



POSSIBLE WAYS OF ORGANIZING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING USING LANGUAGE TRANSFER

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Abstract: The main focus of this paper is to examine the role of English as the first foreign language (FL1) in learning German as a second foreign language (FL2) at the university level. The results will provide insight into the possibilities of improving foreign language teaching at tertiary level. More specifically, the aim of this research is to find out to what extent Serbian students, whose mother tongue is Serbian, rely on their knowledge of English as the FL1 while learning German as the FL2. The research was done with first year students (N=140) from the departments class teacher, pre-school teacher and boarding school teacher at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina. A comparative study of positive and negative transfer of English in the process of learning German will be presented in the paper. The paper will outline specific strategies that could be of great help in learning the foreign language, as well as the ideas for the higher education quality improvement. In addition, the authors will point out different issues of cross-linguistic influence in language learning and suggest some ideas for practice improvement in this area.

Key words: English, German, positive transfer, negative transfer.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is on analysing how the knowledge of English as the first foreign language (FL1) affects learning German as a second foreign language (FL2)¹ at the university level. It is known that English and German are similar from the point of their origin, that is, both belong to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. Since they are so closely related, they share many features. In addition, the English language is very present in both Serbian and German media as a major part of popular culture.

¹ We use the terms FL1 and FL2 because we want to make a distinction between the L2 (a foreign language that is learned in the country where that language is the official language) and FL1 and FL2 which are taught only at schools.

However, it is not known in which way we use the knowledge of English for learning German. There are a number of aspects of English that help or interfere with the correct production of German and these will be discussed in the paper.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ENGLISH AND GERMAN – RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Frankfurt International School (2017) points out some differences and similarities between English and German in terms of the alphabet, phonology, grammar and vocabulary. According to these authors, the German alphabet contains the same 26 letters as the English alphabet, plus the umlauted letters: ä, ö, ü, and the ß (*scharfes S* or double-s). German ESL students may have interference problems in class when the teacher spells out words. For example, beginners who learn German as FL2 (after learning English as FL1) commonly write /i/ or /e/ when the teacher says /ü/ or /ö/. In terms of phonology, we may say that the sounds of English and German are similar, as are stress and intonation patterns. However, the /ðə/ sound as in words like the /ðə/, and thing /θɪŋ/ does not exist in German, and many speakers have problems producing such words correctly. German words beginning with a /w/ are pronounced with a /v/. This explains the mispronunciation of English words *we* or *wine* as ‘ve’ and ‘vine’. Further, if we consider the grammar patterns and verb tenses, we notice that there is a significant lack of correspondence between the tenses used in English to convey a particular meaning and those used in German (ibid.). For example, German does not have a continuous tense form, so it is common to hear sentences such as *I can’t come now; I eat my dinner*; or conversely *He is riding his bike to school every day* (ibid.). Another example of the lack of correspondence is the use of the present simple in German where English uses the future with ‘will’. This leads to mistakes such as: *I tell him when I see him*. In addition, learners of German as the FL2 face a common problem of choosing a correct tense to talk about the past. For example, German learners use the past simple tense (*das Perfekt*) to talk about past events: *Dann habe ich ein Bier getrunken*. The same tense, when used in English is produced in the following incorrect form: *Then I have drunk a beer* (ibid.). Further, if we look at the grammar features, we may notice that German has three features of word order that do not exist in English: firstly, the main verb must be the second element in the independent clause (ibid.). This often requires an inversion of the subject and a verb. For example: *Manchmal komme ich mit dem Bus in die Schule*. (*Sometimes I come to school by bus*). Secondly, the past participle must always be the last element in the independent clause. For example, *Ich habe ihn nicht gesehen*.

