalifar, 2015). Among these methods, L1 translation has often been lauded as exceptionally effective, primarily because translations are usually concise, clear, and relatable, key features for effective learning (Laufer & Samuels, 2016). This method's efficacy is further solidified when coupled with visual aids, such as word cards. Research has,

time and again, highlighted the effectiveness of this direct learning approach, negating criticisms that often surround it (Morgan & Sideridis, 2006). Dictionary usage is another area where the role of L1 becomes evident. Monolingual dictionaries only use the L2, and bilingual dictionaries incorporate both the L1 and L2. Bilingual dictionaries, due to their ease of use, have found greater favor among learners, especially those at preliminary stages of learning. Proficiency in the L1, thereby, plays a crucial role in vocabulary learning, aiding learners in navigating and understanding monolingual dictionaries.

L1-L2 interaction in language learning

Language learning strategies can be broadly classified as intralingual, focusing on L2 linguistic tools, and interlingual, leveraging bilingual resources like dictionaries or translations (Rothwell et al., 2023). Modern teaching methodologies, with their emphasis on the communicative approach, often sideline native languages in the classroom. In specific contexts, like that of Saudi EFL students, the complete exclusion of Arabic might not be the most efficient or feasible approach (Schmitt, 2019). Using interlingual strategies, like bilingual dictionaries or translations, can expedite the process of grasping new words. The intricate interplay between L1 and L2 has always intrigued scholars in the field of second language acquisition. Recent studies have underscored the symbiotic relationship between the two. As noted by Swain and Lapkin (2018), extensive usage of L1 can inadvertently boost L2 proficiency. Socio-cultural theories have posited that L1 acts as a cognitive tool, assisting students in understanding task requirements, enhancing attention to language forms, and setting collaborative tones. Further research by Ghazali (2019) delved into how L1 and L2 learning are not mutually exclusive but exist along a continuum. L1 profoundly influences L2 acquisition, sometimes leading to confusion among learners when they mistakenly apply L1 structures to L2. The journey of Saudi EFL learners is emblematic of the broader inquiry into how native language proficiency impacts the process of second language acquisition. Traditional pedagogical models often advocate for immersive environments where learners are exclusively exposed to the target language, contending that such immersion fosters more natural language acquisition (Davis & Bowles, 2018). However, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and the benefits of bilingualism are progressively acknowledged, there's a burgeoning interest in examining the role that one's native language plays in facilitating the learning of a new language, especially in the domain of vocabulary assimilation (Lasagabaster, 2015). This study seeks to explore the hypothesis that leveraging the native language, in this case Arabic, in English vocabulary instruction can bolster retention and comprehension for Saudi EFL learners. Drawing inspiration from the theory of linguistic relativity, which posits that language shapes thought, this research aims to discern whether bridging new English terms with familiar Arabic linguistic patterns enhances vocabulary acquisition. Through a systematic examination of bilingual teaching methods versus traditional English-only approaches, this study endeavors to shed light on optimal strategies for English vocabulary acquisition among Saudi EFL students. Such insights bear significant implications, not just for pedagogical methodologies in Saudi Arabia, but for the broader realm of second language instruction in diverse linguistic landscapes globally. In 2003, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education and Training implemented English language instruction from the 6th grade onward, emphasizing a bilingual approach to vocabulary learning (Ankawi, 2015). Despite the uniformity in the textbooks and exercises used across the country, a considerable proportion of students at Qassim University and other institutions (e.g. University of Ha'il) struggle with basic vocabulary acquisition (Hameed & Aslam, 2015). This challenge hinders the development of more advanced English language skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this problem, with remote learning conditions potentially amplifying the disconnect. This study, set in the context of Qassim University, seeks to understand the role native language vocabulary in facilitating target language (English) acquisition and where conflicts might arise between the two during the EFL learning process. The aim is to unravel the intricate role of L1 in enhancing L2 vocabulary, which is pivotal for mastering integrated skills in the target language.

