



# Cross-linguistic influence in the Writing of Preliterate Low-proficiency learners

Sirigiri Barad Meenakshi

Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Technology, Gandipet Main Road., near CBIT, Gandipet, Hyderabad, Telangana 500075, INDIA

Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in), [www.isca.me](http://www.isca.me)

Received 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014, revised 26<sup>th</sup> September 2014, accepted 10<sup>th</sup> October 2014

## Abstract

*Experience has taught us that second language acquisition (SLA) is strongly influenced by the learners' first language (L1). Research has proven that literacy in the first language can have a positive influence on the acquisition of L2 literacy. For learners who are not literate in their native language reading and writing in English is an ordeal. This study attempts to examine the relationship between low proficiency preliterate high school level English as Second Language learners' writing competence in L2 and the cross-linguistic influence found in their writing. Of secondary interest is the correlation to the lack of script/literacy in their L1. This is done by examining errors made by low proficiency 'Patkar' students in their written essays. It centers on the concept of an adequate literacy base for the writing of learners who have not experienced a tradition of literacy at home. The researcher attempts to examine and describe cross-linguistic influence in the writing of low-proficiency preliterate learners and determine how mother tongue can influence the acquisition of English. Essays written by such students were analyzed for sub-stratum transfer. Incorrect usage due to interference from their native language as well as their low levels of proficiency was observed. Some recommendations to reduce negative sub-stratum transfer in writing are made. It is suggested that teachers can provide a 'scaffolding' to link challenging content in academics to the cultural resources that are rich in myth and oral literature that such students bring to school. The findings of this study point at issues that should be addressed by policy makers and teachers which could lead to more inclusive classrooms enabling participation, and enhancing learning achievements of learners from various backgrounds. Thus the implications of this study can contribute towards the need for school-based ethnographic research.*

**Keywords:** L2 writing, cross-linguistic influence, low-proficiency learners, transfer, preliterate.

## Introduction

Writing, Socrates argues, is inhuman. It attempts to turn living thoughts dwelling in the human mind into mere objects in the physical world. By causing people to rely on what is written rather than what they are able to think, it weakens the powers of the mind and of memory. True knowledge can only emerge from a relationship between active human minds. And unlike a person, a text can't respond to a question; it will just keep saying the same thing over and over again, no matter how often it is refuted.

However, the writing skill is of utmost use in several contexts of life like the school, the workplace etc., though the demand varies from place to place. In the school setting writing is a skill that draws on the use of strategies such as planning, evaluating and revising, for goals such as writing a report or supporting an argument. Writing is a critical tool for learning content. Effective instruction in writing recognizes that the smooth deployment of the higher level writing strategies needed for effective writing depends on the use of lower-level skills like handwriting or keyboarding, grammar and vocabulary. Therefore for students to write an essay or summary effectively, fluency in both the higher level and lower level skills is necessary.

There is also evidence that a good grasp of L1 literacy can increase the confidence and self-esteem of L2 learners<sup>1</sup>. L2 learners who already possess literacy skills in their L1 are seen to perform better than peers who are not literate in their L1. This is the concept behind bilingual instruction. Though basic encoding/decoding skills are transferable, higher skills may differ from language to language or script.

At the outset the researcher would like to state that the word 'Preliterate' used in this study alludes to its denotative meaning only. It does not intend to connote any meaning to the word. India is a region of oral tradition rather than literate and written language traditions. Over the last century, the writing of some Indian languages, mainly in alphabets based on the Roman script has become more common in several states, even as oral traditions continue. An oral tradition does not simply imply the lack of a literate tradition. While oral tradition has some obvious limitations in preserving knowledge and transmitting information over time, it involves ways of remembering and expressing that are quite impressive in their own right.

Today schools and classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse due to the inclusion of learners from backward and weaker sections of society. To meet these new challenges educational institutions have to reorient their teaching-learning

practices so as to include and respond to the needs of learners from different social and linguistic backgrounds.

However, language can be a barrier to literacy. Becoming literate can be a challenging experience especially for preliterate learners who speak unwritten languages and are expected to read and write in a language they do not understand. It can be so frustrating that some learners just give up. If students are to learn, they must write. Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, the writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. Of the four basic English skills, writing is mostly considered difficult by the vast majority of English language learners. This is because this skill requires learners not only to master the English language system as the target language, but also to disentangle the interference of the different representation of the source language system in their language production.

