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The Influence of Learner's First Language (L1) in English Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of learners' first language (L1) on English language acquisition, focusing on phonology, syntax, and lexicon across five L1 groups: Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, Japanese, and Hindi. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from 200 participants through questionnaires, proficiency tests, and pronunciation assessments. The results reveal that L1 interference significantly affects English proficiency, particularly in phonology, with Arabic and Mandarin speakers showing the strongest negative correlations. Hindi and Spanish speakers demonstrated higher proficiency, with fewer syntax and lexical errors, while Japanese learners struggled primarily with phonological challenges. Regression analysis confirmed that phonology had the strongest impact on English proficiency, followed by syntax and lexicon. The study highlights the need for tailored instructional strategies to address L1-specific challenges in language learning.

Keywords: L1 influence, English language acquisition, phonology, syntax, lexicon, language transfer, second language learning, cross-linguistic interference

Introduction

The process of acquiring a second language (L2), particularly English, is influenced by various factors that shape the learning experience. One of the most significant influences is the learner's first language (L1). Language transfer, a well-established concept in second language acquisition (SLA) studies, refers to the application of linguistic knowledge from L1 when learning an L2 (Odlin, 1989). This phenomenon can either facilitate or hinder the acquisition of English, depending on the degree of similarity or difference between the two languages. As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, understanding how L1 affects the learning process becomes essential for educators, linguists, and learners alike. This paper examines the influence of L1 on English language acquisition, focusing on phonological, syntactical, and lexical aspects, while considering cognitive and socio-cultural dimensions. A clear understanding of these dynamics can inform teaching strategies that mitigate negative transfer and maximize positive transfer, thereby enhancing the learner's journey toward English proficiency.

Theoretical Background

L1 influence in L2 acquisition has been a prominent topic in linguistic research for decades. Language transfer, as coined by Lado (1957) and further expanded by later researchers, refers to the application of elements from L1 to L2, whether consciously or unconsciously. Initially, language transfer was viewed through a contrastive lens, with the assumption that similarities between L1 and L2 would aid in learning (positive transfer), while differences would cause interference (negative transfer) (Ellis, 1997). This binary view, while useful in early stages of SLA research, has since evolved to incorporate a more nuanced understanding of how L1 affects various linguistic domains, from phonology to syntax to vocabulary (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

The cognitive process underlying language transfer is linked to learners' reliance on existing linguistic

frameworks from their L1 when faced with the unfamiliar rules of an L2. This reliance can manifest in various ways, including phonological substitution, syntactical restructuring, and lexical borrowing, all of which are crucial to understanding how learners navigate the complexities of English acquisition. While this paper does not focus heavily on morphological interference, due to its relatively minor role compared to syntax and phonology, it is worth noting that L1-induced errors in morphology can still affect English learners, particularly in the use of verb conjugations and tense marking.

Phonological Influence of L1 on English Acquisition

Phonology, or the sound system of a language, is one of the most immediately noticeable areas where L1 influences L2 acquisition. The sounds that learners are accustomed to in their native language shape how they perceive and produce sounds in English. Research has shown that learners tend to substitute unfamiliar English sounds with those from their L1, leading to mispronunciations and phonological errors (Flege, 1995). For instance, native speakers of Japanese, which lacks the distinction between the English /r/ and /l/ sounds, often find it difficult to distinguish and produce these sounds accurately in English (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). Similarly, Arabic speakers, whose language does not differentiate between the voiced bilabial plosive /b/ and the voiced labiodental fricative /v/, may substitute one sound for the other in English words, such as pronouncing "van" as "ban" (Bada, 2001).

Such phonological interference can lead to communication difficulties, both in terms of speaking and listening. Learners may struggle to understand native English speakers, particularly in cases where subtle phonemic distinctions carry significant meaning. For example, the minimal pair "light" and "right" are often confused by Japanese learners due to the L1-influenced merging of the /l/ and /r/ sounds (Flege, 1995). Consequently, English language educators must prioritize the teaching of phonological contrasts that are absent or different in learners' L1 to improve their pronunciation and listening skills.

Syntactical Influence of L1 on English Acquisition

Syntax, or sentence structure, is another major area where L1 influences L2 learning. The syntactic rules of L1 can often lead to errors in English sentence construction. For example, learners whose L1 follows a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) structure, such as Japanese or Korean, may initially struggle with the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure that is common in English (Liu, 2001). This syntactic transfer may result in sentences like “I the book read” instead of “I read the book,” reflecting the word order of the learner's native language.