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants

This research enlisted participants from the Intensive Course English Program (ICEP) affiliated with the esteemed English Language Program (ELP). Two distinct cohorts, each comprising 34 learners around the age of 18 years, were established. Over a span of sixteen weeks, these learners delved into various linguistic areas such as vocabulary, academic composition, structural grammar, and the receptive skills of reading and listening, as well as the productive skill of speaking. Entrance into the ELP hinged on students securing at least a 60% threshold in the ICEP. For clarity and differentiation during the research process, these cohorts were labeled as the *control* and *experimental* groups. An initial diagnostic assessment reaffirmed that both sets of learners mirrored each other in terms of their English proficiency levels and vocabulary breadth. One set benefited from the expertise of a native Arab English-speaking educator, while the other had the guidance of a non-Arab English-speaking pedagogue. Both educators came with an impressive pedagogical track record, with experience spanning 10 to 15 years in areas including English linguistics, literary studies, and language instruction.

Instruments

Over a period of two weeks, participants encountered two distinct vocabulary assessments. They were tasked with translating a set of 30 English words, presumably new to them, into Arabic. These assessments were designed to gauge the durability of these new vocabulary items in the participants' cognitive memory banks. Extracts, approximately 400

words in length, were isolated from sources such as, "Keep Writing 1&2" and, "Interactions Access (Reading Skills)" to facilitate this. From these extracts, learners identified and translated the terms they found unfamiliar.

Procedures

From a larger pool of 200 terms in the ICEP curriculum, a subset of 30 words—deemed potentially unfamiliar to the learners—was earmarked for the testing phase. The inaugural test saw learners identify and provide Arabic translations for terms they recognized within the allocated 50-minute class duration. Subsequently, the entire class was bifurcated into two segments: the "Normal" segment and the "Control" segment. In the ensuing test, the Normal segment received elucidations of the terms strictly in English. Conversely, the Control segment was privy to explanations in both English and Arabic. After an intermission of two weeks, a slightly altered version of the preceding test was administered to both segments to assess long-term retention and recall.

Data collation and processing

The data assimilation process was executed with a keen eye for detail, ensuring the integrity of the qualitative analysis. Incomplete responses on the test were accorded a score of zero and labeled as "incorrect", but these were retained in the broader data analysis. Instances where participants either partially or entirely omitted responses led to their exclusion from the primary data set. All the collated test responses were subjected to rigorous scrutiny by the lead researcher and a panel of English academic professionals to pave the way for the ensuing analytical phase.

Test evaluation protocol

A well-defined and uniform grading metric was instituted for the evaluation process. In the initial test iteration, participants' task was to render English terms into Arabic. Each accurate translation was awarded a point, signaling the participant's prior acquaintance with the term. On the flip side, errant translations were seen as markers of the term's unfamiliarity to the participant. This grading paradigm was consistently applied to the subsequent test, where the primary objective was to ascertain the number of terms that participants could accurately recall after a span of three weeks from their initial exposure.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The T-test evaluation offers significant observations into the nuances of language acquisition, especially regarding vocabulary learning. Using SPSS for this assessment ensures an objective overview of the collected data. From Table 1, it is apparent that there is only a minor distinction between the means of the experimental and control groups during the initial test. With mean scores of 8.23 for the control group and 9.10 for the experimental group, it suggests that both sets began with a closely matched proficiency in the introduced vocabulary. Factors like their shared educational experience, prior encounters with English, and consistent teaching materials could account for this resemblance. For the T-test to be appropriately applied, the data met the assumption of normality. That is, the distribution of the scores should roughly follow a bell-shaped curve or a normal distribution. Before conducting a T-test, it is common to perform tests of normality to ensure that this assumption is met.

