

The Critical Role of L1 for Bengali English-Language Learners (ELLs) in an ESL Classroom

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Abstract: In India, students have been mandated to study English as a Second Language (ESL) from primary through secondary school levels. It is commonly believed that the acquisition of a second language (SLA) is significantly impacted by the learner's first language. Another common belief is that the influence of the learner's first language (L1) on second language acquisition (SLA) is negative. In other words, the L1 is perceived to hinder or interfere with the learning of the second language (L2). The debate over the inclusion of the mother tongue or L1 in second language teaching and learning persists. Utilizing the L1 in an English classroom presents both advantages and disadvantages, contingent upon the timing and extent of its usage within the ESL classroom. This paper examines how Bengali language as L1 facilitates in positive transfer in English language acquisition for Bengali ELLs.

Keywords: Bengali Language, ELT, ESL, L1, L2, Lexical Borrowing, Phonology, SLA, Syntax

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1. Introduction

Ajit Mohanty (2006) argues that English language has become the single most important predictor of socio-economic mobility in the post-independence era in India. In a highly multilingual Indian context, English is the dominant language of higher administration, higher level education, professionals, armed forces, industry, commerce, media and judiciary. Annamalai (2013) argues that the adulation over English language in India is due to the role of English in competitive market economy. Possessing a minimum level of proficiency in English has become prerequisite for completion of various technical and non-technical courses and also entry to higher educational institutions in India. However successive education policies have recommended that early education at primary and secondary levels should be delivered in the regional languages. According to National Education Policy (2020), the medium of instruction until at least 5th grade, but preferably till 8th grade and beyond, will be mother tongue or regional language. According to UN, globally 40 per cent of the population doesn't have access to education in their respective mother tongues. UNESCO encourages and promotes multilingual education based on first languages. Such type of education begins with the first language of the learners and then gradually introduces other languages. The new World Bank policy approach to language instruction incorporate principle which states that first language instruction should be continued even after a second language becomes the principle language of instruction. In such scenario, incorporating ESL learners' mother tongues or first languages in teaching and learning English language and developing their English language proficiency becomes significant. Since the 1960s, the Second Language Acquisition has become the topic of great interest among researchers, especially the role of mother tongue (L1) in L2 acquisition. These studies had huge impacts on the language development, language rules, cognitive development, social language issues and so on. Furthermore, it would be helpful for adult learners tackling their second language for professional necessities, and also for people who are interested to learn L3 or L4. This progression is beneficial for devising strategies to acquire new languages. This paper will discuss how Bengali language as L1 helps in English language acquisition for Bengali English-Language Learner (ELL).

2. L1 Transfer

Many studies have shown the most important role of L1 in L2 acquisition is L1 transfer. Language transfer is the utilization of linguistic features of one language in another language by a bilingual or a multilingual speaker. Jarvis, Pavlenko (2008) state that Language transfer may occur across both languages in the acquisition of a simultaneous bilingual, from the first language (L1) of a mature speaker to the second language (L2) they are acquiring, or vice versa. Language transfer is also known as L1 interference, linguistic interference and crosslinguistic interference. Language transfer is most commonly discussed in the context of English language learning and teaching but it can happen in any situation when someone doesn't have native-level proficiency of a language. Paradis and Genesee (1996) state that language-transfer occurs frequently in bilingual children when one language is dominant. Language transfer can be *positive transfer* and *negative transfer*. Ellis (1997) argues that while similarities between first and second language facilitates learning which is called *positive transfer* and differences between them can cause interference errors because of *negative transfer*. Language transfer involves not only transfer of language knowledge but also knowledge about society and culture. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) is concerned with influence of mother tongue in second language acquisition. Fries (1945) introduced Contrastive Analysis as he assumed that errors would be produced in those areas of target language which lack similarities with the same corresponding areas of mother tongue (L1) of a learner. CAH was popularized by Lado (1957) in his book "Linguistics Across Cultures". Gass, et al. (2013) opined that contrastive analysis is comparison between mother tongue (L1) and target language (TL) of the learners to identify the errors and this would help in locating the areas in target language which need to be focused on and areas of target language which don't need any attention in the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). So, when it comes to L1 transfer, the role of Bengali language in English language acquisition for Bengali ESL learners cannot be undermined. This paper will consider whether L1 transfer has any implications in ESL classroom for Bengali learners. Let's start with phonetic transfer first.