(*I have not seen him.*). Thirdly, the main verb with its modal verb must constitute the last element in the dependent clause. For example, *Sie fragte mich, ob ich den Film schon gesehen hätte.* (*She asked me if I had already seen the film.*) (ibid.). Furthermore, similarities in vocabulary come from the same origin of the two languages – the Indo-European one. The similarities of lexis that can be mentioned here are given in the following way German/English: *Hand/hand*, *Wind/wind*, *Schwein/swine*, *hart/hard*, *helfen/help*, *Winter/winter*, *Haus/house*, *trinken/drink* etc. According to Mayer (2017), a basic word order is similar, e.g. *Ich trinke Tee*/I drink tea, or in case of modal verbs, *Sie muss lernen*/She must learn. Also, if we explore the declension of verbs (*singen-sang-gesungen* and *sing-sang-sung*), we may notice similarities here, too. However, many words do not have the same meaning, i.e. they are ‘false friends’. For example, a German word ‘also’ means ‘so’ in English; a German word *aktuell* means ‘current’ not actual, a German word *bekommen* means ‘get, receive’ while in English we have ‘become’ meaning ‘to start, to be’, etc. Then again, nouns in German are capitalized, which often misleads students to write the English nouns with capital letters or write the German nouns without a capital letter at the beginning.

On the basis of the previously said, we intend to present the research that will give an outline of both positive and negative transfer in learning the FL1 and FL2 with adult learners. Therefore, the present paper is intended to give a contribution to a cross-linguistic influence in learning a second foreign language with the focus on Serbian students at the tertiary level, in such cases when their first foreign language is English (FL1) and their second foreign language is German (FL2).

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this research we have chosen a mixed-method research design in order to provide a better understanding of the problem of the positive and negative transfer from the FL1 to FL2. A mixed-method research provides more comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem and helps answer questions that cannot be answered by qualitative or quantitative approaches alone (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative data consists of open-ended information that the researcher gathers through questionnaires or interviews with the participants. In general, open-ended questions in the questionnaire allow the participants to supply answers in their own words.

The paper will focus more on the qualitative data because these can provide more in-depth answers such as why and how a student uses a certain learning strategy to solve a language task, not just on ‘what’, ‘where’ or

'when', as the data presented in numbers reveal. The analysis of the qualitative data were grouped into two major categories of positive and negative transfer for each specific language category: lexis, grammar and set phrases or idioms.

RESEARCH RESPONDENTS, INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURE

A sample of 140 students were examined using the questions given in the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) designed specifically for this purpose. The sample included male (N=25) and female (N=115) first and second-year students at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina from the class teacher, pre-school teacher and boarding school teacher departments. Students at the Faculty of Education in Jagodina are adult learners (between 19 and 21 years of age) who study English and German as foreign languages and their mother tongue is Serbian. All the participants started learning English from the first grade of primary school (at the age of 7) and started learning German as the second foreign language in the secondary school (at the age of 16). The questionnaire was completed in the presence of two researchers, who gave students a chance to ask questions and clarifications of the language tasks. Any comprehension problems were clarified with the help of an English and a German teacher – the authors of this paper.

The instrument (English version - see Appendix 1) that was used in the study was a questionnaire consisting of three parts. The questionnaire was originally given in Serbian (students' mother tongue) because we wanted to make sure that all the participants understood the questions.

The Questionnaire examined how students understand the set phrases and idioms which are similar in English and German, but very different when compared to the Serbian ones. Considering the fact that English and German are of Anglo-Saxon origin, which accounts for the numerous examples of phrases overlapping, students did this task very successfully.

Hence, these groups of questions were examined and the results of the usage of lexis, grammar and set phrases or idioms will be presented later in the paper having in mind both positive and negative transfer of English as the FL1 in the process of learning German as the FL2.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The main focus of this study is to show that there is more positive transfer influence in the process of learning German as the second foreign language (FL2).

