

Influence of L1 Transfer on the Acquisition of L2 Syntax: A Study Based on the Written Composition of Undergraduate Learners

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In the Sri Lankan context, the majority of the language learners speak Sinhala as their first language (L1) and they are exposed to the English language only once they start their primary education. Before learning the Second Language (L2) these learners already have developed a strong first language system. Further Sinhala and English are structurally different and the students have little or no exposure to the target language outside their learning environment. L1 influence is common in both their oral and written communication. This has resulted in language errors even in the communication of undergraduate students although they are advanced learners who have been learning the language for several years. L1 influence is particularly common in syntax which is one of the basic yet crucial aspects of language. This hinders the teaching-learning process and much of the classroom time is consumed in addressing these errors while the actual focus of learners should be advanced aspects of the language. This poses a severe problem in following their respective degree programs as well because L1 influence severely affects their academic writing. Hence this study was concentrated on analyzing the influence of L1 on undergraduate learners' second language errors through a comparison of the syntax of Sinhala and English. A sample of 50 first-year students following three different degree programs at a government university was selected for the study. They all follow the English language as a compulsory subject during their first year at the university. The students were assigned to write a composition on a given topic which was later examined for errors. 40 errors influenced by L1 were found and they were categorized and analyzed based on their syntactic features. The findings of this study would enable the curriculum designers to devise materials focusing on addressing the L1 influence on second language acquisition.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, L1 Influence, Syntax, Language errors