2.1. Phonetic Transfer

Any language has its own unique phonetic features. So, any person learning a new language will be influenced by the pronunciation patterns of their own mother tongue. Various researches have suggested that L2 learners in the beginning of their L2 acquisition process use L1 phonemes for similar L2 phonemes which are not identical. Early researchers like Broselow (1984) have shown that major influences in the phonological acquisition process of L2 come from the learners' native language. Major's (1987) ontogeny model argues that at the initial stages of L2 acquisition process, transfer plays a greater role in L2 phonological encoding process but its role diminishes with the development of distinct L2 phonological competence.

The role of Bengali in phonological encoding as well as its influence on the acquisition of English phonology is complex and specific to an individual learner. Bengali has its unique set of phonemes. When a Bengali speaker learns English, there may be a tendency on the speaker's part to transfer the phonological rules and patterns of Bengali pronunciation to English pronunciation.

Both languages have a variety of vowel sounds. Though there are similarities in terms of short and long vowel distinctions, specific vowels may not always match exactly. Bengali has a rich vowel system. Some Bengali vowel sounds don't have direct equivalents in English. For example, আ (a) can be represented as "a" in "guitar", ই (i) as "i" in "pit", উ (u) as "oo" in "root" etc.

Bengali consonants generally align with their English counterparts. Both Bengali and English share basic consonant sounds, such as /b/, /h/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /t/, /s/ etc. For example, ব (b) becomes "b", ম (m) becomes "m", হ (h) becomes "h" etc. Both languages distinguish between voiced and voiceless sounds. English and Bengali have voiceless and voiced pairs of stops like /k/ and /g/, /p/ and /b/, /t/ and /d/ etc.

Flege's (1995) speech learning model proposes that at the starting of L2 acquisition process, when a learner comes across an L2 sound, the learner looks for representative phoneme in L1 phonological inventory. If the representative phoneme for L2 sound isn't there, then the learner substitutes the target L2 phoneme with nearest L1 sound. Bengali doesn't have certain English consonants like "th" (/θ/ and /ð/). So, a Bengali speaker might replace them with sounds present in Bengali. Both languages have nasal sounds. Bengali has nasalized vowels. For example, ম (m) with nasalized vowel becomes ঝ: (nasalized /m/). English has nasalized consonants like /m/, /n/ as in words like "sing", "think". Both languages have common nasal sounds like /m/, /n/. Both languages have sibilant sounds like /s/ and /ʃ/ (sh) as in /s/ in "sip", /ʃ/ in "ship" etc. In Bengali language /s/ and /ʃ/ (sh) sounds are represented by স and শ sounds respectively. Both English and Bengali languages use approximants like /w/ and /j/. Approximants are consonant sounds which are produced by bringing one articulator close to another articulator without actually coming in contacts or touching with each other. For example, the /w/ sound in English can be found in Bengali also. Both languages use diphthongs. Diphthong is a sound which is formed by combining two vowels in a single syllable in which the sound begins as one vowel. For example, the English word "boy" has a diphthong "oy" similar to the Bengali diphthong in the word ভয় (/bʰœ/). Both languages use stress as one of the phonetic features, while specific rules for word stress may differ. Various types of adaptations have been identified at the phonological level, including Prothetic adaptations such as "iskel" (ইস্কেল) for "scale", Epenthetic adaptations like "birij"(বিরিজ) for "bridge", Epithetic adaptation for example, "anti" (আন্টি) for "aunt", and Metathetic adaptation such as "phlaks"(ফ্লাক্স) for "flask" (Hoque et al.,2021).

