HOW TO DEAL WITH LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

Transfer is a reality in the process of second language acquisition. Teachers of second languages should be able to identify this phenomenon in order to prevent the errors which may arise or use them in a constructive way. Differences between language and cultures should be taken into consideration in order to deal with transfer and then, teaching will be more effective. Moreover, errors made by learners will help teachers to foresee what may be difficult or easy for them, and will provide clues of how to act. On the other hand, teachers of second languages should also take into account the similarities between the native and target language. Thus, they will also take advantage of this positive transfer in order to ease the learning process. In this article, we will focus on the concept of Language Transfer and some of the main difficulties that the Spanish students of English as a second language have in the process of learning due to the influence of their native language.

HOW TO DEAL WITH LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN THE ENGLISH CLASS

There are several ways of referring to Language transfer (linguistic interference, cross meaning or L1 interference), however, every of them define a same reality. In terms of second language teaching and learning, transfer is the influence of the learner’s native language in a second language. When the linguistic interference results in correct language production, it is called positive transfer. However, if the learner’s second language induces to error, we will be referring to negative transfer. In any case, the term could be extended to any situation in which someone that does not have a native-level command of the language translates his or her knowledge to the target language.

In order to explain easily how to deal with positive and negative transfer in the English classroom, we will make a distinction between lexical transfer due to lexical reasons and language transfer due to morphosyntactic reasons.
Negative and positive transfer due to lexical reasons: Cognates and false cognates are a good example of how L1 interferes with the second language, in this case English. The word *cognate* derives from Latin *cognatus* "blood relative". Cognates in linguistics are words that have a common etymological origin. Cognates do not necessarily have the same meaning: *head* (English) and *chef* ("chief, head", French), constitutes an example of how cognate terms may have a different meaning. This is due to the fact that the languages develop separately, eventually becoming false friends. Students will find one language easier to learn if shows many lexical similarities with their native language. The benefits of recognizing cognates may not be the only advantage that Spanish speakers have in learning English. Furthermore, another advantage is that Spanish speakers will have more time to focus on unknown vocabulary. One the other hand, by means of the use of cognates, we are providing some kind of “shelter”. Second language learners may feel more confident and motivated if they realize that they already know “something” about that second language. This may contribute to their self-confidence and be translated into motivation. Nevertheless, there are also some disadvantages. False cognates or the so called “false friends” contribute to a negative transfer and so, becomes a difficulty in the teaching-learning process. For example: The English word “actually” and the Spanish word “actualmente” seem to be cognates, as well as the word forms “interesting” in English and “interesante” in Spanish do. However, although the second pair are cognates, the first pair are not, since they differ in meaning: “actually” does not mean “actualmente” but “de hecho”. This kind of error shows evidence of negative transfer due to native language influence. In order to deal with false cognates, we will suggest some activities whose aim is to break false cognate’s word form similarities by means of visual differences in meaning. Due to this, the students will be able to join, in a natural way, a new word with its corresponding concept.

Task: “What is actually happening?”
- Objective: Learning false cognates and eliminate negative transfer.
- Content: False cognates
- Procedure: The students should pay attention on some situations (you can present them on flash cards, PowerPoint…) and decide what it is actually happening by choosing between two options. One of the options will be a false cognate with a picture of its real meaning and the other one will be the picture and word with which it is usually confused. No matter if the students realise that they are dealing with false cognates and they expect the answer they have to choose... The real aim is to create a certain kind of visual impact, joining in a natural way a new word with its corresponding concept and eliminating the negative transfer caused by the word form.

Examples:
After this first contact with cognates, the possibilities of this exercise are countless. The teacher may take the two problematic words and suggest the students to form (orally or writing) sentences with these two words. By doing so, they would be consolidating the meaning.

For further difficulty the teacher may also take two random words with its pictures and ask the students to form (orally or writing) a sentence. By doing so they would be reinforcing the new concepts.

Apart from similarities and dissimilarities in word forms, word meanings constitute another kind of problems that will be translated into positive and negative transfer as well. Some semantic differences between languages do not always lead to significant learning difficulties, in fact, sometimes they contribute to a positive transfer. For example, two verbs in Spanish “conocer” and “saber” correspond to a single verb in English “to know”. Spanish speakers learning English seem to have little difficulty in associating two lexical forms with one concept, since they just have a broader semantic field for the verb “know”. This fact can be seen in the right use of the verb “know” by the Spanish students. The can perfectly distinguish between: I know Spain, I know Literature, I know his brother...