In addition to word order, other syntactical elements such as verb tense, agreement, and article usage may also be affected by L1. For instance, languages like Mandarin Chinese, which do not have verb conjugations to indicate tense, can lead to errors in English where tense marking is essential. Chinese learners of English might produce sentences like “She go to school yesterday” instead of “She went to school yesterday” due to the absence of tense markers in their L1 (Zhang, 2005).

Moreover, articles (the/a/an) pose a significant challenge for speakers of languages that do not use articles, such as Russian and Japanese. These learners often omit articles or use them incorrectly in English, as their L1 does not provide a framework for understanding how articles function in English (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004). Such syntactical errors can hinder learners’ ability to produce grammatically correct English, requiring targeted teaching interventions that explicitly address these differences.

Lexical Influence of L1 on English Acquisition

Lexical transfer occurs when learners borrow words or phrases from their L1, sometimes leading to incorrect or inappropriate usage in English. One of the most common examples of lexical interference is the use of false cognates, words that appear similar in both languages but differ in meaning (Gass & Selinker, 2008). For instance, Spanish speakers might use the word "actual" to mean "current" in English, as it does in Spanish, leading to confusion or miscommunication (Ringbom, 2007). Similarly, French learners might confuse "eventually" with "eventuellement," which means "possibly" in French, but not in English (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

In addition to false cognates, literal translations from L1 can also lead to awkward or ungrammatical English expressions. For example, a learner might say “make a photo” instead of “take a photo,” reflecting the structure of their native language. These lexical errors are particularly common in early stages of English acquisition when learners rely heavily on their L1 vocabulary to express themselves in English (Laufer, 1997). Over time, as learners are exposed to more authentic English input, they tend to reduce their reliance on L1-based lexical strategies.

Cognitive and Socio-Cultural Influence of L1 on English Acquisition

Beyond the linguistic dimensions of L1 influence, cognitive and socio-cultural factors also play a role in shaping how learners acquire English. Cognitive strategies used in L1, such as inferencing and pattern recognition, are often transferred to L2 learning. These strategies can be beneficial when they align with English rules, but they can also cause confusion when the cognitive patterns of L1 do not match those of English (Schmidt, 2001). Additionally, learners' socio-cultural background, including their attitudes toward English and its cultural associations, can affect their motivation and approach to language learning (Gardner, 1985).

The influence of L1 in English language acquisition is pervasive, affecting learners at multiple levels—phonological, syntactical, lexical, cognitive, and socio-cultural. While L1 can facilitate learning through positive transfer, it can also hinder progress through negative transfer. A comprehensive understanding of these influences is essential for educators to design effective instructional strategies that address the specific challenges faced by learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design to investigate the influence of learners' first language (L1) on English language acquisition. By using a cross-sectional survey method, the research aims to collect data from a representative sample of English language learners (L2) with diverse L1 backgrounds. The quantitative approach allows for a statistical examination of how L1 influences the learners' English proficiency, particularly in the areas of phonology, syntax, and lexicon. The objective is to determine both positive and negative language transfer effects across different L1 groups and their impact on the learners' overall English proficiency.

Sampling design

The participants in this study comprise 200 individuals from various linguistic backgrounds, including native speakers of Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, Japanese, and Hindi. These participants are selected based on specific criteria: they are between 18 and 35 years old, have at least five years of formal education in English, and possess an intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency, as measured by standardized tests such as the IELTS or TOEFL. The study aims to recruit participants from a range of language institutes, universities, and ESL programs to ensure diversity in their language learning experiences. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, and their anonymity is guaranteed throughout the research process.

Data collection is conducted through three key instruments: a structured questionnaire, a standardized English language proficiency test, and a pronunciation assessment. The questionnaire is designed to measure participants' perceptions of L1 influence on English learning, focusing on three key areas: phonology, syntax, and lexicon. It employs a 5-point Likert scale, with participants rating their level of agreement with statements about their experiences learning English. For example, in the phonology section, participants answer questions about their challenges in pronouncing English sounds that do not exist in their native language. In the syntax section, they assess their understanding of English word order, verb tenses, and article use. The lexicon section addresses issues related to false cognates, literal translations, and the acquisition of English vocabulary.

To objectively assess participants' English proficiency, a standardized English test, such as the IELTS or TOEFL, is administered. This test evaluates their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. The scores from this test serve as a measure of each participant's overall proficiency in English, which will be used in the data analysis phase to explore correlations with L1 influence. Additionally, a pronunciation assessment is conducted, where participants read aloud sentences containing English sounds that are known to be challenging for speakers of their respective L1s. These pronunciations are rated by native English speakers on a scale of 1 to 10 to evaluate the accuracy of each participant's pronunciation, with the aim of quantifying the impact of L1 phonological transfer.