A general research question we aimed to answer was - what was the level of positive and negative transfer of English as the FL1 in the process of learning German as FL2 in terms of vocabulary, grammar and set phrases or idioms. In the present paper, these were the two specific research questions the authors wanted to answer: 1) In which cases may we notice the positive transfer of the English language knowledge to the acquisition of German lexis, grammar and set phrases? 2) In which cases may we notice the negative transfer of the English language knowledge to the acquisition of German lexis, grammar and set phrases?

In addition, the purpose of this research was also to suggest possible ways of teaching/learning improvement for university learners who are less successful in learning the second foreign language (Cirkovic-Miladinovic, 2014a). In this way it would be possible to suggest some learning strategies for organizing and storing information, learning grammar and vocabulary, and to encourage students to consider which strategies work best for them in learning German as the FL2 (ibid.).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We present the data obtained with the help of the questionnaires as follows: both positive and negative transfer of English to learning German are presented in terms of lexis, grammar and set phrases or idioms. The data are analysed qualitatively giving the percentage for both positive and negative transfer as well for the purpose of comparison and a confirmation or a disproof of the main hypothesis.

Results of the positive and negative transfer in terms of lexis

Positive transfer was noticed in the following examples: *Die Maus ist groß* - in case of words *die Maus* (German) and *mouse* (British English), the English word is pronounced in the same way but is spelled differently, so the difference is at the orthographic level. Students solved the task on the basis of phonological similarity of the mentioned words. Additionally, the third person singular of the English verb helped them infer the meaning of the German verb *ist*. The Mother-Tongue interference can be observed in the lack of the definite article *the* in students' translation of this sentence into English (for example in Serbian: *Miš je veliki*, literally translated into English it would be: Mouse is big). The question was answered 100% correctly.

The sentence *Er ist ein guter Koch* was solved by taking into account the similarities in pronouncing the German noun *der Koch* and the English noun

cook. There is an evident lack of voice change /h/ into /k/, which could be explained by the voice changes that happen in the group of Indo-European languages. If we look at the percentage of positive and negative transfer, we notice that 20% of students used the definite article 'the' before the noun *book*, 12% of students used the definite pronoun 'this' and only 8% of the participants used the indefinite article 'a'. The majority of students (60%) used zero article. The term zero article refers to noun phrases that contain no articles, definite or indefinite. English, like many other languages, does not require an article in plural noun phrases with a generic reference, a reference to a general class of things. There are a number of common fixed expressions used with certain prepositions involving everyday time and place nouns where zero article is required. In this case, students explained their choice for using a zero article with a noun *book* because of the rule "we use zero article with uncountable and plural nouns when we talk generally about people or things (such as: *Formal education in Britain begins when children reach the age of five*) or with objects when we want to talk about them in general (such as *school* and *university* in the following example: *At university I never bother with lunch, but always eat breakfast and supper. At school I always ate lunch and dinner, but never breakfast.*)"

In the example, '*Am Freitag spielen wir oft Fußball*' students translated the sentence based on the morphological and phonological similarity of the words in the sentence such as *frei + der Tag = der Freitag*...fri + day = Friday. All participants (N=140) solved the task successfully. The German uncountable noun *der Fußball* is orthographically similar to the English word *football*. In this task, students tended to pronounce these two words in the same way because of their similarity in spelling: 92 students (76.66%) pronounced these two words identically. Consequently, we may notice the negative transfer in this case.

In the next example '*Wir haben das Gift*' personal pronouns *wir* and *we* point out to the phonological similarity, so all the students (100%) recognized the meaning. On the other hand, the word *das Gift* and *the gift* are often mistaken for each other because they are phonologically the same, so this example represents the negative transfer commonly known as 'false friends'. 92% of students thought that *das Gift* (*the present*) means the same as the English word *the gift* (Longman dictionary of contemporary English 2005).

The next sentence '*Mein Job ist Kochen*', was successfully translated by 95% of students. The determinatives *mein* and *my* mean the same and are pronounced similarly. In addition, the German noun *der Job* is borrowed from the English language and is the same in spelling and pronunciation. Positive transfer was also proved in this example in 100% of students' answers. Correspondingly, students noticed a similarity in meaning and form

of the German noun *das Kochen* and the English gerund *cooking* which is also considered a noun with the same form as the present participle of a verb *to cook*.

