

The Influence of the Second Language on First Language Writing: A Case Study of a Polish-English Bilingual Child

Lukasz Materowski, University of Hull

Title and Summary: The Influence of the Second Language on First Language Writing: A Case Study of a Polish-English Bilingual Child

This dissertation investigates the influence of the second language on the first. The main objective of this study is to investigate the influence of the subject's L2, in this case English, in the writing of L1 Polish and whether the influence (if any) could be interpreted as 'negative transfer' or 'positive transfer'. The study is theoretically embedded in Grosjean's (1998) and Cook's (1991) approach to bilingual individuals. Hence, it uses the various theoretical models for language representation in the brain as proposed by Cook (2003).

The influence of L1 on L2 has now long been investigated by researchers. In comparison, the reverse phenomenon, i.e. L2 effects on L1 has gained rather limited attention in the literature. In his *Languages in Contact* (1953), Weinreich discussed interference between the bilingual's two languages referring to it as 'deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language' (1953: 1). According to Cook, however, 'few people seemed to notice that Weinreich's definition concerned deviation in either language' (2003: 1). To Cook, it is reasonable that 'as well as the first language influencing the second, the second language influences the first' (2003: 1).

This study employs a qualitative research design – a case study. The data for this study, which consisted of Polish narrative writing samples, were obtained from a Polish-English bilingual child. For writing each composition, the participant was given approximately fifteen minutes. However, the condition was not to use any resources such as dictionaries to check spelling or translate words or phrases to ensure maximum spontaneity while producing the narratives.

The genre was a personal narrative, divided into two sub-areas: *home and past time activities*, and *school* and within each sub-area the participant had to respond to superficially prepared topics created by the researcher. The narratives varied in length, but on average they ranged from a maximum of 150 words (full page) to a minimum of 50 words (half page); the most frequent length was around 200 words (1 and a half pages). The study employs the categorisation system used in Serano and Howard (2003), which deal with instances of L2 influence on L1 in the three categories: *mechanic transfer*, *lexical transfer* (or word level transfer), and *transfer beyond the word level*.

After analyzing the participant's written narratives, it was discovered that each of the above domains displayed at least some evidence of English influence in the participant's Polish writing. In most cases, however, the influence was minor. Although English influence was found across all three domains, the greatest amount of influence was in the mechanic domain, followed by transfer at sentence level, and then word level transfer. In conclusion, based on Cook's idea of multi-competence and his Integration Continuum Model, it is assumed that L2 effects in the subject's case could be best described in terms of language maintenance instead of L1 attrition (loss of L1). Thus, the subject's L2-influenced use of written Polish does not seem to have replaced or led to deterioration in the subject's L1 knowledge, but instead seems to have been supplemented to her L1 competence as additional options for written expression.

Potential Impact

This study is extremely innovative in that it examines an area which is underexplored. Much research is conducted on the extent to which the L1 interferes with the L2, however this research takes us into the area of the L2 affecting the L1 for a young learner immersed in the L2 environment. One of the main areas of impact here is a sound understanding of language interference, for those living in an L2 environment. As the UK has seen an increase in immigration over the past number of years, this research is a stepping stone in understanding issues related to language learning, particularly the neglected matter of L2 influences on L1 output. This deeper understanding could in turn have an influence on integration, and indeed improve practices within ELT, by making language learners more aware of the intricacies of bilingualism. While language learners aim to succeed in L2 output, those living in the L2 environments should be aware of the impact this has on their own L1, which is of course part of their identity. Although part of language learning, in particular for immigrants, is the integration into the L2 society, the identification with their L1 carries equal importance. Another potential case for impact relates to the large number of mature foreign students studying in the UK from all over the world, who bring their families with them and view the whole experience of sending their children to English schools as a very positive by-product. While there is often apprehension at the effect this might have on their L1 and their reintegration back into their home societies/education system, this research goes a long way in reassuring them about such issues.

Moreover, with information such as this, researchers, policy makers, institutions and teachers can gain a better insight into language issues and language contact, in order to inform teaching and pedagogical support. For example, such research allows teachers become more aware of the language concerns students may face, which could be drawn on for classroom practice. The fact that the effect of the L2 on the L1 can be seen in beneficial terms is also worthy of discussion, because insightful findings such as this could reiterate the significance of language learning on a wider scale, from a purely academic perspective, as is demonstrated from the results presented above. This research therefore contributes significantly to our understanding of bilingualism and takes both a highly creative and an extremely insightful approach to the area under exploration.