

The Influence of Second Language Learning on Language Transfer in the Process of Trilingual Education

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Abstract: The transfer from the second to the third language is not a simple and easy-understanding process. In exploring the process of trilingual learning, this study thoroughly examines the impact of second language learning on the acquisition of a third language, particularly the phenomenon of transfer. By talking about various aspects of language transfer, the study shows multiple factors influencing language transfer, and how these factors influence the learning processes of third languages. This passage expounds both the positive and negative transfer effects of the second language towards third language learning by using the literature analysis. It comes out of the various factors such as the interlinguistic universals, the depth and breadth of second language acquisition, and the third language learning environment which influence the third language acquisition. On this basis, the paper also explores how these findings can be applied in language teaching practice to optimize the learning strategies and teaching methods of trilingual learners. This paper comes to the conclusion of the influence of the second language on the third language acquisition in the language transfer aspect.

Keywords: Third Language Learning, Language Transfer, Language Acquisition, Multilingual Learning, Trilingual Education

1. Introduction

Trilingualism refers to the ability to speak three languages, which widely means that the languages besides the mother language and the second acquisition language. Language transfer refers to the phenomenon in which learners use the pronunciation, word meaning, structural rules, or habits of their mother tongue to express their thoughts in a second language. The acquisition and mastery of the third linguistic system provide unique challenges and opportunities for the language learner, which differ from the monolingual or bilingual experience. The intricate interactions between the three languages, particularly the influence of the second language (L2) on the third language (L3) acquisition, is a topic of burgeoning interest within the field of linguistics [1]. The progress towards trilingualism often begins with the acquisition of a mother tongue or first language (L1), which lays down the essential foundational linguistic structures and cognitive frameworks for language processing. Upon this basis, learners may then acquire an L2, which can significantly shape the subsequent acquisition of an L3. This process is not merely an addition of linguistic elements but a complex, dynamic interaction of cognitive, cultural, and contextual factors that can facilitate or hinder language learning, which is called positive and negative transfer.

The transfer between L2 to L3 indicates various linguistic fields such as phonology, lexicology, and syntax, and many other factors influence the transfer. Therefore, this study posits several hypotheses. Some studies show that language transfer from L2 to L3 is not a unidirectional process but rather bidirectional and selective, influenced by linguistic proximity and typological features of the languages involved. Additionally, it is hypothesized that individual learner differences—such as cognitive style, motivation, and prior linguistic experience—play an important role in mediating transfer effects [2]. A further hypothesis is that a higher proficiency in L2 may lead to a more pronounced positive transfer to L3, as the learner has a more robust and differentiated linguistic system to draw upon [3].

The scope of the current study is to analyze the intricate dynamics of language transfer in the trilingual acquisition process and concentrate on the influence exerted by the L2 over the L3. The significance of this research lies in illuminating the multifarious aspects of language transfer, contributing to a deeper understanding of how previously acquired languages influence the learning of an additional language. The implications of this research are manifold, extending from theoretical contributions to practical applications in language education and learning strategies.

2. Aspects of Language Transfer

2.1. Phonological Transfer

It is well-established that phonological transfer can be proved in numerous ways, ranging from the subtle inflection of sounds to the imposition of an entire phonemic structure from L2 to L3. The intricacies of this transfer are multifaceted and can be observed through a comprehensive analysis of the phonetic and phonemic elements of the languages involved.

One aspect of phonological transfer is the potential for positive transfer. The similarities between the phonological systems of L2 and L3 can facilitate the learning process. For instance, when the phonemic inventory of L2 shares commonalities with that of L3, trilingual learners may experience ease in the pronunciation of certain sounds. This phenomenon can lead to a more rapid acquisition of the L3 phonological system and can provide a sense of familiarity and confidence for the learner [4]. For example, when the English major students study Japanese as second foreign language, they can get in touch with the loanword which is familiar with the pronunciation of English, the transfer of English phonology can learn Japanese better. Conversely, negative phonological transfer can become a barrier to L3 acquisition. This occurs when the phonological properties of L2 contrast with L3, resulting in mispronunciations or the application of inappropriate phonological rules. For example, a learner with a well-established phonological system in L2 may unconsciously apply stress or intonation patterns from L2 when speaking L3. It is critical to recognize that these phonological transfers are not merely random occurrences but are influenced by an array of factors, including the learner's exposure to the target language, the degree of similarity between the languages, and the learner's cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness [2].