This study was born from a deep concern on the below grade level writing performance exhibited by ninth class preliterate students and to find out the root problems underlying students' poor written production. Of the various issues underlying students' language processing competence, this study focuses on the identification of the syntactic and lexical conceptual structure in processing the source language to be the target language.

The effect of the grammar of the first language on the formation of the grammar of the second language has been reported by many scholars<sup>2,3</sup>. They associate the grammatical mistakes of second language with the grammar of the learner's first language. Report cases of grammatical mistakes encountered by Thai learners of English as a result of variation of expressing tense in both languages<sup>4</sup>.

There have been very few studies that have examined school level preliterate learners. However no studies have addressed the grammatical transfer issue between 'Patkar' and English<sup>5</sup>. This paper aims at adding evidence about the effect of first language on mastering a second language and to fill this gap in linguistic studies of transfer. It will shed light on the problems which low proficiency disadvantaged learners encounter when writing in L2 (English).

**Theoretical framework:** The term "cross-linguistic influence" is commonly known as language transfer which has been defined as "the influence of the mother tongue on the learner's performance in and/or development of a given target language"<sup>6</sup>. It also includes the influence of any language known to the learner prior to learning the target language.

Transfer thus is a general term describing the carryover of previous performance or knowledge to subsequent learning. There are two major types of transfer: positive and negative.

Positive transfer occurs when a native form is used in the production of an L2 utterance, and it is also a part of the L2 norm. Here the role of transfer is facilitative. Negative transfer occurs when the L1 form used in L2 production is not a part of the L2 norm, and the resultant utterance is erroneous. Negative transfer (or interference) is inhibitive. Deviances can be categorised based on differentiation between 'competence' and 'performance'<sup>7</sup>. 'Mistakes' are performance-related deviances which can occur as a result of factors external to the competence of the speaker, such as tiredness or lack of concentration. Errors, on the other hand, are deviances caused by a lack of competence and are systematic<sup>8</sup>.

Language transfer can occur in the areas of syntax, lexis, pronunciation and/or discourse level. s "Sub-stratum transfer" is the influence of the first language (L1) on the second language (L2); and "borrowing transfer" the influence of L2 on the L1<sup>9</sup>.

A learner already knows his/her mother tongue when learning a new (second/third) language and so makes an attempt to transfer the mother tongue. The transfer may prove to be justified because the structure of the two languages is similar as in the case of Telugu and Kannada – in that case we get 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation'; or it may prove unjustified because the structure of the two languages are different like English and Hindi – in that case we get 'negative transfer' or 'interference'.

This study focuses on negative transfer. Sub-stratum transfer is a strategy especially used by low proficiency students in their written work.

## Methodology

The participants of this study are learners from a community called the 'Patkars' in the state of Andhra Pradesh. They are referred to as the 'Pategars' in the state of Karnataka. The setting for this study was a large, urban, government aided school in the city of Hubli in the state of Karnataka in South India. The campus is located right in the middle of the city which houses the largest population of 'Patkar' speakers in one city, in the world. Because of the uniqueness of this city for this community it is essential to understand the sociocultural and linguistic dynamic that exists and why it was considered particularly appropriate for this type of study.

Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh was the capital of their illustrious ancestor Sri Somavamsha Sahasrarjun, also known as Sahasra Bahu or Kartavira Arjun. Written accounts of Kartavira Arjun can be found in the Indian epics, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas. He was a devotee of Lord Dattatreya. Recent history is traced to Mandavgadh in Madhya Pradesh (modern name is Mandu). Written accounts confirm that Patkars were rulers of Mandu and successfully withstood constant Muslim invasions for centuries. There's a temple of Sri Somavamsha Sahasrarjun in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh,

dating back to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The temple was rebuilt in 13<sup>th</sup> century after withstanding Moghul attacks.

The subjects of the study comprised of a group of thirty seven low proficiency preliterate students studying in class 9 in this school. All of them were pursuing their schooling in the dominant state language Kannada as their medium of instruction. Their exposure to the English language was low at school and nil to minimal at home. These subjects were undergoing a General English course which was prescribed as part of their SSLC syllabus.

Because these children are not exposed to literacy events at home they start primary school with no awareness of the meaning or the uses of written language because of a lack of script in their language. It is a preliterate society with most of the problems peculiar to such societies. Repetition of classes and school drop-outs are common amongst these learners.