The positive transfer could be seen in the sentences 6, 7, 8, 9 and 12 (see the Appendix 1) in cases of cardinal numbers *sechs*-six, *vier*-four. The same was true for the adjectives *nett*-neat, *jung*-young, *fantastisch*-fantastic, verbs *trinken* – drink, nouns *der Raum*-room, *das Glas*-glas or in the case of adverbs *oft*-often. 100% of students solved the task in all of these examples and noticed a similarity in the meanings of the mentioned words. Modal verbs, German *kann* /kan/ and English *can* /kæn/, share the same meaning but there is a difference at the orthographical and phonological levels. This feature did not get in the way of students' successfully solving the task with 100% of accuracy.

Positive transfer occurred also in the sentence number 12, containing pairs of adjectives, German *sonnig* and English *sunny*. We may notice a similarity at the word formation level: both words are formed of the nouns *die Sonne* and the sun and generative endings -ig and -y for forming adjectives (*Sonn+ig=sonnig* and *sun+y=sunny*). Furthermore, students noticed phonological similarities and similarities in meaning in the following pairs of words: *Vater*-father, *Mutter*-mother, *Bruder*-brother, *Schwester*-sister. We also determined that students noticed a phonological similarity between the German verb *kommen* and the English verb *come* although there is not a possibility to use a continuous tense of verbs in German (92% of students used continuous tense *coming* while 8% of students used it as a bare infinitive *come*).

There were examples of the negative transfer in the questionnaire. In the sentence number 15, students (92%) thought that the German word *der Brand* (meaning *the fire*) means the same as the English word *brand*. Students explained this mistake by pointing out that these two words are spelled the same and their pronunciation is similar. Participants (95%) made a mistake in the example number 10 (*Der Tag ist Mist*) and thought that the German word which denotes rubbish has the same meaning as the English noun *mist/fog*. The next sentence, number 11 (*Wo bist du?*) also represents a negative transfer example. Namely, all students (100%) made a mistake and thought that the German interrogative pronoun *wo* (meaning *where*) is similar at the orthographical level with *who* which is the interrogative pronoun used to ask about a particular person.

The results have shown that students used their knowledge of English in the majority of examples and solved the tasks successfully. Students also used inductive and deductive ways of reasoning by solving the tasks, because

they were in the position to compare and analyse groups of words or just the words in three languages concluding the rules and patterns at the same time (Rubin 1981, cited in Ćirković-Miladinović, 2014b: 13). It is interesting to consider at this point that students were very successful in solving the tasks with German vocabulary using their English knowledge to guess the meaning of the given words and sentences. Based on the results from the questionnaire, we may conclude that positive transfer occurred in 9 out of 15 sentences, meaning that students successfully completed the task in 69.24% of examples while only in 4 sentences (30.76%) we encountered problems with the negative transfer.

Results of the positive and negative transfer in terms of grammar

In the next part (B) of the questionnaire, participants were given the sentences to translate them from Serbian into German and to explain what helped them to do that correctly.

In terms of adjective comparison, students recognized the similarity in comparing adjectives in German and English. The comparative is formed in both languages by adding -er to the positive form, for example, in German *lang + er = länger* whereas in English *long + er = longer*, *jung + er = jünger* vs. *young + er = younger*. In addition, it was noticed that students understood German quantifier *zu* in 50% of cases, because of the phonological similarity between the mentioned quantifiers and the English quantifier *too*. Students explained the usage of the German phrase *so gut* (22.5% of students used it properly in translation) relying on the familiar English phrase *so good*.

