THE INFLUENCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE ON ENGLISH GRAMMAR ACQUISITION

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Annotation

The acquisition of English grammar by second language learners is significantly influenced by the structural, typological, and cognitive properties of their native language. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as native language influence or cross-linguistic transfer, has been widely examined within the field of second language acquisition. The present thesis explores how native language structures affect learners' acquisition of English grammatical features such as tense, aspect, word order, articles, and prepositions. Drawing on empirical findings from contrastive analysis, error analysis, and interlanguage studies, the thesis demonstrates that native language influence can both facilitate and hinder English grammar acquisition depending on the degree of similarity between the native language and English. The study synthesizes established research to highlight pedagogical implications for teaching English grammar to multilingual learners.

Keywords

Native language influence; grammatical acquisition; cross-linguistic transfer; second language acquisition; English grammar

Introduction

Second language acquisition research has long recognized the role of the learner's native language in shaping the process of acquiring a new language. Early linguistic theories viewed native language influence primarily as interference that caused learner errors, while contemporary perspectives consider it a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon. English grammar acquisition, in particular, presents challenges for learners whose native languages differ typologically from English in terms of morphology, syntax, and functional categories. Numerous studies have demonstrated that learners rely on existing linguistic knowledge when processing and producing a second language, leading to systematic patterns of transfer [1]. Understanding these patterns is essential for explaining learner errors, developmental stages, and variable success in acquiring English grammar.

Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative synthesis methodology based on a critical review of peer-reviewed empirical studies and foundational theoretical works in second language acquisition. The selected sources include experimental studies, longitudinal learner corpus analyses, and contrastive linguistic research focusing on English grammar acquisition. Studies were selected according to their relevance to native language influence, methodological rigor, and citation in established SLA literature. The analysis focuses on grammatical domains such as tense–aspect morphology, article usage, word order, and prepositional structures, as these areas have been consistently identified as sites of strong native language influence [2][3]. Data from published

learner studies were compared to identify recurring patterns of transfer across different language backgrounds.

Results

Findings from the reviewed literature indicate that native language influence manifests most clearly in grammatical areas where English differs substantially from the learner's first language. For example, learners whose native languages lack articles, such as Russian or Chinese, demonstrate persistent difficulty in the acquisition of English definite and indefinite articles [4]. Similarly, tense and aspect acquisition in English is influenced by whether the native language grammaticalizes tense morphologically or relies on contextual cues [5]. Word order transfer has been observed among learners whose native languages permit greater syntactic flexibility than English, resulting in non-target-like sentence structures [6]. Conversely, positive transfer occurs when grammatical structures are similar across languages, facilitating faster acquisition and greater accuracy [7].

Analysis and Discussion

The influence of the native language on English grammar acquisition can be most effectively interpreted through the framework of interlanguage theory, which conceptualizes learner language as a systematic, rule-governed system that evolves over time rather than as a collection of random errors [1]. The findings reviewed in this study indicate that grammatical transfer from the native language constitutes a core component of interlanguage development, particularly during the early and intermediate stages of English acquisition. Learners consistently draw on previously acquired linguistic knowledge when encountering unfamiliar grammatical structures in English, which results in predictable patterns of both accurate usage and non-target-like forms.

One of the most extensively documented areas of native language influence is article acquisition. English articles pose significant difficulty for learners whose native languages lack an equivalent grammatical category. Research demonstrates that learners from article-less language backgrounds tend to fluctuate between omission and overuse of articles, reflecting reliance on semantic rather than syntactic cues [4]. This behavior supports the hypothesis that learners initially map English forms onto existing conceptual categories rather than acquiring new grammatical distinctions immediately. Such findings challenge deficit-based views of learner language by showing that apparent errors are often systematic and developmentally constrained.

Tense and aspect acquisition in English further illustrates the complex interaction between native language structures and target language input. Studies indicate that learners whose native languages encode aspectual distinctions morphologically acquire English progressive and perfect constructions with greater accuracy than those whose first languages rely on lexical or contextual markers [5]. These results confirm Odlin's hypothesis that structural similarity facilitates positive transfer, accelerating grammatical development [2]. However, when tense and aspect systems differ significantly, learners may exhibit prolonged optionality or non-target-like usage, particularly in spoken production. This phenomenon highlights the role of native language conceptualization in shaping grammatical interpretation rather than mere surface-level form transfer.

Word order provides another domain where native language influence is strongly evident. Learners whose native languages permit flexible constituent order frequently transfer

these patterns into English, resulting in deviations from canonical subject–verb–object structures [6]. Corpus-based studies reveal that such word order errors are not arbitrary but reflect consistent application of native syntactic rules. Importantly, longitudinal data suggest that exposure to input alone is not always sufficient to eliminate these patterns, especially when native word order does not obstruct comprehension. This supports the claim that communicative success may reinforce non-target-like grammar forms, contributing to fossilization in advanced learners [9].

The issue of fossilization remains a central concern in discussions of native language influence. Evidence indicates that certain grammatical features, particularly functional morphology such as agreement markers and articles, are more resistant to restructuring than core syntactic patterns [9]. Researchers argue that deeply entrenched native language representations may limit learners' sensitivity to subtle grammatical contrasts in English, even at high proficiency levels. This observation aligns with ultimate attainment studies, which show persistent variability among adult L2 learners despite extensive exposure and instruction [12]. The analysis confirms that native language influence does not disappear but becomes less overt and more selective over time.

Importantly, the reviewed findings challenge the traditional notion of native language influence as primarily negative interference. Instead, cross-linguistic influence is increasingly recognized as a bidirectional and facilitative process when structural correspondences exist [7]. Learners whose native languages share typological features with English often demonstrate faster acquisition rates and greater grammatical accuracy. This supports usage-based and cognitive approaches that emphasize pattern recognition and frequency effects in language learning [11]. Native language knowledge, therefore, functions as a cognitive resource rather than an obstacle.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strengthen arguments against strict separation between first and second language systems. Research in cross-linguistic influence and bilingual cognition suggests that linguistic systems interact continuously, even in highly proficient learners [8]. This interaction explains why native language effects can resurface under processing pressure, such as in spontaneous speech. Such evidence supports dynamic models of language competence that account for variability rather than assuming uniform target-like attainment.

Pedagogically, these insights carry significant implications. Awareness of learners' native language structures enables instructors to predict common grammatical difficulties and design contrastive instructional strategies. Research demonstrates that explicit instruction targeting areas of negative transfer yields better learning outcomes than purely input-based approaches [10]. Moreover, raising learners' metalinguistic awareness of cross-linguistic differences has been shown to reduce persistent errors in English grammar. The analysis indicates that effective grammar instruction must account for both universal developmental sequences and language-specific transfer effects.

Overall, the discussion confirms that native language influence is a central and unavoidable aspect of English grammar acquisition. Its effects are systematic, developmentally conditioned, and shaped by multiple linguistic and cognitive factors. Rather than viewing transfer as an error source to be eliminated, contemporary research supports a perspective that treats native language influence as an integral component of the learning process. This

understanding offers a more balanced and empirically grounded explanation of variation in English grammar acquisition among second language learners.

Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that native language influence plays a central role in the acquisition of English grammar. Empirical evidence confirms that learners systematically transfer grammatical features from their native language, affecting both accuracy and developmental trajectories. While structural differences can lead to persistent errors, similarities between languages can significantly enhance learning efficiency. Recognizing the dual nature of native language influence contributes to a more nuanced understanding of English grammar acquisition and supports the development of informed teaching strategies. Future research may benefit from integrating neurolinguistic methods to further explore how native language representations interact with English grammatical learning.

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