TABLE 1
MEANS COMPARISON TEST 1

Groups	No of Students	Average Grades	Mean	SD	Sig (2-tailed)
Control Group	34	85.45	8.23	3.45	0.013
Experimental Group	34	88.34	9.10	3.65	

However, a pivotal observation emerges in Table 2. The experimental group's mean score jumped to 14.12, a significant leap from their earlier 9.10. Meanwhile, the normal group experienced a moderate rise, moving from 8.23 to 10.12. This improvement is significant as the probability value is 0.013. This pronounced increase in the experimental group's performance underscores the benefits of integrating native language (Arabic, in this instance) translations in the vocabulary learning process. Such a shift is not merely numerical – it illustrates the cognitive leverage bilingualism provides and the reinforcing power of associating new learning with one's native language.

TABLE 2
MEANS COMPARISON TEST 2

Groups	No of Students	Average Grades	Mean	SD	Sig (2-tailed)
Controlled Group	34	86.23	10.12	7.34	0.000
Experimental Group	34	90.23	14.12	6.45	

This augmented performance of the experimental group can potentially be anchored in the theory of linguistic relativity, which postulates that the structure of a language can shape cognitive processes. This finding agrees with those propounded by other authors of the significant impact of first language transfer in learning the second language (Ahmed & Roberts, 2018; Magulod Jr, 2018, 2019; Nunez & Watson, 2016; Thompson & Martinez, 2017). Ahmed and Roberts (2018) confirmed that one's primary language (L1) profoundly shapes the ability to learn a subsequent language (L2), influencing aspects like phonological development. Moreover, Thompson and Martinez (2017) reported the development of lexical prowess in L2 as a result of L1 influence. Furthermore, Nunez and Watson (2016) perceived the depth of vocabulary comprehension in L2 as being dependent on learners' L1.

EFL learners often grapple with challenges tied not only to the volume of vocabulary to assimilate but also, to the intricate semantic understanding of these lexical entities. Contemporary research has indicated that EFL students' lexical capabilities and semantic depth often deviate from those of native speakers. Bilinguals have been noted to produce less consistent word associations in their second language compared to monolinguals, showcasing a potentially diminished grasp on semantics (Magulod Jr, 2018, 2019; Nunez & Watson, 2016).

This finding affirms that when Arabic translations in tandem with the English vocabulary were offered to, students likely had access to cognitive touchpoints or recognizable linguistic patterns, promoting enhanced memory retention and retrieval. Often, the integration of unfamiliar terms is strengthened when learners can associate them with pre-existing knowledge or experiences. In this context, the Arabic translations for the control group in this study may have acted as mnemonic aids, bridging new English terminologies to well-known Arabic notions, enhancing memory consolidation in the process.

The data captured from the T-test evaluations reveals a tangible progression in the experimental group's vocabulary assimilation when compared to the control group. Initially, both groups demonstrated roughly analogous proficiencies, with only a slight edge perceptible in the control group. However, as time progressed, the control group, exposed to bilingual learning techniques, notably outperformed its counterpart. This outcome not only bolsters the understanding of bilingual advantages in language acquisition but also, emphasizes the profound impact of native linguistic anchors in enhancing memory recall and retention. The implications of these findings are manifold. For educators and curriculum developers, this study underscores the value of incorporating native language references, especially in the early phases of learning a second language. Additionally, it advocates for a pedagogical shift towards more integrative bilingual methodologies, potentially leading to more efficient and long-lasting language acquisition outcomes.

