

A REVIEW OF HANNAH NEUSER'S STUDY ON SOURCE LANGUAGE OF LEXICAL TRANSFER IN MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the doctoral thesis of Hanna Neuser's research of lexical transfer in multilingual learners. The primary focus of this mixed method study is to investigate how multilingual learners source the appropriate language of lexical transfer. The study is set within the framework of five main factors: proficiency, recency, psychotopology, L2 status and item-specific transferability. The main questions investigated were: the extent to which the combined factors predict the source language of transfer, the degree of impact of each individual factor in the prediction of source language in spoken and written production, the direction of the effect of each factor on the prediction of source language in written and spoken production and the extent each item-specific transfer contributes to the understanding of the prediction of source language selection in multilingual learners. The study took place in Luxemburg with 79 high school student participants, between the ages of 13-14, all multilingual Luxemburgish, German, French learners. The outcomes of the study offer a clear understanding of the transfer patterns of these learners and pave the way for more individualised research into the single factors investigated.

KEYWORDS: Source language, lexical transfer, multilingual learners, mixed method.

INTRODUCTION

Neuser's Doctorol thesis is a research area that is both welcome and exciting. With an increasing number of people learning multiple languages and growing numbers of natural bilinguals, this topic of lexical transfer between the various languages is a timely and serious consideration for language teachers, teaching and learning across the globe.

Neuser opens with an introduction on bi and multilingualism and the interaction of the multiple languages in the mind. Drawing on a number of theorists (Jarvis & Pavlenko,2008; Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner, 2003) to name but a few, the background theory is thorough and well presented.

This is followed by the differences between the various levels of transfer in second language acquisition (SLA) and third language acquisition (TLA) and addresses De Angelis (2007a) prediction of multilingual behaviour. Describing the difficulties in predicting transfer behaviour, Neuser sheds light on the various forms of transfer and their terms within the framework of an investigation into these factors:

- Proficiency
- Recency
- Psychotypology
- L2 status
- Item- specific transferability

all underpinned by the works of De Angelis & Selinker (2001), Hall & Ecke (2003) and Lindqvist (2009) in the context of oral production and De Angelis (2005a), Ringbom (2001), Sánchez (2015b) and Singleton & Ó Laoire (2006) within the context of transfer in written production. This introduction sets a firm foundation on which the research is presented.

Following on from the introduction, Neuser then presents the theoretical background, which defines the terminology around language transfer (LT) between source language (SL) and target language (TL) and the constructs within which they operationalise. The main terminology defined is: Multilingualism, which is the more common term used nowadays, as opposed to purilingualism, which more often than not refers to individual multilingualism rather than societal (Kemp, 2009). Multilingualism is used more to refer to the use of multiple languages due to cultural, societal, domestic or economic reasons. A considerable feature of the presentation of the terminology is the reference to language proficiency, which later brings to light the way in which this impacts LT. The areas of interference, transfer and CLI are then defined and explained, with a focus on the most recent developments of the terminology. A conclusion here being that transfer should be viewed as a general tendency rather than a pattern and that transfer and CLI are often used interchangeably and are the most prominently used terms in the text. In addition to clarification of terms around languages (L1, L2 etc) types of transfer are also presented, which makes easier sense of the presented research. To conclude the chapter, models and frameworks are presented in order to exemplify lexical selection and how it may be governed by the activation or inhibition of language subsets and how these then result in transfer.

Following on from an overview of previous research into SL of transfer, in which Neuser discusses the predictive factors mentioned above, the justification for the present study is outlined. The discussion continues by highlighting the main differences between transfer in second and third language acquisition with examples drawn upon which give rise to the increasing evidence that in multilingual speakers/learners, transfer can often derive from the L2 or L3 as opposed to the L1, depending on proficiency, recency, markedness and psychotopology. Due to the broad range of variables involved with these areas, Neuser focus her study on solving the issues of confounding factors that previous studies encountered, exploring the relevance of item- specific factors for the SL of transfer in TLA and analysing the generalisability of the predictive factors across the modes of production. Therefore, a mixed method study was chosen, incorporating quantitative elements, which balance out the qualitative elements and comparative and exploratory analysis.

The 4 research questions were:

1. To what extent do the four factors combined predict the SL of transfer in multilingual learners and are there any differences in how well the four factors combined predict the SL of transfer in spoken Vs written production?
2. To what degree does each factor individually predict the SL in transfer and are there any differences in how well each individual factor predicts the source language of transfer in spoken Vs written production?
3. What is the direction of the effect of each factor in predicting the SL of transfer? In other words, is the direction of the effect positive or negative (e.g. does higher proficiency in a background language increase or decrease the odds of choosing that language as a source of transfer) and are there any differences in the direction of the effect of each factor in spoken Vs written production?
4. To what extent can item- specific transferability contribute to our understanding of the SL of transfer in multilingual learners and are there differences in how item- specific transferability affects the SL of transfer in spoken Vs written production?

Method and Participants

The setting for the research was Luxemburg, where all of the participants shared the same three languages (Luxemburgish, German and French), before acquiring English. 79 high school students (43 F,36 M), between 13-14 years of age, in their second year of English instruction, took part in the study. In total there were 23 additional language spoken at various levels of proficiency among the participants. The instruments used for data collection are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the study

Pilot study	
Written Production	
1	Free production Picture story description Picture naming (in the classroom)
2	Questionnaire (in the classroom)

Main study		
	Spoken Production	Written production
1	Picture story description (individual recordings)	Picture story description (in the classroom)
2	Questionnaire (in the classroom)	

Data collection was obtained from the participants and their guardians and responses were coded and within all transcriptions the transfers were bolded. With a focus on lexis, only lexical errors were considered and instances of language switching not related to the story content was excluded. During inferential statistical analysis, each transferred item was recorded as a dependent variable, therefore no averaging was required. Multinomial logistic regression (MLR) (Neuser and Pfenninger, forthcoming) was used as the basis for the main statistical analysis, with internal and external validity.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results are organised by descriptive statistics, overall amount of transfer, distribution across source languages, categorisation of source languages and them by research question. This study is the first of its kind with a comparative perspective and comprehensiveness across the five predictors for the source language of transfer. Proficiency and exposure were recorded as significant predictors of the SL of transfer in both areas of production, including the L1 status effect, urging the need for more research within the area of L1/L2 status on LT. Psychotopology was not found to have any significant effect, however each factor has an isolated effect. The study also revealed insight into differences between the SL of transfer in spoken and written production and the MLR provides a better prediction of SL in the context of spoken rather than written language production. Despite the four factors not having been able to predict the SL of transfer in written data, they were found to be significant factors in writing. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis brings the high level of systematicity and predictability of transfer behaviours, which is a novel finding and paves the way for more detailed research into the individual factors within the two production domains in the future.

CONCLUSION

Neuser's study endeavoured to measure the various factors' abilities to predict the SL of transfer in multilingual speakers and learners of English. She employed a new method of statistical analysis, which has proven appropriate and effective in its measurement. The findings of the study offer a clearer understanding of transfer patterns and behaviour in learners' choice of source language and neurolinguistic patterns of language selection within the multilingual speakers' lexicon.

The final conclusion is that, within and in addition to the main four factors, context, purpose and task also impact on the choice of SL of transfer, enabling speakers to be more prepared in a variety of circumstances. The outcomes of this study go some way to offer a clearer understanding of the complexities of crosslinguistic influence within multilingual speakers and learners and will encourage more detailed research into this area, which in turn will impact on the future of foreign language teaching and learning.

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