A Study of Native Chinese Speakers Learning Indo-european Languages: The Case of English and Russian

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Abstract: Language proximity can have different degrees of influence on trilingual acquisition. For example, Japanese has a strong influence on Chinese, while English has a strong influence on Russian. This study used interviews and corpus analysis to examine learners with different levels of English as a second foreign language and Russian as a third foreign language. It was found that when native Chinese speakers learn a language belonging to the Indo-European family, the influence of English on Russian learning is greater than that of native Chinese, and the specific influence of English will be different at different stages. Based on the study some suggestions are also made for trilingual teaching. Considering that the majority of Chinese language learners today have a certain level of proficiency of English, it is significant to conduct the research of L3 learners who is native Chinese and whose L2 is English. Through interviewing the subjects and analysing their compositions, the researchers find that English as L2 both facilitates and hinders L3 acquisition. In particular, intermediate L3 learners are most likely to be influenced by L2, and conversely, advanced L3 learners are rarely influenced by their L2 English. L3 acquisition is more likely to be influenced by L2 when L3 and L2 are in a closer linguistic distance than L3 and L1. This study contributes to multilingual acquisition research and provides effective suggestions for multilingual teaching strategy.

Keywords: Trilingual acquisition, English learning, Russian learning

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With the development of globalization and the increasing frequency of international communication, the study of trilingual acquisition has received more and more attention [1]. Since English language acquisition plays such a significant part in the education of Chinese children and adolescents, many Chinese trilingual learners already have a certain level of English proficiency when acquiring a third language. Based on some preliminary research, we assume that the degree of influence of English as a second language on trilingual acquisition varies depending on the learners' English proficiency and the target language [2]. In this article, the first foreign language one acquired refers to the second language and is abbreviated to "L2", meanwhile the second foreign language is defined as the third language and abbreviated to "L3" as follows.

1.2.   Research Gap

Previous research showed that the trilingual acquisition refers to the acquisition of one or more languages in addition to the learner's native language and the second language he or she has already acquired. Then DeAngelis and Selinker, Schepens et. al found that second language is the main source of language transfer in multilingual acquisition. Some studies have also found that the language distance and the L3 level of the learners may be important factors affecting language transfer. When the native language is similar to the L3, the native language has a greater impact on trilingual acquisition than the second language [3]. However, research on the effect of lower level of L2 on L3 acquisition (TLA) is still relatively inadequate.

At present, a wide range of studies on trilingual acquisition in foreign countries are focused on Indo-European languages with similar language types, and less on other language families, especially Chinese in the Sino-Tibetan languages, and even less on the trilingual acquisition of native speakers of Chinese [4]. In contrast, there is even less research on trilingual acquisition in China. English and Russian are both Indo-European languages, and they are related in some way. It is still inconclusive whether the L3 (Russian) learning of native Chinese speakers is more influenced by L2 (English) or by their native language (Chinese). These need to be studied in depth.

1.3.   Research Objective

The discussion of these issues is useful for native Chinese students acquiring one or more foreign language as L3, especially Russian as L3. Considering such a current situation, if this research question is answered, learners can appropriately adjust their learning methods and improve their learning efficiency based on the findings of this research. In addition, it not only can be used by teachers in teaching Russian, but also can help language educators to adjust the details of their teaching methods in order to better assist learners [5].

1.4.   Paper Organization

The paper begins with a description of the problem to be studied and the research methodology. This study attempts to interview the trilingual learners who learn Russian as an L3 with different levels of English, specifically to suggest how lower level of English as a L2 affect the L3 (Russian) acquisition of native Chinese speakers [6]. Then the researcher collects Russian writing exercises of the subjects and analyze their lexical and grammatic mistakes and characteristics in terms of their L3 acquisition.

1.5.   Research Question

When acquiring three or more languages, individuals' monolingual and bilingual language knowledge and their own learning experiences inevitably have an impact on the acquisition of other languages and learners' cognitive development [7]. Some of the interesting questions in this research are as follows:

1.How does low to intermediate level of English as a L2 affect the L3 (Russian) acquisition of native Chinese speakers?

2.In what cases does English as a L2 help native Chinese speakers acquire Russian, and in what cases does it become a hindrance [8]?

3.Is the L3 acquisition of native Chinese speakers more influenced by L2 (English) or by their native language (Chinese)?

These need to be studied in depth. So, this research focuses on the effect of English acquisition level on Russian acquisition.

