The phenomenon of transfer in L3 learning from a psycholinguisitc perspective: a case study

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The presentation focuses on the phenomenon of transfer in L3 production. It aims at observing instances of transfer, discussing its origin (either L1 or L2) and answering the following questions:

- Is it L1 or L2 of a subject that determine her linguistic choices?
- Which language subsystem (lexical or syntactic) is effected by L1 and which by L2?
- Can observed instances of transfer be interpreted as a strategy and if so, is it conscious or automated?
- To what extent is transfer determined by the language of input (L1 or L2)?
- Do the learners switch readily from L1 to L2 as a source of transfer or are they systematic in making references either to L1 or L2 only?
- Is transfer of training (understood as a method by which learners are taught L2/L3) a source of different types of transfer?

2. SUBJECTS USED IN THE STUDY

The study was carried out on a homogenous group of four subjects, all female in their early twenties. Two of them were students of English at the Institute of English, University of Silesia (Poland) and the remaining two studied English at Departamento de Linguas e Culturas, Universidade de Aveiro (Portugal). All of them had been learning English for approximately 10 years and they are pretty fluent users of this language. Their second foreign language (L3) was German at lower intermediate level, they had been studying it for the period of 5-7 years in a less intensive way - with the exception of subject D, who was born and lived in Germany for several years. Being university students, the subjects are well-educated, highly proficient in their L1 and their language awareness both in L1 and L2 is high. On the affective level of attitudes and motivation, Polish and Portuguese students to the same extent exhibit instrumental motivation as far as English is concerned (the subject of their studies, way to future career) as well as elements of integrative motivation: empathy and positive attitudes towards English culture and its people (high status). On the other hand, German though one of the courses in the programme of their studies (minor) is in all cases treated as means of communication with relatives and friends back in Germany. Motivation to learn German is more extrinsic and pragmatic.

3. RESEARCH METHODS USED IN THE STUDY

The data were collected by means of an introspective method (simultaneous introspection) and complemented by a personal , learner profile questionnaire. Simultaneous introspection can be defined as:

«The process of observing and reflecting on one's thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states with a view to determining the ways in which these processes and states determine or influence (language) behaviour.» (Nunan, 1992:231)

In other words, the process of performing a language task is being recorded on the tape and later on transcribed as a thinking-aloud protocol (TAP), a verbalization of subject's ways of coping with the language problem, including pauses, hesitations, comments both on cognitive and affective level.

The subjects in the present study were asked to perform one task: to translate a short text (a newspaper article) into German (L3 of the subjects). In case of learners A (Polish) and C (Portuguese) the text was written in their L1 (Polish and Portuguese respectively), while B and D subjects were to translate the same text from English (subjects' L2) into German (table 1).

Table 1 – Language of the input text.

Subject	Text in:	Translation into:
A (Polish)	L1	L3
B (Polish)	L2	L3
C (Portuguese)	L1	L3
D (Portuguese)	L2	L3

Simultaneous introspection has often been used in translation tasks as translation seems to be most open to introspective methods, since it is a process which for most of its part takes place on the level of consciousness, i.e. it is accessible to verbalization (Gabrys, 1996: 117).

Before performing the task by means of verbalizations, the subjects were exposed to simultaneous introspection (sample materials, discussion of important elements in verbalising, etc.)

The linguistic task performed was linguistically focused: written, elicited, reproductive, automatic/creative.

The use of an introspective method allowed me to look not only at the product , i.e. the translations produced by the subjects, but to get some insight into mental processes taking place when the task was performed: references made to L1, L2 or other knowledge being activated in the process on translation/verbalization.

The data received in TAPs was complemented by the questionnaire information. The questionnaire focused on: * subjects' learning history - data for English: length, intensity, exposure; * evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in English;

* subjects' learning history- data for German; * evaluation of difficulty areas; * learners' perception of facilitating and impeding aspects of L2 competence, their influence on L3 performance; *motivation to learn another foreign language; *subjects' learning profile (attitudes, strategies, etc.).

Table 2 presents the whole research cycle.

Table 2 – The research cycle.

Stages:	Activities:
Preparatory stage	1. selection of the method
	2. selection of the subjects
	3. selection of a lg task and text for translation
	4. explanation of the method to the subjects
	5. exposure to the method (recorded and transcribed samples)
Data collection proper	1. preparing the context for the study (language lab)
	2. explanation of the task to the informants
	3. individual recordings on tapes
	4. adoption of the appropriate rules for the transcriptions
	5. production of thinking-aloud protocols (TAPs)
Post- introspection data collection	1. administration of a learner questionnaire

4. DESCRIPTION OF INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE AND COMPARISON OF THE SUBJECTS

In each of the translation performances analysed a different characteristics with reference to the phenomenon of language transfer in L3 learning context is being manifested.