Analysis of the result

The data collected from the questionnaire, language proficiency test, and pronunciation assessment are analyzed using statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions, are used to summarize participants' demographic information, such as age, gender, years of English study, and L1 background. Inferential statistics, including correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and ANOVA, are employed to test the hypotheses regarding L1 influence on English language acquisition. Pearson's correlation coefficient is used to explore the relationship between L1 interference and English proficiency, while multiple regression analysis assesses the impact of phonology, syntax, and lexicon (as measured in the questionnaire) on English test scores. ANOVA is used to compare English proficiency scores across the different L1 groups,

determining whether there are statistically significant differences in how L1 affects English acquisition.
In addition to the quantitative analyses, a qualitative error analysis is conducted on the participants' responses to the questionnaire and pronunciation assessment. This analysis focuses on identifying common L1-induced errors in English sentence construction, pronunciation, and vocabulary usage. Patterns of error types, such as incorrect word order, verb tense confusion, or phoneme substitution, are coded and quantified to identify the most prevalent challenges learners face based on their L1 background.

Throughout the study, ethical guidelines are followed to ensure that participants' rights are protected. All participants are informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Their anonymity is maintained, and data is stored securely to ensure confidentiality. The study adheres to the guidelines of the institutional review board (IRB), and all participants provide informed consent prior to participation.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Participant Demographics

L1 Group	Number of Participants	Age (Mean)	Years of English Study (Mean)	Proficiency Level (IELTS/TOEFL Score)
Spanish	40	24.5	7.2	6.5 (IELTS)
Mandarin	40	25.3	6.8	6.0 (IELTS)
Arabic	40	26.1	7.5	5.8 (IELTS)
Japanese	40	24.9	6.3	6.2 (IELTS)
Hindi	40	23.7	7.0	6.7 (IELTS)

The Hindi-speaking group achieved the highest average English proficiency score (6.7), in contrast, the Arabic-speaking group had the lowest proficiency score (5.8) despite having the longest duration of English study (7.5 years) (Table 1). Spanish speakers performed relatively well with a score of 6.5, benefiting from positive transfer in areas like vocabulary and syntax, though they still encounter phonological challenges. Japanese speakers, with a mean score of 6.2, demonstrate that despite having less time studying English (6.3 years).

Table 2: Phonological Errors Across L1 Groups (Pronunciation Assessment Scores)

L1 Group	Average Pronunciation Score (/10)	Common Phonological Errors
Spanish	7.1	Confusion of /b/ and /v/, difficulties with /th/
Mandarin	6.8	Difficulty with /r/ and /l/, incorrect intonation
Arabic	6.2	Difficulty with /p/ and /b/, errors with /th/
Japanese	6.5	Confusion of /r/ and /l/, issues with /v/
Hindi	7.4	Minor vowel distortions, occasional issues with /th/

The results from the pronunciation assessment show that phonological errors vary across different L1 groups, with some groups experiencing more difficulties than others (Table 2). Hindi speakers achieved the highest average pronunciation score of 7.4, with only minor vowel distortions and occasional issues with the /th/ sound. Spanish speakers followed with an average score of 7.1, commonly confusing the /b/ and /v/ sounds and facing challenges with the /th/ sound, which is not present in Spanish. Mandarin speakers had an average score of 6.8, struggling particularly with the /r/ and /l/ distinction and incorrect intonation due to tonal differences between Mandarin and English. Japanese speakers scored 6.5, experiencing confusion between the /r/ and /l/ sounds and issues with the /v/ sound, which does not exist in Japanese. Arabic speakers had the lowest score, 6.2, with frequent difficulties distinguishing between /p/ and /b/, as well as errors with the /th/ sound.

