Encountering Mother Tongue Interference in Second Language Learning

Dr Yogendra Pareek
Associate Professor
SPNKS Govt PG College, Dausa, Rajasthan.

Interference means “... the trace left by someone’s native language upon the foreign language he has acquired.” (Quirk et al 19) These are those errors which need to be eradicated because they are those differences which a non-native learner of English must recognize as not-English. It must be learned that L2 learners are applying “identical classifications to linguistic situations which are sharply different”. Their accent and pronunciation is very much influenced by their mother tongue. The negative aspect of such interference is that it may give one a complex while communicating with a fluent speaker of English. But this knowledge helps the trainers/teachers of English to recognize the language background of the learners.

English is learned or acquired as a foreign or a second language, L2, by the speakers of L1, other language, who have their native language background. The aim of learning a second language is to be able to find the right word and sentences to convey the meaning intended. We should be able to translate our thoughts into words, and at same time feel, perfectly at ease while doing so. However, there is a big difference while learning our first language, which is our native language or the mother tongue, and the second language. For the sake of conveyance, let’s call our mother tongue or native tongue as L1 and second language as L2. So now, L2 is our target language; learning and mastering it is our target. And in the present context our L1 is 'Hindi' and our L2 is 'English'. And the goals of learning our L1 or mother tongue are different from those of learning L2, the second language or foreign language, which is English. Now, the interesting phenomena is that the first language is not learned, but acquired, which means that the L1 is learned by a child naturally; The child picks this up from the speakers all around him/her. S/he listens to the words and sentences spoken and then tries to imitate them without being concerned about the rules of usage or grammar. According to linguists, every human being has an innate capacity to learn a language, and when they come into contact with the sociolinguistic environment, they learn the language by constructing their own grammar in a natural way, which goes on and on.

A certain system, a pattern or a kind of logic develops by which after a few years, a child is able to generate any number of sentences without actually being conscious about them, it may still not be must be aware of the rules of usage or grammar. This is the way a child learns of rather acquires the first language L1 or mother tongue. Now the problem is that he applies that same system, or pattern of L1 onto L2 the rules which are applicable only to L1 totally unaware of the fact that L2 or the foreign language being learnt has its own system or pattern of governing. This process is called Mother Tongue Interference and this interference can be seen at all the levels of language - grammatical, phonetical, lexical, syntactical, which does affect the meaning also. Although, this is a big problem for the learner, it can be of some use for a teacher, because then the teacher knows what are those areas where a learner is likely to face difficulties. He can also compare the two languages and mark out the difficulties. This technique is called contrastive analysis. Secondly, he has the first hand knowledge of his learners’ making an error when they accidentally indulge in mother tongue interference in the classroom.

According to R Lado, individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and a distribution of meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language learning.

Here are a few common examples of mother tongue interference in the Indian context, which make the above point clearer:

Take the word Uncleji
Uncle + ji
It is alright as far as L1 ie Hindi is concerned, as ji is used as mark of respect, but in the English language and culture it is not so.

Another example is:
Mai yeh pen paanch repay meh laaya
Which is translated word to word in English as -
‘I bought this pen in five rupees’.
but the correct sentence is:
I bought this pen for five rupees.

This difference gets clearer in the case of question tags:
In Hindi the sentence is:
Tum wahan gaye thei, hai naa?
Which is translated into the target language as:
‘You went there, isn’t it?’
Where as the correct form according to Standard English is:
‘You went there, didn’t you?’

Then again in Hindi we say:
Nahi sahab, mai nahi aa sakta
Which is translated as:
Sorry, Mister I can’t come…
The correct form is either ‘sorry sir, I can’t come’.
or ‘sorry Mr + (name) Smith, I can’t come’.
This transfer takes place even at the phonological level.
In English the letters [ P, T, K ] are aspirated i.e.
P - Pʰ
T - Tʰ
K - Kʰ
In Hindi we have only p
So, Paper in L2 is Paper in L1

In Hindi, normally there is no stress, rhythm or intonation; so the words pronounced by those whose mother tongue is Hindi may raise difficulties for the native speakers, as the L1 users won’t be understood.
Hence, the word, ‘Tank’ when pronounced without aspiration may sound as ‘Dank’ to the native speakers of English language.

