

Beyond the L2: How Is Transfer Affected by Multilingualism?

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As if learning a foreign language were not hard enough, those who have studied more than one might have noticed that it is tough keeping all those languages straight in your head! In the process of foreign language learning, we often mix things around. The question of language transfer, a fundamental issue in second language acquisition, has recently been examined from a new perspective, namely that of multilingualism, or third language acquisition (TLA), as it is commonly referred to. The emerging interest in TLA seems to have sprung in large part from Cook's (1992) multicompetence model. Cook calls attention to the "monolingual bias to research" (p. 577) and points out the very obvious fact that multi- – not monolingualism – is the reality for the great majority of the world's population. He presents a powerful argument that multilingualism is the existence in the mind of one system, which functions as a whole, rather than the coexistence of separately functioning linguistic systems.

In outlining his multicompetence model, Cook (1992) defines transfer as "a source of both code-breaking and decoding" (p. 581). Code-breaking in language learning is the "creation of knowledge in the mind" (p. 581); decoding is the "use of existing knowledge for a purpose" (p. 581), namely to understand input or produce output. In other words, according to Cook, transfer is both a synchronic and diachronic phenomenon in the language acquisition process.

Seen in light of Cook's (1992) multicompetence model, there is no reason why that existing knowledge should not include previously learned non-native languages, in addition to the native language. In contrast to the traditional approach to SLA transfer theory which takes into account only the native language (L1) and the target language, TLA researchers seem to support the inclusion of previously learned non-native languages when they claim that a comprehensive theory of transfer must include prior knowledge of non-native languages. After all, the research indicates that those learning a third language (L3) do indeed transfer from the second language (L2), and that often, it is the preferred source of transfer.

Two main factors – typology and psychotypology (Kellerman, 1979) – have been shown to highly influence the multilingual's selection of a language as a transfer source. The basic task, then, of TLA researchers is to understand how, when, and why one language is chosen over another.

In one of the first major TLA investigations, Williams and Hammarberg (1998) suggest that the learner assigns different roles to languages and the L2 emerges as the preferred source of transfer provided certain elements are present such as typology, proficiency, and recent use. One reason for this could be something known as *the foreign effect* (Meisel, 1983). It simply means the L1 is suppressed by virtue of its being native when learning an additional foreign language. As a result, the L2 is activated. Williams and Hammarberg (1998) postulate that different acquisition mechanisms might exist for L1 and L2, and therefore, when an additional non-native language is learned, the L2, or non-native, mechanism is reactivated. In contrast, De Angelis and Selinker's (2001) study reveals that proficiency and recent use do not necessarily have to be present – typological proximity is enough by itself to influence the selection process. Herwig's (2001) neuro- and psycholinguistic analyses likewise suggest that when multilinguals do written

translations from their L1, they tend to draw upon their knowledge of other non-native languages, and not just their L1, in the production of the target language. Typological similarity is almost always the deciding factor in which language gets used as a source.

TLA researchers are also interested in learning more about typology's overall role in the learner's ability to acquire an L3. Leung's (2005) findings suggest that knowledge of an L2 typologically close to the L3 facilitates acquisition. Gibson, Hufeison, and Libbon (2001) observe that the typological relationship between the L1 and L3 has no bearing on L3 acquisition, but that that of the L2 and L3 might. Whether this has anything to do with the suppression of the L1 is uncertain at this point, but worthy of further investigation.

Perhaps even more interesting than the role of typology is that of psychotypology. De Angelis (2005) convincingly demonstrates that if a learner perceives two languages to be similar, then that perception is actually more influential on the selection process than actual typology is. This might be connected somehow to the metalinguistic maturity of the learner. Cenoz (2001) examines the role that age plays together with typology. In her study on multilingual children in the Basque country, Spain, older children transferred more into L3 English than the younger ones did. In addition, the older children relied more on Spanish as the transfer source language, while the younger children used both Basque and Spanish. This seems to suggest that transfer in the multilingual might emerge not only as a result of his or her perception of typological proximity, but also that age might factor into that perception. These findings could have lasting implications for the study of language transfer, for they reveal that active decoding involving multiple sources of existing knowledge occurs, and, most significantly, that the L1 is not necessarily the dominant source. This being the case, knowledge of multiple languages might facilitate, or conversely, complicate, the acquisition of a new language.

In considering the effects of the L1 upon the L2/L3, Cook (1992) distinguishes between synchronic and diachronic transfer, pointing out that the undisputed influence of the L1 on the L2 changes – and lessens – as fluency progresses. This highlights the importance of more longitudinal studies on TLA. Researchers are more knowledgeable about synchronic transfer at this point than about how transfer changes in multilinguals over the course of time.

The research discussed here might not be wide or solid enough in scope to truly influence SLA transfer work at this point. In addition to the lack of longitudinal investigations, there are additional limitations. For example, while the typological similarity of the L2 in relation to the L3 as a reason for transfer is greatly emphasized, only De Angelis (2005) mentions the possibility of transfer occurring from an L2 source that is typologically distant from the L3. To date, little is known about this issue (see Rivers, 1979, and Schmidt & Frota, 1986). An additional consideration is that the majority of the languages used in the studies were Western European. A wider variety of languages would need to be tested to get a broader understanding of typology as a factor in transfer.

While the weight of the findings is uncertain, they are certainly very thought provoking. They seem to be challenging us, as Cook does (1992), to reconsider our “monolingual bias” (p. 577). If the study of multilingualism can be a means with which to do this, then it seems that it can only serve to encourage and enrich SLA research in its quest for a deeper understanding of language transfer.

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