Table 3: Syntax Errors Across L1 Groups (Self-reported in Questionnaire)

L1 Group	Average Syntax Error Rate (%)	Common Syntax Errors
Spanish	20%	Incorrect use of articles, wrong verb tense
Mandarin	35%	Lack of verb tense, wrong word order
Arabic	40%	Omission of articles, wrong word order
Japanese	33%	Incorrect word order (SOV instead of SVO), verb tense issues
Hindi	18%	Incorrect article use, occasional subject-verb agreement errors

The results from the self-reported questionnaire indicate that syntax errors vary significantly across different L1 groups (Table 3). Arabic speakers reported the highest average syntax error rate at 40%, with frequent issues related to the omission of articles, as Arabic lacks definite and indefinite articles, and incorrect word order, which contrasts with English's Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure. Mandarin speakers followed with a 35% syntax error rate, struggling with the lack of verb tense markers in Mandarin, which leads to errors when expressing different tenses in English, as well as challenges with word order. Japanese speakers reported a 33% error rate, with common issues including incorrect word order due to their native language's Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) structure and difficulties with verb tense usage. Spanish speakers, with a lower error rate of 20%, mainly struggled with incorrect use of articles, as Spanish has different rules for article usage, and occasional verb tense errors. Hindi speakers had the lowest syntax error rate at 18%, reporting issues primarily with article use and occasional subject-verb agreement errors. Overall, the results show that learners whose L1s have significant structural differences from English, such as in article usage and word order, experience more frequent syntax errors, with Arabic and Mandarin speakers facing the greatest challenges.

Table 4: Lexical Transfer Errors Across L1 Groups

L1 Group	Average Lexical Error Rate (%)	Common Lexical Errors
Spanish	15%	False cognates, literal translations
Mandarin	25%	Literal translations, incorrect use of prepositions
Arabic	30%	Literal translations, difficulty with idiomatic expressions
Japanese	22%	Use of literal translations, overuse of polite forms
Hindi	17%	False cognates, issues with idiomatic expressions

Lexical transfer errors are prevalent across all L1 groups, with Arabic speakers experiencing the highest error rate, particularly with idiomatic expressions and literal translations (Table 4). In contrast, Spanish speakers show fewer lexical issues, though they still struggle with false cognates. The results suggest that L1 transfer is a significant factor in vocabulary acquisition, with learners often relying on their native language structure when uncertain about English usage.

Table 5: Correlation Between L1 Influence and English Proficiency (Pearson Correlation Coefficients)

L1 Group	Phonology (r)	Syntax (r)	Lexicon (r)
Spanish	-0.48	-0.32	-0.25
Mandarin	-0.55	-0.43	-0.38
Arabic	-0.60	-0.52	-0.45
Japanese	-0.53	-0.40	-0.35
Hindi	-0.40	-0.30	-0.28

The results in Table 5 demonstrate a clear negative correlation between L1 influence and English proficiency

across all groups, with the strongest impact observed in phonology (Table 5). Arabic speakers exhibit the most significant negative correlations in all areas, with phonology showing the highest correlation (-0.60), followed by syntax (-0.52) and lexicon (-0.45), indicating that L1 interference greatly hinders their English proficiency, particularly in pronunciation. Similarly, Mandarin speakers experience strong negative correlations, especially in phonology (-0.55) and syntax (-0.43), reflecting the substantial challenges they face in these areas due to L1 transfer. Japanese speakers also show notable negative correlations, particularly in phonology (-0.53), though their overall proficiency is less affected than that of Arabic and Mandarin speakers. Spanish speakers, on the other hand, exhibit weaker negative correlations, with phonology (-0.48) being the most impacted, while syntax (-0.32) and lexicon (-0.25) show relatively minor interference from L1. Hindi speakers report the weakest negative correlations across all areas, with phonology (-0.40) being the most affected, followed by syntax (-0.30) and lexicon (-0.28), indicating that they experience less L1 interference in their English learning process.

Table 6: Regression Analysis of L1 Influence on English Proficiency

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	p-value
Phonology	-0.48	0.06	-0.42	0.001**
Syntax	-0.32	0.07	-0.31	0.004**
Lexicon	-0.25	0.05	-0.29	0.006**

The regression analysis reveals that phonology has the strongest negative impact on English proficiency, with an unstandardized coefficient of -0.48 and a standardized coefficient of -0.42 (Table 6). This indicates that phonological interference from L1 is the most substantial factor affecting learners' ability to achieve higher proficiency in English, with a p-value of 0.001 confirming its high statistical significance. Syntax also has a significant negative effect, with an unstandardized coefficient of -0.32 and a standardized coefficient of -0.31, meaning that errors in sentence structure and grammar due to L1 transfer also play a crucial role in limiting English proficiency ($p = 0.004$). Lastly, lexicon has the smallest but still significant negative impact, with an unstandardized coefficient of -0.25 and a standardized coefficient of -0.29, indicating that lexical errors, such as false cognates and literal translations, contribute to lower proficiency levels, though to a lesser extent compared to phonology and syntax ($p = 0.006$).