2. Case Description

2.1. Description of the Respondents

These subjects are divided into two groups. Both of the two groups possess the language capabilities of Chinese (L1) and English (L2). In one group, the members have a higher level of English proficiency, while the members of the other group have a lower level of English proficiency [9]. Each group has three subgroups, who are labelled as beginner, intermediate and advanced learner according to their L3 (Russian) knowledge.

Table1: The classification of the subjects with L3 Russian

English	Russian	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
Lower level(Group1)	IR1	IR3	IR5
Higher level(Group2)	IR2	IR4	IR6

The classification of Russian levels is based on the ТРКИ (государственное тестирование по русскому языку как иностранному), which is an acronym for test of Russian as a foreign language. The English abbreviation is TORFL. It is an international state examination to assess the Russian language proficiency level. TORFL covers six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2, i.e., the A1 and A2 are for beginners, B1 and B2 are for intermediates and C1 and C2 are for advanced leaners. However, only four levels can be certified beginning with B1, also known as "first certification level." So, according to the official definition, students who have studied Russian for only one year in this study are classified as beginners [10].

The classification of English proficiency levels is based on the College English Test Band 6 (CET-6), which is a universal English examination among Chinese university students, and IELTS scores, i.e., students who obtained a score of 600 or above in the CET-6 exam or an IELTS score of or greater than 7 belong to the higher level, and the rest belongs to the lower level.

IR1 has only studied Russian for one year and has not yet passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). IR2 has an IELTS score of 8 and has studied Russian as a second language for one semester. IR3 is a senior in Russian major with a CET-6 score of around 425 and has passed TORFL B2. IR4 is a senior in Russian major with an IELTS score of 7 and has passed TORFL B1. IR5 is a postgraduate in the major of Russian translation with a CET-6 score of 580 and has passed TORFL C1. IR6 is a graduate in Russian major. She has passed TORFL C2 and has an IELTS score of 7.5.

2.2. Methodology of Research

In this study, the respondents were selected to match the research questions on the basis of the selected research questions. First of all, the researcher interviews their learning pattern of L3. The interviews focus on their subjective feelings and thoughts when they are learning L3. The total procedure of the interviews is recorded and transcribed. Then, the researcher analyzes the inner thoughts of the L3 learners according to the transcripts of the interviews. Secondly, they were approached to get the essays they had written, and their essays were analyzed to clarify the specific influence of different languages on their learning of Russian [11]. The key point of the analysis also focuses on the impacts of the acquisition of their L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) and the comparison of these impacts.

2.3. Research Content

The interview was about the influence of English on Russian language learning. At the beginning the interviewees were asked about their levels of Russian and English respectively. The interviewer asked them to compare the role of Chinese and English in learning Russian during the interviews. All six

respondents answered that English has a greater impact on Russian than Chinese. So based on the respondents' answers, the interviewer's follow-up questions focused on the specific impact of English on Russian. The focus of the questions varied according to the level of the interviewers. For example, for beginners, the questions were focused on letters, vocabulary and simple sentences, while for advanced Russian speakers, the questions were focused on complex sentences and writing.

3.   Interview Analysis of Respondents

3.1.   At the Initial Stages of Learning Russian

The influence of English on Russian in the beginning stages of learning Russian is mainly in the words, because at this stage learners are not yet exposed to more complex sentences.

The transfer of English has many positive effects during the initial stages of learning Russian. For example, there are many words, such as профессор (professor), секрет (secret), ресторан (restaurant) in Russian that are very similar to English, so beginners are able to remember them very quickly. However, the English alphabet can be a hindrance to learning the Russian alphabet. For example, the letter m(n) is pronounced in English as [m]([n]), but in Russian is pronounced as [t] ([p]). Therefore, at the beginning stage, learners tend to confuse them.

3.2.   At the Intermediate Stage of Learning Russian

At the intermediate stage of learning Russian, learners are exposed to complex sentences, and English helps them with this. Especially, English grammar, such as attributive clauses, will help in learning such sentences in Russian.

Here's an English sentence:

This is the book which interests me.

And this is a Russian sentence:

Это книга, которая меня интересует.

In these two sentences, "book" and "книга" are antecedents, "which" and "которая" are relative words to lead a clause. So it is easy for Russian learners who are good with Engilsh gramma to learn the complex sentences, because they share a similar structure.

What's more, in terms of vocabulary, English can help Russian learners with Russian words recognition.

E.g. (Область) Region, (Регион) Area, (Место) Place

In Chinese they have only one meaning, which means for native Chinese students acquiring Russian as L3 their meanings are the same. So, without English it is difficult for them to distinguish these words. However, with the help of English, we can find the corresponding words in English.