Since German sentences have a fixed word order, negative transfer was expected particularly in the sentences with modal verbs, for instance, *Ich kann eine Torte machen*, whereas in English the infinitive comes right after the modal (*I can make a cake*). Unexpectedly, all students (100%) put the infinitive in the German sentence in the proper place. As previously stated, when it comes to making questions and taking care of the word order in this task, students solved correctly (again 100% of students) the following task and put the auxiliary verb in the first place followed by a proper pronoun and then an adjective: *Ist es warm?* vs. *Is it warm?*

When it comes to the verbs, the results from the questionnaire have showed that the examined students (63%) had problems translating the Serbian sentence *Ja sam skuvala supu*. [transl. I have cooked the soup] into German and used past simple tense or Präteritum (*Ich kochte die Suppe*) instead of *Ich habe die Suppe gekocht* in German Perfect. This pointed out the negative transfer from the mother tongue and the FL1 to the knowledge of

verb tenses of the FL2. This could be explained by the fact that both English and German refer to past events using the simple past tense and the present perfect tense. The perfect past tense is called *Perfekt* in German, but it is important to understand that although the German *Perfekt* is considered the closest equivalent of the present perfect in English in terms of its structure, in fact, there are some notable differences in the ways each language uses this tense ("English Present Perfect," 2017). What the English Present Perfect and the German *Perfekt* have in common are compound tenses, formed with an auxiliary verb and the past participle (ibid.). This auxiliary verb is usually *to have* (*haben*) and sometimes, in German, *to be* (*sein*). The English Present Perfect refers to an action or a state that began in the past and continues into the present, whereas the German *Perfekt* is usually used to speak about completed states and actions (ibid.)

Prepositions and prepositional phrases showed that students made mistakes in using the German preposition *an* [English *on*] denoting the position of the surface on which something is placed, so they used German *auf* in the same way as they would use English *on* in the phrase 'on the wall', although the correct form should be *Das Bild ist an der Wand*. Students explained this by saying that in English when something is on a place, it has contact with a surface, i.e. there is no restriction concerning the position of a surface. It is evident here that negative transfer occurred and prevented students (45%) from solving the task correctly.

In terms of possessive pronouns, we could notice that students had problems with the German gender. Namely, 55% of students used the possessive article *dein* without the necessary change of the gender (students used the male gender for *dein Vater* and *dein Tanta* instead of the male *dein Vater* and the female gender for *deine Tante*). Students reported that this was difficult for them because in English they did not have to consider the gender of the possessive pronoun, e.g. when they say *my grandfather* or *my grandmother*.

In the sentence *Ich liebe ihn nicht*, if we take into account the usage of the negative verb forms and negations, it may be noticed that the negations in the German and in English languages come right after the verb (*I do not love him*). So the students were very successful in this task and only 4% of them made mistakes. Therefore, it could be said that 96% of students' knowledge of using the negations in German and English was well-founded.

To sum up, the obtained results revealed that in terms of grammar there is more negative than positive transfer in case of surveyed students. Negative transfer (in 75% of answers) occurred in cases where the students had to use the definite article. In such cases, students made mistakes in 63% of answers because they did not use the proper past tense in German (FL2)

because of the interference of the English (FL1) past tense form. There was also the issue of the noun gender, that is, 55% of students made a mistake using German possessive pronouns which should have been used in a proper gender, unlike the English pronouns. However, positive transfer was evident in the cases of the word order in sentences (100% of students solved this task). 55% of students used the preposition *on* properly and 96% of students were successful in using the negation of verb forms. Besides German articles, students reported that the grammar category of verb tenses was the most difficult for them in both their mother tongue and in English.

Results of the positive and negative transfer in terms of set phrases and idioms

The third part of the questionnaire was created for the purpose of testing students' abilities to use the knowledge of the English vocabulary and set phrases and to complete German sentences and German set phrases and idioms. Idioms represent a set of words that has a special meaning that is different from the ordinary meaning of each separate word (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2005) and because of this specific structure it is the category that students have to memorize. In terms of the set phrases, students were 100% successful and realised that the English idiom 'break the ice' (meaning to be afraid of something) is the same as German *Eis brechen*, then English *strong as a lion* (meaning a very strong person) is the same as German *stark wie ein Löwe*, and also English *to be on/off* (to turn on or to turn off some electrical device) is the same as German *sein an* or *sein aus*.