Students were given three writing tasks- first a guided writing activity where they were given questions and asked to write answers. Second they were made to write a paragraph in English with 'Myself' as a prompt. The third task involved the students writing an essay on a culturally familiar topic- Dasara. The students' written products were analyzed for negative substratum transfer in the areas of lexis, grammar and syntax produced.

## Results and Discussion

**Findings:** On analyzing essays written by these learners several errors were noticed due to the interference from their native language and their low proficiency in the L2.

**Transfer of Structure:** Learners' preferences to transfer aspects of the L1 rather than use those of the target language is revealed. Here are some examples of the sentence units which contain errors and inconsistency in the transfer of structure.

### English L2 writing - Patkar L1

Im house is live **How ghar um rhaoch**

I house in live

My mother name is Renuka **Mara mai nu naav Renuka**

My mother 's name Renuka

I very interest is school **Manne laiishtachesaalum**

I very like is school in

Im brother is Ganesh **Maro bhai ganesh**

My brother ganesh

Im house dajibanpeth **Maru ghar dajibanpeth um che**

My house dajibanpethin is

I home is very best. **Maru ghar chesabitichogot**

My house is very best.

I like flowers **any Manne ishta phoolokontabi**

I like flowers any

Errors were noticed in a failure to use the possessive 's'. This can be contributed to the formal and informal register used in their L1. '...nu' for informal '...aantaunu' for formal, which has led to the omission of the possessive altogether. It was also observed that syntax in most cases followed a prefabricated pattern.

My name is .....

My mother name is .....

My father name is .....

My brother name is .....

My school name is .....

My friend name is .....

**Markedness:** Marked forms relative to unmarked forms which are more basic, are special<sup>10</sup>. In the examples given above it can be seen that in Patkar, 'che' and 'che' are marked in comparison to the general English equivalent 'there is'. It is interesting to note that 'che' can be used to mean both 'there is' and 'I have'.

### Guided writing samples

Do you live in a house or a flat?

Yes live **in a house**.

How many rooms are there?

There are 4 rooms **in my house**.

How much noise is there?

There is yes noise **in my house**.

Are there any good restaurants nearby?

There are no good restaurants **in my house**.

How many theatres are there in your neighborhood?

There are no theatres **in my house**.

Is there any bus-stop near your home?

Yes there is bus stop **in my home**.

The examples given above are a sample to illustrate mother tongue influence on second language learning, specifically writing. It is rarely that teachers of English know about the linguistic background of their students. Sometimes the native language influence may be seen as an example of creative constructive. If teachers have some idea about the background of their learners it would be easy for them to help their students. Research has shown us that learners from all linguistic, ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds come to school with already constructed knowledge about their home language and culture. This can be used as a framework to build new knowledge.

Using multi-cultural examples to illustrate academic concepts and ideas can help in improving instructional quality in such classrooms. Such strategies can enable better learning to happen, incorporating diversity into the heart of teaching. It can also improve academic achievement by linking school knowledge to their lived experiences.

For successful inclusive education early intervention goes a long way. It is important for the government to organize teacher training which ensures that all teachers are qualified to adapt

their teaching to individual learners' needs. It is imperative for teachers to regard learners as the principal stakeholders in their profession and direct all their efforts to meet the needs of their learners.

To understand sub-stratum transfer, besides understanding the structural as well as the non-structural factors, it is necessary to have an understanding of cultural beliefs and values of the writers. The writing produced by low proficiency English language learners can sometimes be incomprehensible to readers who are not familiar with the culture of the writer. As a result of which the reader may not be successful in interpreting the meaning ascribed by the writer. In this particular case it was possible to understand the sub-stratum transfer resorted to by the learners because the researcher was familiar with the culture of the writers.

**Discussion:** The study employed qualitative methods to gain information about 'Patkar' students' L2 writing competence and their transfer. That L1 transfer is the source of errors is hard to dispute. The results of the study showed a strong correlation between L2 writing competence and sub-stratum transfer.

Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it<sup>11</sup>.

14 among many other scholars emphasize this point and states that "teacher may become more effective through a consideration of differences between languages and between cultures". An English teacher aware of L1-based transfer errors, for example, will be able to pinpoint problems of students better.