On the other hand, when the Spanish learners want to translate into English the Spanish verb “hacer” which has a broader semantic field than “do” and “make”, students produce error. Thus, these errors can be attached to negative transfer due to native language influence. As a consequence, the learner may use the rule incorrectly, by making the use of that rule more general that it actually is. For example, if the
learner writes I do a cake, they are probably generalizing the use of “do” to every process that involves creation and realization. In order to deal with this kind of negative semantic transfer, we will propose an activity whose aim is to narrow the learner’s semantic field by means of a conceptual map.

**Task:** “Make and do your mind map”
- Objective: Learning how to use “make” and “do”, narrowing the students’ “hacer” semantic field and eliminating negative transfer.
- Contents: Make and do uses.
- Procedure: The teacher draws in the black board a conceptual map related to the uses of the Spanish word “hacer”. Then, the teacher draws another one, this time related to “make” and “do” uses. The students should compare both conceptual maps. After that, the students, with the help of the teacher, will add examples to each of the branches. By doing so, the students will narrow their Spanish conceptual map of the word “hacer” and will acquire a narrower one in which they can differentiate between “make” and “do”.

![Conceptual map](image_url)
Then, the teacher will say words and the students will have to decide in which branch they should add it.

The same activity can be done in a more illustrative way by using images instead of written examples. The teacher would show pictures and the student would have to choose where to put it.

*Negative and positive transfer due to syntax and morphology:* Meaning is not the only information we can obtain from words, their syntactic and morphological information will also provide meaningful information.

The pluralisation of adjectives becomes a frequent example of negative transfer due to morphosyntactic reasons among students learning English as a second language. Whereas in the case of Spanish, adjectives must agree in number with the nouns they modify, in English, plural nouns are not modified by adjectives in plural.
Example:
Alberto tiene los ojos azules.
*Alberto has got blue eyes.

Spanish students usually make this kind of error at some point of their learning process, and it is due to their native language influence in the second language.

Another example of negative transfer related to morphology and syntax is the use of the ‘s genitive to mean possession.

Whereas in Spanish we express possession by means of a periphrastic expression, in English possession is expressed in a “synthetic” way. The order of elements in the structure that the students have fossilized in Spanish interferes with the new structure that they are trying to learn, so that they have two completely different structures meaning the same. However, the following approach to the ‘s structure or genitive phrase may be helpful: The genitive phrase or GP, has the distribution of a third person determiner. It means that the genitive phrase is placed before the noun and means possession. Besides, it can be replaced by any third person possessive determiner. In Spanish, possessive pronouns occupy the same place than English possessive determiners, right before the noun. Following that perspective, possessive determiners occupy the same place in both, Spanish and English. Since we already know, the place of the possessive determiner in English could also be occupied by a genitive phrase. All this has an easy application in the teaching of the genitive structure. The students will learn that just like in Spanish we say “su casa” in English we say “her house”. Besides, “her” can be substituted by any possessor: “Ann’s house”, “My parents’ house”, “Your house” etc. The syntactic place does not vary.

Task: Possessives.
- Objective: Learning the correct place for possessives by comparing the syntactic place of the possessive determiner and the genitive phrase.
- Contents: Possessive determiners and genitive phrases.
- Procedure: The teacher should take some object from some student and say:

“This is his/her pencil case “
“This is (name of the student)’s pencil case”.

Then, she should do the same varying the pronouns in form and number. After that, the teacher may ask one student about some other student’s object. Finally, the students should do the same but this time in a written exercise:
Throughout this article, language transfer has been regarded as a natural fact in the process of learning a second language. After having discussed some of the advantages of this influence and proposed some activities to deal with negative transfer, L1 interference should not be considered a negative aspect in the process of teaching English as a second language. Nevertheless, teachers may use positive transfer to motivate their students and create a feeling of self-confidence in the English class, a subject which is usually associated to adjectives such as “difficult” and “different”. Furthermore, negative transfer may be seen as constructive way of approaching students efficiently.

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