- **Subject A:** Although the input text in L1 is pretty complex in terms of syntax, the subject automatically translates without making references to so characteristic of German, word order. Such a strategy blocks the comprehension of the translated text. The entire focus in the process of translation is put on word search done via L1, which results in L1 transfer on a lexical level. L2 competence doesn't seem to be activated in the process of verbalization.
- **Subject B:** The subject manifests through the whole process of verbalization her reliance on L3 linguistic competence by referring constantly and consciously, to rules operating in German. However, the performance often results in errors since the rules are imperfectly acquired at this stage. The focus is on syntax: word order, inflectional endings and appropriate use of articles, i.e. most error-prone areas of German syntax. The subject whose knowledge derives from an artificial context of formal instruction in a classroom seems to be a good example of how training (in this case very much grammar based) can effect learner's performance (transfer of training).
- **Subject C:** The subject treats language transfer as her main strategy in translating the text. She consciously makes use of her competence in L1, L2 and L3 to a comparative degree by either code-switching, foreignizing, paraphrasing or word coinage. The conscious use of transfer as a strategy refers entirely to a lexical level of a text and extensive lexical search on a word level. No attention is paid to syntax or structure of the text.
- **Subject D:** Very little data was gathered from this subject's verbal report as most of it was carried out on an automatic unconscious level of thought processing. It can only be hypothesized that most of the erroneous forms produced in the text originate from the fact that the subject acquired German rather than learnt it through a formal instruction, living in the country and being exposed to its language. As a result the text and the comments made in the TAP represent a simplified (omissions) discourse(e.g. word choice, incorrect spelling). More attention is paid to grammar than lexis in conscious comment when they are made.

Table 3 presents the characteristics of the four observed learners and the main results of the study.

Table 3 – Results of the study.

Subject:	Input in:	Language transfer:		Transfer of training:
		lexical level	**syntactic level**	
A	L1	L1	L1	?
B	L2	L3	L3	formal instruction
C	L1	L1/L2/L3	L1	?
D	L2	L3	L3	natural setting

5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It was observed in the present study that:

a) Instances of language transfer were present in all four texts produced by the subjects. **L1 transfer** was detected in the area of grammar (mainly word order), while **L2 transfer** in majority in case of lexical search performed by the subjects.

b) Transfer appeared to be **a production strategy** employed by the subjects. In case of syntax it was used unconsciously (automatized), quite contrary to lexical level, where the subjects used the whole range of transfer strategies (such as code-switch, foreignizing, paraphrasing) consciously - both via L1 and L2.

c) The influence of **language of the input text** (either L1 or L2) seems to be evident when the two pairs of subjects (A/ C - L1 and B/D - L2) are compared in terms of the main focus of the processes observed in their verbal protocols. «L1 pair» focused on lexical level of the text, which might have been caused by the L1-L3 real and perceived distance between the two languages (bigger than the distance between L2 and L3).The lexical level of the text might have been perceived to be the main means of communicating the message. It was then consciously processed. On the other hand, «L2 pair» focused on the syntactic level of the text, either applying consciously L3 rules acquired imperfectly at this stage, or processing the text automatically.

d) Another variable observed in the study that influenced the appearance of language of transfer was **the mode of learning (training)** the subjects were exposed to. It was most evident in B and D cases. The subject who learnt both L2 and L3 in a formal context through instruction and grammatical syllabus, perceived language, i.e. grammatical categories as a psychological reality and for her performing a language task was like «filling a grid» (Sajavaara, 1986) according to the learnt rules. The subject (D) who acquired rather than learnt her L3 in a natural setting didn't consciously refer to language categories but automatically (intuitively) manipulated the text.

The observations made and the above findings, though very loose and not complete, seem to support the assumptions that:

* L3 users code-switch from L1 to L3 (either from L1 or L3) and

* L3 processing is not separate from L1 (in terms of syntax) or L2 (in terms of lexis).

It may be assumed then, that there is a close relation (Cook, 1993) between the three competences (L1-L2-L3), which is determined by a whole spectrum of factors, among others: language distance, linguistic awareness, language of input , mode of learning (training) and age considered in the present study.

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