Another case is the word ‘wine’; the sound /w/ is different from how it is pronounced by users/speakers of Hindi; the bilabial /w/ becomes labiodental /v/. This is because L1 users do not distinguish between /w/ and /v/. For them, there is just the labiodental sound /v/. Of course, the native users of English ie L1 speakers use /v/ for vase and /w/ for wine.

This interference also takes place at the social and cultural level.
Let us take a very common example of a wedding card in India; in Hindi, the two persons getting married are mentioned as:
SUNIL
Sheela
Which is translated into English as the wedding of ‘Sunil with Sheela’
Whereas according to standard English, the correct form ought to be ‘the wedding of Sunil to Sheela’.

There is one more mistake which is commonly committed by L1 students who try to convey the cultural concepts specific to L1 in the target language L2 by mere translation. For instance, during a General English exam, the students of BA Part I were supposed to write a letter to their parents. The L1 culture requires students to show respect to their elders, especially immediate family. And it is normal and customary to touch the feet of elders on meeting them and saying Namaskar, Pranaam etc. But when an interaction takes place which is not face-to-face and the concept of touching the feet is to be conveyed, it common for L1 users to begin the letter in their mother tongue, Hindi here, by the term Charansparsh. But this term gets translated as ‘Legs touch’, which is a case of mother tongue interference. It is an awkward expression for the native users of English as neither the concept nor the conveying of this exists in their culture and context, and they do not begin their letters that way. This is not wrong with the cultural values because in Hindi the letter would have the expression:
Aadarniya Mataji
Charansparsh

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These are some of the examples that have been used to explain the concept of mother tongue interference, which will occur where L1 is acquired and L2 is learned at a later age. People have even gone to the extent of saying that one has to forget one's language to acquire another/new language, but it is not possible perhaps to delete the mother tongue from inside. This is beautifully expressed by the Indian poet Sujata Bhatt in the poem “Search for my Tongue” -

You ask me what I mean
by saying I have lost my tongue
I ask you what would you do
if you had two tongues in your mouth,
and lost the first one, the mother tongue,
and could not really know the other,
the foreign tongue.
You could not use them both together
even if you thought that way.
And if you lived in a place you had to
speak a foreign tongue,
your mother tongue would rot,
rot and die in your mouth
until you had to spit it out.
I thought I spit it out
But overnight while I dream
it grows back, a stump of shoot
grows longer…
it ties the other tongue in knots
…
it pushes the other tongue aside
Everytime I think I’ve forgotten,
I think I’ve lost the mother tongue,
it blossoms out of my mouth.

So, it is not possible to make someone forget or unlearn their mother tongue, L1, and make them acquire another tongue, L2. Translation is not the correct way of learning and has to be avoided. He has to develop reflexes in the target language of L2. He would also be told fully about words and patterns in L2 which otherwise would remain vague. The errors and resistance caused by the L1 will give way over a period of time. They are all part of the learning process. The learner has to be vigilant and alert while facing and tackling the problem. The teacher also has a big role to play in removing this problem. He should know beforehand what will be the areas of difficulty so that he has a prior knowledge of at what points he may have to correct his learners.

Contrastive analysis is used to explain why certain features of the target language are more difficult to learn than others. Those features that are similar in both mother tongue L1 and target language L2 are the ones which are easier to learn; those that are different are the ones that are difficult to learn. Through this method of analysis, the areas of difficulty can be foretold and worked upon upfront. This, however, is not a guaranteed way, as it may predict errors where none may arise or it may not anticipate all the errors that a learner makes while learning the second language.

The solution to the main problems faced by the learners of target language or second language would be to teach full sentences that are context-based. The teacher could use a context which interests the learners and which they like and then explain the things within this context. This would stick in their minds easily and for long. Today, the exposure to English is much more than it used to be earlier. In the era of social media and artificial intelligence the problem of mother tongue interference can be tackled. Learners are well equipped to practice, recognize the errors including mother tongue interference, and eradicate these mistakes gradually. Besides, the conventional ways of reading, writing, listening or watching English news on TV, new methods like usage of artificial intelligence SIRI, ALEXA, Google Assistant, and the latest is ChatGPT which has proved to be a game changer in the realm of technology. Today, the speakers of L1 can achieve a high competence in L2 because they soon have the knowledge of the error and the means to rectify it. They achieve an L1 like command over L2, and as David Anoussamy says in the book The Language Riddle After some time, some of the words of target language are preferred by the learner to those of the mother tongue and are used while speaking in the mother tongue. This is reverse interference.
References