Besides the set phrases, we wanted to examine students' knowledge of collocations that are characterized by usual lexical connections but not as strong as in idioms (Bugarski, 2009:200). The data showed that students were aware of the collocations that were tested in the questionnaire and these were the following: He is 6 years old → *Er ist 6 Jahre alt*; Take a second street left please → *Nimm bitte die zweite Straße links*; Take a seat please → *Nimm bitte Platz*; How old are you? → *Wie alt bist du?* On the contrary, all students (100%) had problems in the example number 5 (*Du bist 21 und nächstes Jahr ____ ich 21 Jahre alt.*) because they used the future tense of the verb to be (I will be 21 next year) although in German it should be *Ich werde 21 nächstes Jahr*, where the verb *werden* is used in the present and not in the future tense.

According to the data from this part of the questionnaire, we may conclude that there were more positive than negative transfer occurrences and that students used their knowledge of the English set phrases and idioms

and successfully solved the tasks in 90% of examples (only one sentence out of 10 was problematic).

The above findings support the hypothesis that students at the university level were successful at recognising cross-linguistic similarities between English and German and were able to utilise this knowledge when discovering the meaning of less known German vocabulary items. This research proved that there was more positive than negative transfer in the case of the examined students.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The data obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews data (think-aloud students' answers) provides an optimistic picture – students reported that they became more aware of the similarities and the differences among the three languages, Serbian, English and German. In order to elucidate this finding, we may refer to Groseva's (1998) claim that it is the FL1, which is consciously learnt and analysed, rather than the L1, which serves as the basis for further comparisons when learning an additional language.

Using compensation strategies by the examined students was very successful and proved that university students were able to deal with the given tasks. In line with the previously said, it could be stated that learner strategy research in the language classroom seemed to be one of the important parts of the teacher's role. Thereupon, if teachers are willing to be researches in their own classroom then they will be in position to find out possible language learning problems of their learners and solutions for them (Cirkovic-Miladinovic, 2014b). The teacher's help would increase success in students' learning and learning outcomes will be of higher quality overall. Success in learning FL1 and FL2 will increase students' motivation for further foreign language learning. Motivation about the language is found to be of particular importance in predicting outcomes, along with fun activities and activities that promote language use in accordance with students' preferences and interests (Bernard, 2010). According to Fen Ng and Kiat Ng (2015: 104) motivation is a crucial factor in learning the second language and it is influenced by different variables like personality and attitudes of learners, their learning styles and the power of a relationship between two foreign languages. In other words, these variables are potential factors of enhancing learners' motivation in FL1 and FL2 learning.

Balla's (2013: 87) findings indicate that L3 German learners attribute greater facilitating roles to their FL1 English than to their L1 Hungarian. She believes that the facilitation can be enhanced with special instruction that

compares the learners' FL1 and FL2. The results of her study show that the comparative instruction has different roles at the various stages of instruction, and that it facilitates FL2 learning especially at an earlier stage of instruction. On the other hand, our research shows that examined students at the university level are more skilled to rely on their FL1 knowledge and that the longer study period means a better vocabulary and set phrases knowledge, proving that there was more of the positive than negative transfer in the examined process.

Further research into this subject is essential so that the positive influence of the FL1 English is maximised while the interference with the FL2 German is minimised. This research may contribute to the field of FL learning by providing an insight into the situation where two foreign languages are learned and also lead to developing special learning materials for this purpose. It would be of great importance if this research might initiate a discussion among both foreign language teachers and teacher trainers for the benefit of foreign language learners at university and all other levels.

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