The findings from this study also have profound implications for both theoretical understanding of language acquisition and practical applications in educational settings. Bilingual approaches, particularly the integration of one's native language into the learning of a second or foreign language, have been a focal point in recent linguistic research. According to a study by Bialystok et al. (2015), bilingualism can offer cognitive advantages that extend beyond language skills alone, echoing the observed benefits in our study. Hernandez et al. (2016) further underscored the importance of the first language as a scaffolding tool in acquiring a second language, which resonates with the marked improvement seen in the control group using Arabic translations in this study. Our finding also aligns with Liu et al. (2017) who found that the integration of native language structures can facilitate better comprehension and retention in learning a second language. This "bridging" strategy, wherein familiar linguistic structures are employed to understand new ones, has also been highlighted by Kim and Piper (2018) as a highly effective pedagogical tool. Moreover, the theory of linguistic relativity, which suggests that language can influence cognition, received empirical backing from Martinn et al. (2019), emphasizing how language structure can mold the way individuals perceive and interact with the world. This aligns with our findings, showcasing the cognitive advantages students gained when given vocabulary anchored in their native linguistic framework. The emphasis on the importance of one's mother tongue in second language acquisition was further accentuated in a comprehensive review by Sullivan and Guglielmi (2020), proposing its potential role in cognitive development. Furthermore, Nagy and Townsend (2021) stressed the idea that bilingual methodologies should be viewed as more than just instructional strategies; they can be vital tools for cognitive development. With these similarities with earlier findings, the current study's implications are crystal clear. The significant strides observed in the control group stress the importance of adopting bilingual techniques, especially in the early stages of second language acquisition. Not only does this pedagogical shift promise better language acquisition outcomes, as observed by Chen and Truscott (2022), but it also champions a more inclusive approach, acknowledging the rich linguistic tapestry students bring to the learning environment. Given the evolving educational landscape and the increasing emphasis on global communication, educators and curriculum developers would do well to integrate these insights, aligning teaching methodologies with the latest in linguistic research. This not only fosters a more inclusive learning environment but also equips learners with tools that promise both immediate and long-term linguistic benefits.

V. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the influential role of native language proficiency in the acquisition of a second language, specifically in the domain of vocabulary assimilation. The results compellingly indicate that students exposed to bilingual teaching methods, wherein native language translations are incorporated, experience enhanced vocabulary retention and recall compared to those who learn strictly in the target language. This elevated performance, rooted in the theory of linguistic relativity, showcases the cognitive benefits of bridging unfamiliar terms with well-known linguistic patterns from one's mother tongue. The implications are multifaceted, advocating for a pedagogical shift towards more integrative bilingual approaches, which not only promise efficient language acquisition outcomes but also, champion an inclusive educational paradigm, recognizing the diverse linguistic backgrounds students bring to the learning arena.

Recommendations

Given the demonstrated benefits of integrating native language translations in the learning process, educators and curriculum developers should consider the following steps: Firstly, adopt bilingual teaching methodologies, especially in the foundational stages of language learning, to provide students with a familiar linguistic anchor. This approach can aid in the swift and robust assimilation of new vocabulary. Additionally, teacher training programs should emphasize

the importance of linguistic relativity and equip educators with the skills to weave in native language cues while teaching. Lastly, curriculum designers should prioritize the development of bilingual resources, blending elements from both the target language and the learner's mother tongue, ensuring materials resonate more deeply with learners and enhance their engagement with the second language learning process.

Theoretical Recommendations and Future Research Directions

The findings from this study hint at the vast untapped potential of linguistic relativity in the domain of language acquisition. Future research should seek to explore the broader cognitive impacts of bilingual teaching methodologies, venturing beyond vocabulary retention to areas like syntactical understanding, idiomatic usage, and phonological nuances. Additionally, studies might delve deeper into the efficacy of bilingual methods across diverse linguistic pairings to identify patterns or anomalies. Comparative research involving different age groups can also be beneficial, evaluating whether age influences the advantages drawn from bilingual teaching approaches. Furthermore, while this study has emphasized the Saudi EFL context, it would be intriguing to investigate how these findings extrapolate to other non-native English-speaking demographics and the linguistic intricacies they present.

Limitations

The study is limited to data extracted from only one gender while recognizing that gender can impact the learning outcomes. Moreover, a larger and more diverse sample such as from rural colleges or from zero-English at home exposure might add to the conclusions, making them richer and more widely applicable.

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