Additionally, phonological transfer is not a static phenomenon; it is dynamic and can evolve as the learner's proficiency in L3 develops. Early stages of L3 acquisition might be heavily influenced by L2 phonology, but as the learner gains more exposure to L3 and becomes more proficient, the influence of L2 may weak.

2.2. Lexical Transfer

Lexical transfer is a key component of language transfer, and involves the transference of words, phrases, and meanings from one language to another. This aspect of language transfer is evident when trilinguals draw upon their knowledge of L2 to comprehend, learn, or use L3. Lexical transfer

can occur at various levels, from the direct borrowing of words to the subtle influence on semantic structures.

The positive aspect of lexical transfer lies in the facilitation of L3 vocabulary acquisition. In states where L2 and L3 share cognates or loanwords, trilingual learners may find it easier to expand their L3 lexicon due to the pre-existing knowledge from L2. This pre-existing knowledge can act as a scaffold, supporting the learning of new lexical items by providing a familiar foundation upon which to build. Such transfer can also enhance the trilingual learner's ability to guess the meaning of new L3 words based on their L2 counterparts, thereby increasing the efficiency of the learning process [4]. However, negative transfer can also lead to the phenomenon known as 'false friends,' where words that appear similar in L2 and L3 have different meanings, leading to confusion and errors in comprehension or production. Moreover, the over-reliance on lexical transfer can result in a lack of depth in the learner's understanding of L3 vocabulary, as they may not fully grasp the nuances and connotations associated with the L3 words. This superficial understanding can hinder effective communication and the ability to use L3 in a culturally appropriate manner [4].

2.3. Cognitive Transfer

Cognitive transfer represents the most abstract yet profoundly significant dimension of language transfer. It encompasses the influence of L2 on the cognitive processes involved in L3 acquisition, including problem-solving strategies, metalinguistic awareness, and conceptual organization. This form of transfer can be viewed as the mental behavior that trilingual learners engage in when applying their cognitive resources, honed through L2 learning, to the challenges of mastering L3.

Positive cognitive transfer can manifest in several ways. Trilingual learners who have developed strong analytical and reasoning skills in L2 are likely to apply these skills to L3 learning and enhance their ability to understand and internalize complex grammatical structures or to discern subtle semantic distinctions. The cognitive flexibility gained from managing two languages can also aid learners in adapting to the demands of a third language, allowing for more agile shifting between linguistic systems and fostering an openness to novel linguistic patterns [2]. On the other hand, negative cognitive transfer can appear when L2 learning strategies are inapplicable or counterproductive in the context of L3. For instance, a strategy that was effective in memorizing L2 vocabulary may not be suitable for L3 due to differences in morphological complexity or the presence of non-transparent orthographic systems. Additionally, the conceptual frameworks and categories established in L2 may not match with those of L3, leading to difficulties in categorizing and conceptualizing L3 [2].

It is important to acknowledge that cognitive transfer is not solely determined by the linguistic properties of the languages in question but is also shaped by the learner's individual cognitive style, learning experiences, and the specific educational context. The interplay of these factors can result in a diverse range of transfer effects.

3. Factors Influencing Language Transfer

3.1. Interlingual Commonality

Interlingual commonality is the overarching principles that govern the structure and function of all human languages, and plays a vital role in the phenomenon of language transfer during the acquisition of a third language. The universal patterns and structures provide a cognitive scaffold that guides the learner in making predictions about the new language based on their existing linguistic knowledge. To illustrate, a learner might apply the common concept of subject-verb-object (SVO) word order when attempting to comprehend or produce sentences in a third language.

This application of a familiar grammatical structure to a new linguistic context can lead to positive transfer, especially if the third language shares this characteristic.

However, when the grammatical structures of the languages are disparate, the learner may have a negative transfer. As linguistic universals encompass a wide array of language features, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, the learner's awareness and understanding of these features across their known languages significantly influence the direction and degree of language transfer [4]. The complexity of interlingual commonality extends beyond mere structural similarity.

3.2. Social Context and Language Use

The social context in which languages are learned and used significantly impacts the process and outcome of language transfer. Social context encompasses the cultural, educational, and communicative environments that shape language use and exposure. It is within these contexts that learners form associations between linguistic forms and social functions, which can either facilitate or hinder the transfer of linguistic elements.