2.2. Lexical Transfer

L2 vocabulary research generally agrees that when learners initially add a word from their second language into their mental vocabulary, they typically link it with very similar conceptual characteristics as its equivalent in their first language (Jiang, 2004). As a result of more encounters with the word, they will slowly establish new L2 specific conceptual features and memory traces encoding these features (Jiang, 2004). Lexical borrowing involves the incorporation of specific words or entire sets of vocabulary, which can include roots, affixes, sounds, word combinations, and grammatical structures, from one language or dialect into another (Daulton, 2011). The motivation behind borrowing words from another language arises from the necessity to articulate a concept or depict an object for which there lacks a readily available term in one's native language (Holmes, 2013). Not every borrowing that becomes established happens solely because there is no equivalent term in the language adopting it (Myers-Scotton, 2006). Borrowings can also occur when there are viable equivalents already existing in the recipient language. This phenomenon, termed core borrowing, holds a higher symbolic value than the native terms in the recipient language. Dash et al. (2009) observed that the integration of English words and terms into the Bangla language occurs through two main processes: adoption and adaptation, as they become part of the Bangla lexical repertoire. Examples of English words adopted into the Bangla language include terms like 'ball', 'cricket', 'politics', 'party', 'science', 'cycle', 'sentiment' and more. Morphological adaptation involves several processes, such as combining Bangla classifiers with English words (such as "pencil + -guli"), adding Bengali case markers to English words (such as "shirt + -er"), adding Bengali suffixes to English words (such as "cinema + -khor"), and creating compounds with both English and Bengali words (such as "full + hata"). Ferdous (2016) conducted an analysis of English loanwords in Bangla, examining them across three dimensions: phonological, morphological, and semantic. As she noted, phonological adjustments aligned with the phonetic traits of Bangla involve several operations, including final vowel insertion (such as "gilti" from "gilt"), syncope (such as "ton" from "tone"), consonant elision (such as "tul" from "stool"), anaptyxis (such as "tebil" from "table"), partial phonological alteration (such as "kaman" from "cannon") and substitution (such as "cen" from "chain"). The borrowed words undergo several morphological transformations, including compounding (such as "headmaster"), hybridization

(such as “head-pondit”), and clipping (such as “phone” from “telephone”). In everyday Bangla speech, certain English expressions like “good morning” and “don't mind” are commonly utilized (Ferdous, 2016). There are English words without Bangla equivalents and these have been directly borrowed from English into Bengali such as “British”, “Coat”, “piano”, “rail station”, “bathtub”, “half-pant”, “TV”, “NRI”, “glamour”, “rail line” etc. (Hoque et al., 2021).

2.3. Syntax Transfer

Syntax refers to the arrangement of words to form meaningful phrases and sentences within a language. It involves how words are organized and grouped together to convey thoughts and ideas effectively (Haspelmath, 2010). Syntax transfer from L1 to L2 refers to the influence a speaker's native language (L1) has on their second language (L2) grammar. This can be a double-edged sword. When L1 and L2 share similar grammatical structures, learners can leverage their L1 knowledge to learn L2 quicker. For example, someone whose L1 orders subject-verb-object can likely grasp English sentence structure more easily. When L1 and L2 structures differ, L1 habits can lead to errors in L2. For example, Spanish speakers learning English might place adjectives after the noun (e.g., “the car red”) due to their L1 structure. A basic sentence in English typically follows either the structure of subject-verb-object or SVO. An example like “I eat rice” follows the structure of subject-verb-object (SVO), where “I” is the subject, “eat” is the verb, and “rice” is the object. In contrast, the basic structure of a Bengali sentence typically involves the subject-object-verb (SOV) arrangement. The sentence “আমিভাতখাই” (Aamibhatkhai) follows an SVO structure where আমি is the subject, ভাত is the object, and খাই is the verb. Significant disparities can be noted in how the passive voice is structured in English and Bengali (Farzana, 2021). The syntax for forming interrogative sentences in English follows the pattern of “Auxiliary Verb – Subject – Main Verb – Object,” while in Bengali, it typically follows the structure of “Subject – Question Marker – Object – Verb.” This further emphasizes the difference in syntax between English and Bengali (Farzana, 2021).

3. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that when negative transfer occurs from Bengali (L1) to English (L2) at the level of syntax, positive transfers occur at phonological and lexical levels. It is popularly given argument in India that in order to make English language learners more proficient in English or achieve native like proficiency, learners’ mother tongue or L1 should be kept out of the ESL classroom completely. Mother tongue is widely believed to interfere negatively in the process of English language acquisition for the ESL learners in India. But such arguments may not be entirely true. Many experts in the field of second language acquisition argue that a person's first language (L1) plays a supportive role in the process of learning a second or foreign language in the classroom. The native language can serve as a valuable tool for swiftly and accurately translating an English word, a process that might otherwise consume several minutes of the teacher's time to explain in an ESL classroom. Schweers (1999), backed by data, recommends the cautious and restricted utilization of the native language (L1) within the English classroom. Auerbach (1993) articulates that commencing with the native language (L1) offers learners a feeling of security and validates their lived experiences, enabling them to articulate themselves. This, in turn, fosters willingness among learners to experiment and take risks with English.

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