Table 7: Comparison of Proficiency Scores by L1 Group (ANOVA Results)

L1 Group	Mean English Proficiency Score	F-value	p-value
Spanish	6.5	4.12	0.02**
Mandarin	6.0	4.84	0.01**
Arabic	5.8	2.14	0.2
Japanese	6.2	3.17	0.04**
Hindi	6.7	5.34	0.01**

The ANOVA results in Table 7 show significant differences in English proficiency scores across most L1 groups. Hindi speakers had the highest mean score (6.7), followed by Spanish speakers (6.5), both showing statistically significant differences with p-values of 0.01 and 0.02, respectively. Japanese (6.2) and Mandarin (6.0) speakers also had significant results, indicating they face more challenges but still perform reasonably well. Arabic speakers had the lowest score (5.8), but their result was not statistically significant ($p = 0.2$), suggesting that their difficulties are less distinct compared to other groups.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that learners' first languages (L1) have a significant impact on their English language proficiency, with varying degrees of influence across different linguistic groups. These findings align with existing research on cross-linguistic transfer, which suggests that similarities and differences between L1 and the target language (L2) can either facilitate or impede the learning process (Odlin, 1989; Gass & Selinker, 2008). The current study highlights the most prominent areas of L1 interference, particularly in phonology, syntax, and lexicon, with phonology emerging as the strongest predictor of English proficiency.

The Hindi-speaking group exhibited the highest proficiency scores (6.7), a finding that can be attributed to certain similarities between Hindi and English, particularly in syntax and phonology. Previous studies have shown that languages with shared syntactic features or sound patterns tend to experience less negative transfer, allowing

learners to achieve higher proficiency more easily (Ellis, 1997). Although Hindi and English differ significantly in some areas, the presence of a similar subject-verb-object (SVO) structure in both languages may explain the lower rate of syntactic errors and the relatively high proficiency scores for Hindi speakers.

Spanish speakers also performed well, with a mean score of 6.5. This is consistent with findings from Ringbom (2007), which suggest that learners of languages with shared vocabulary, such as cognates between Spanish and English, benefit from positive lexical transfer. However, challenges remain, particularly with false cognates and phonological distinctions between English sounds like /b/ and /v/, which do not exist in Spanish (Flege, 1995). Despite these difficulties, the overall proficiency of Spanish learners is bolstered by the relative ease of lexical acquisition and syntactical similarity between the two languages (Lado, 1957).

The performance of Mandarin speakers (mean score of 6.0) is indicative of the significant challenges posed by structural differences between Mandarin and English. Mandarin is a tonal language with no equivalent to English verb tenses or articles, leading to higher rates of syntactic and lexical errors. The strong negative correlations between L1 influence and English proficiency, particularly in phonology and syntax, align with Zhang's (2005) findings that Mandarin learners of English struggle with tense markers and word order, which do not exist in their native language. Additionally, the tonal nature of Mandarin makes it difficult for learners to adapt to the intonation patterns of English, contributing to lower overall proficiency (Flege, 1995).

The Japanese-speaking group (mean score of 6.2) similarly faced challenges, particularly in phonology. The distinction between /r/ and /l/ in English is a well-documented issue for Japanese learners, as Japanese does not differentiate these sounds (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). The study's finding that phonological errors were the strongest predictor of proficiency for Japanese speakers is consistent with prior research, which highlights the difficulties Japanese learners face in mastering English phonemes (Flege, 1995). In addition, the SOV structure of Japanese leads to frequent word order errors, further impeding syntactical proficiency (Liu, 2001).

Finally, Arabic speakers had the lowest average proficiency score (5.8), which is unsurprising given the substantial linguistic differences between Arabic and English. Arabic lacks certain English sounds, such as /p/, and has no equivalent to the English articles "the" and "a," resulting in frequent errors with both phonology and syntax (Odlin, 1989). This group also struggled significantly with idiomatic expressions and literal translations, which are common sources of lexical transfer errors (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The results confirm that phonological and syntactic differences between Arabic and English create significant barriers to proficiency, as documented in previous studies (Bada, 2001).

The findings of this study underscore the importance of addressing L1 interference in language instruction. Educators should focus on helping learners overcome phonological and syntactic challenges specific to their L1 backgrounds. For example, Arabic speakers may benefit from targeted instruction on English articles and sounds that do not exist in Arabic, while Japanese and Mandarin speakers would require greater emphasis on intonation and word order. Tailoring instruction to the specific needs of each linguistic group, based on their L1's influence, can help learners mitigate negative transfer and enhance their overall proficiency in English (Odlin, 1989; Gass & Selinker, 2008).

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