One dimension of the social context is the status and role of the languages involved in the learning process. For instance, if the second language (L2) is a universal language, such as English, its widespread use may encourage learners to transfer elements from it when learning a third language (L3), especially if the L3 is perceived as having a lower global status [5]. Conversely, if L2 is a minority language with limited functional domains, its influence on L3 acquisition may be less pronounced.

Another dimension is the frequency and quality of interaction in the L2 and L3. Regular use of the L2 in diverse social contexts can lead to more entrenched and automatized language structures, which in turn may become more readily transferable to the L3. Similarly, if the L3 is acquired in a socially immersive environment, the need for effective communication can heighten the learner's sensitivity to both positive and negative transfer, as they seek to achieve communicative competence.

Moreover, the role of the social context is not static but dynamic, evolving with the learner's experiences and changing circumstances. As learners navigate between different social environments, their language use adapts, and the potential for language transfer is changed. Educators must consider the complex interplay between the social context and language use when devising language education strategies, aiming to use methods to maximize positive transfer and weaken negative transfer through targeted interventions.

3.3. Diversity in Acquisition Processes

The diversity in acquisition processes is related to the individual differences and cognitive variations among language learners, and profoundly influences the nature of language transfer. Each learner's language acquisition journey is unique, shaped by a constellation of cognitive abilities, learning experiences, and personal attributes. These factors collectively determine how a learner's knowledge of an L2 can affect the subsequent learning of an L3.

As shown in Table 1, there are generally only two acquisition sequences for acquiring two languages: the first language acquisition is followed by the second language (L1→L2), or the first and second languages are acquired at the same time (L1+L2). But trilingual acquisition exhibits at least four sequential developments from the first to the second to the third (L1→L2→L3), the acquisition of the first language followed by the acquisition of the second and third languages (L1→L2/L3), the acquisition of the first and second languages followed by the acquisition of a third language (L1/L2→L3) and even the acquisition of the first, second, and third languages at the same time (L1/L2/L3) [6].

Table 1: The comparative between the acquisition of second language and third language

Second language acquisition	Third language acquisition
1. L1→L2	2. L1+L2
1. L1→L2→L3	2. L1→L2/L3
	3. L1/L2→L3
	4. L1/L2/L3

Cognitive flexibility, the mental ability to switch between thinking about two different concepts or thinking about multiple concepts simultaneously, is a critical factor in this context. Learners with higher cognitive flexibility are typically better equipped to manage the complex of multiple language systems, allowing for more adept identification of transferable elements and more skillful avoidance of negative transfer [4]. Another dimension of diversity in acquisition processes is the depth and breadth of L2 proficiency. A robust command of the L2 can provide a rich reservoir of linguistic knowledge that may facilitate the recognition of similarities and differences with the L3, leading to strategic transfer. However, it can also lead to overgeneralizations and erroneous transfers if the learner is not cautious in differentiating between the languages [5].

Finally, the affective factors, such as motivation, attitude, and anxiety, wield a substantial influence on the acquisition processes. A learner's motivation to learn an L3 can drive them to actively seek connections with their L2, harnessing the power of positive transfer. Conversely, negative attitudes or high levels of anxiety could hinder a learner's ability to effectively utilize their L2 knowledge in the service of L3 acquisition.

4. Conclusion

The investigation into the transfer effects from second-language acquisition to third-language learning in the context of trilingualism has yielded plenty of insights, which are vital to both linguistic theory and pedagogical practice. The analysis of different linguistic skill areas, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary, has brought to light the multifaceted nature of language transfer. This paper mainly discusses the language transfer for a third language, the aspects and influence factors of language transfer. The findings have indicated that the environmental context and motivational factors are influential in shaping the transfer effects. A supportive learning environment that encourages active engagement with both the second and third languages can amplify positive transfer. In summary, the culmination of the study's findings presents a comprehensive overview of the factors that influence cross-linguistic transfer in trilingual language acquisition. These findings contribute significantly to the understanding of how second language learning shapes the subsequent acquisition of a third language and provides a foundation for optimizing instructional approaches and learning strategies in multilingual settings. However, the paper did not further discuss the influence of language transfer in a real context, which is short of concrete data and examples of definite language. The path forward for research in language transfer within trilingual contexts is rich with possibilities. For learners, awareness of their transfer tendencies and strategies during the language learning process can help them use existing language knowledge and skills more effectively to facilitate new language learning.

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