

## IS MOTHER TONGUE INFLUENCE A FRIEND OR FOE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

*by:*

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The influence of a learner's mother tongue on second language acquisition has long been a subject of debate in the fields of linguistics and language education. Commonly known as language transfer, this phenomenon takes place when elements such as structures, sounds, vocabulary, or grammar from a learner's first language (L1) influence the acquisition and usage of a second language (L2). While this influence is sometimes seen as a hindrance, leading to errors and interference, there is growing recognition that it can also serve as a helpful bridge in learning a new language. Whether the mother tongue is a friend or foe depends on how it is perceived, how language instruction is delivered, and how learners apply their linguistic resources during the acquisition process.

When learners begin to study a second language, they naturally draw on the linguistic system they already know—their L1. This process, known as positive or negative transfer, can either facilitate or obstruct the acquisition of the L2. Positive transfer occurs when similarities between the two languages result in correct usage, as when a Spanish speaker learning Italian finds that many cognates, grammatical rules, and sentence structures are familiar. On the other hand, negative transfer—often referred to as interference—happens when differences lead to errors, such as a Tagalog speaker learning English might say “He go to school every day” because in Tagalog, subject-verb agreement is not an issue. These errors are not simply signs of failure but reflections of how learners attempt to apply prior knowledge in unfamiliar contexts.

The traditional view of mother tongue influence, particularly in the mid-20th century, leaned heavily toward seeing it as a problem. Under the contrastive analysis hypothesis, which gained prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, language educators believed that by identifying differences between the L1 and L2, they could predict and prevent learner errors. This approach assumed that the more different the two languages were, the harder it would be for the learner. However, this deterministic view was later challenged by the interlanguage theory developed by Selinker in the 1970s. This system is constantly evolving as learners receive more input and correct their errors, highlighting that L1 influence is part of a natural and necessary process in language development rather than simply a barrier to overcome.

More contemporary research emphasizes the potential benefits of mother tongue use in second language learning, especially in educational contexts. Cummins (2000) introduced the idea of Common Underlying Proficiency, which suggests that knowledge and skills acquired in the first language can transfer to the second. For example, if a learner understands how to summarize a text or identify main ideas in their L1, they are likely to apply these same cognitive strategies in the L2. In this sense, the mother tongue becomes a valuable cognitive and academic resource rather than a crutch. This perspective is particularly important in bilingual and multilingual societies, where students are often expected to learn in a second or even third language without adequate support for their native tongue.

Moreover, allowing some use of the L1 in the classroom can improve learners' confidence and comprehension, especially at the early stages of learning. Translation activities, code-switching, and bilingual glossaries can make complex concepts more accessible and reduce anxiety. According to Vygotsky, the learner's linguistic background is part of their cultural and cognitive identity and should be integrated into, rather than excluded from, the learning process. When learners are encouraged to draw connections

between languages, they develop metalinguistic awareness—the ability to think about and analyze language—which ultimately supports second language development.

Despite the benefits, it is important to recognize that overreliance on the L1 can also impede L2 fluency. Learners who constantly translate in their heads before speaking or writing in the L2 may struggle to develop automaticity. This can lead to slower processing and fossilization of errors. Effective language instruction often involves the strategic use of L1 support, gradually phased out as learners become more proficient. The aim is not to remove the influence of the mother tongue but to utilize it in a constructive and supportive manner.

In multilingual classrooms, mother tongue influence becomes even more complex. Learners might use different home languages, which may not correspond to the language used for instruction. In such contexts, teachers face the challenge of being inclusive without knowing every student's L1. Nevertheless, research shows that validating learners' linguistic backgrounds and encouraging translanguaging—where students move fluidly between languages for learning—can foster a more equitable and engaging classroom environment (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

The influence of the mother tongue in second language acquisition cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of friend or foe. The influence of the mother tongue in second language acquisition cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of friend or foe. Rather, it is a multifaceted phenomenon that plays both facilitative and inhibitory roles depending on how it is managed in the learning environment. Far from being an obstacle, the L1 can serve as a foundation for building new language skills, offering cognitive support and boosting learner confidence. Teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers must recognize the nuanced role of the mother tongue and create instructional strategies that respect linguistic diversity while fostering effective second language learning. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to

navigate multiple languages – and draw from one’s full linguistic repertoire – will remain a crucial asset for learners everywhere.

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