3.3.   At the Advanced Stage of Learning Russian

At the advanced stage of learning Russian, English no longer has an influence on it, neither facilitating nor hindering it. This is simply because after many years of learning Russian, Russian learners have developed a set of thinking patterns in Russian and no longer draws on English for thinking.

4.   Analysis of Compositions of L3(Russian) Learners with Different Levels of English

Based on the above research, it was found that advanced Russian speakers are not influenced by English when expressing themselves, because they are used to the Russian way of thinking. Therefore, in the following study of essays, the Russian advanced speakers' essays are not found to be in error. Thus, the researcher focuses on the study of beginners' and intermediates' compositions and studies in which parts of speech they are prone to make mistakes.

4.1. The Frequency of Errors in the Compositions of Russian Learners at Different Levels

Table2: The frequency of errors in the compositions of Russian learners at different levels.

	Noun	Verb	Adjective/Adverb	Conjunction	Preposition
IR1	2/34 (5.88%)	2/18 (11.11%)	2/13 (15.38%)	2/4 (50.00%)	1/18 (5.56%)
IR2	4/62 (6.45%)	2/25 (8.00%)	1/33 (3.03%)	0/11 (0.00%)	1/24 (4.17%)
IR3	1/110 (0.90%)	4/32 (12.50%)	2/39 (5.13%)	0/22 (0.00%)	0/37 (0.00%)
IR4	1/89 (1.12%)	3/47 (6.38%)	0/23 (0.00%)	0/18 (0.00%)	0/30 (0.00%)
Total	8/295 (2.71%)	11/122 (9.02%)	5/108 (4.63%)	2/55 (3.64)%	2/109 (1.83%)

The table 2 is about errors in the compositions. It shows the errors in the compositions of Russian learners of different levels. These errors are classified according to the different parts of speech. According to this table, verbs accounted for 9.02% of errors in the compositions of Russian learners at different levels, and the lowest proportion, 1.83%, belonged to prepositions. Overall, Russian learners are more likely to make mistakes in the use of verbs than prepositions.

4.2. Percentage of Language Transfer Errors in the Total Number of Errors

Table3: Percentage of language transfer errors in the total number of errors.

	Noun	Verb	Adjective/Adverb	Conjunction	Preposition
IR1	0/2 (0%)	1/2 (50%)	0/2 (0%)	1/2 (50%)	0/1 (0%)
IR2	1/4 (25%)	2/2 (100%)	1/1 (100%)	0/0 (0%)	1/1 (100%)
IR3	1/1 (100%)	2/4 (50%)	0/2 (0%)	0/0 (0%)	0/0 (0%)
IR4	1/1 (100%)	3/3 (100%)	0/0 (0%)	0/0 (0%)	0/0 (0%)
Total	3/8 (38%)	8/11 (73%)	1/5 (20%)	1/2 (50%)	1/2 (50%)

The table 3 is about the percentage of language transfer errors in the total number of errors. According to this table, verbs are especially more influenced by the transfer of English language, as it accounted for 73% of language transfer errors in the total number of errors. Overall, despite the fact that learners already have a good level of Russian, they are inevitably influenced by English language conventions in the use of the Russian language.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion of Key Findings

Based on this research study, the following conclusions were drawn.

1. English as L2, has an impact on the learning and the use of vocabulary and grammar in L3, as well as on L3 writing.

2. English as L2 both facilitates and hinders the learning and the use of L3.

3. The influence of L2 on L3 is the most obvious at the intermediate level of L3 and learners with advanced level of L3 are rarely affected by English.

4. When L3 is an Indo-European language, it is more likely to be influenced by L2 English than by L1 Chinese. Considering of the common view that L1 acquisition is under the control of universal grammar and L2 acquisition is less controlled by universal grammar, this research suggests that the similarity between languages may have greater impacts on second language acquisition than universal grammar.

5.2. Research Significance

This research provides suggestions to the multilingual teaching and learning. It suggests that when teaching foreign languages except English, it is meaningful to take full advantage of the fact that most of the students' L2 is English, so that teachers can provide foreign language teaching materials that are more appropriate for today's university students.

5.3. Future Studies and Limitations

However, this research has its drawbacks. Because of the limited samples, the results presented are only based on the available data and do not exclude the influence of other variables and the presence of randomness.

It is hoped that in the future more samples can be collected and more volunteers can be found to participate in the research. It is also under the expectation that in the future universities can make better use of the final exam results of the students as researching materials to build up a corpus that can be used as a corpus base for related research.

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