Like all new Englishes the English writing of the participants of this study exhibits the effect of grammatical restructuring as a result of contact with both the mother tongue, Patkar and the dominant regional language, Kannada. The different representations of expressions between Patkar and English have indeed influenced the students' way of transferring their ideas in their written production. The data analysis on the selected sentence units shows that all the sentences taken as the unit of sampling in this study are greatly influenced by the system in Patkar language as the students' source language. The pragmatic and semantic meanings, the lexical and syntactic structure of the sentences portray the linear language transfer. Therefore, some ways to solve this problem must be part of the future improvement plans.

The researcher makes some recommendations to reduce learners' use of negative sub-stratum transfer in their writing. They are that: i. Not just language teachers, but all subject teachers also should emphasize accuracy in addition to proficiency. ii. While writing learners should be encouraged to

think in the target language rather than in their mother tongue. iii. Teacher-student conferencing and feedback should be part of regular formative assessment practices. iv. The habit of reading and listening to Standard English should be formed and the need for the same stressed along with both speaking and writing in English often to gain control over language. v. Teachers' awareness of students who do not take active roles in class and ability to include them should be raised.

Teaching methods have to be adapted to the diversity in classrooms so that they can compensate for the children's differences at the outset of their school career. Student performance in the classroom is highly correlated with not just cognitive factors but also family, socioeconomic, community and other environmental factors. Therefore no single solution will solve the problem. Improving home and community environments would clearly help, but it is not easy. Especially where learners come from communities where the native language is endangered, it is not even desirable to try to control them.

Children who grow up in a socially and linguistically disadvantaged context often lack the language skills required to function in society in the way that society expects them to. Low literacy skills are often observed. A lack of proficiency in the school language makes it difficult for students to actively participate and some students avoid writing because they realize that they make a lot of errors. Such students must be given the best possible opportunity at school to acquire the language skills. This means more than just teaching the relevant vocabulary, syntactic constructions and pronunciation but providing a lot of opportunities to practice. Teachers can provide a "scaffolding" that links the academically challenging content to the cultural resources that are rich in myth and oral literature which such students bring to school. More than anything else teachers need to be personally committed to achieving equity for all students and believe that they are capable of making a difference in their students' learning.

Early intervention is an important principle for successful inclusive education. It is thus important that the government organizes teacher training so as to ensure that all teachers are properly equipped with pedagogical qualifications for adaptation of teaching to the individual learners' needs. It is imperative for teachers to regard learners as the focal point of all activities and efforts taken to adopt policies that effectively meet their needs.

## Conclusion

This study states that knowledge of sub-stratum transfer is a useful aid to effective teaching and learning of the second language which will enable teachers to identify the problems encountered by students in their writing. This knowledge will help them deal effectively in certain areas of teaching at least.

More often than not in the Indian context teachers are the best if not the only advocates for second language students. Therefore it is important for them to be aware of issues surrounding the question of transferability of literacy skills and to use that knowledge to facilitate equity for students.

The findings of this study suggest inputs that need to be addressed by policy makers and teachers themselves for the promotion of inclusive classrooms where meaningful and successful classroom participation can take place, thereby enhancing the learning achievements of children from diverse backgrounds. However this research investigates only linguistic skills and (lack of) literacy skills in L1. It does not consider the interactions of other factors involved in results, social and personal factors that interact with transfer and individual variations; therefore findings are only represented as one approach to the study of transfer in writing.

## References

1. Hudelson, The role of native language literacy in the education of language Minority children, *Language Arts*, **64(8)**, 827-841, (1987)
2. Hakuta K., *Mirror of language: the debate on bilingualism*, New York: Basic Books, (1986)
3. Larsen-Freeman, The acquisition of grammatical morphemes by adult ESL students, *TESOL Quarterly*, **9**, 409-19 (1975)
4. Anyan, Different Families, not distant cousins: Comparing Thai and English, *Med Magazine*, **37**, (2006)
5. Shaughnessy C., *Pre-literate English as a Second Language Learners: A Case Study of Somali Bantu Women*, ED495960, (2006)
6. Alsleben B., *Pre-literate English Learners: Refugee Camp to the U.S. Classroom*, *California English*, (2006)
7. Sharwoodsmith, *Second Language Acquisition, Theoretical Foundations*, Longman, (1994)
8. Chomsky N., *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Language Arts & Disciplines, MIT Press, (1965)
9. Corder S.P., the Significance of Learners' Errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, **5**, 161-169, (1967)
10. Odlin T., *Language Transfer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1989)
11. Ellis R., *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford University Press ,(1994)
12. Freire P., *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, New York Continuum, (1970)