

Transfer in Early Multilingual Acquisition

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Chapter Objectives

- Defining transfer and distinguishing between positive and negative instances of transfer
- Understanding the role of transfer in the acquisition process
- Discussing positive transfer as a fruitful strategy in the learning process
- Interpreting errors not necessarily as instances of negative transfer but as a creative strategy
- Suggesting possible ways of reacting to language transfer in the teaching process

Language Transfer: Old Misconceptions, New Definitions

Language learning is often surrounded by misconceptions, one of the most persistent being the belief that second or foreign language acquisition (L2, from now on) is entirely shaped by the learner's first language (L1, from now on). According to this view, structural similarities between the two languages should result in error-free learning, while structural differences would inevitably lead to mistakes. However, linguistic research has challenged this assumption, demonstrating that language transfer is a more complex phenomenon. In this chapter, we will explore how modern research has debunked this myth and how an understanding of both positive and negative transfer can provide valuable insights for plurilingual education.

Interpreting Transfer in Language Acquisition: Does the Contrastive Hypothesis Still Hold?

The following short dialogue took place between a four-year-old Italian girl (G) who was involved in a German language contact programme in a kindergarten in Trentino, a province in northern Italy, and the teacher (T):

- (1) T: *Was trinkst du gerade?* (What are you drinking?)
G: *Della Wasser.* (Della [some, in Italian] water.)
T: *Dein blaues Glas ist schön.* (Your blue glass is nice.)
G: *Ich nein cannuccia blau* (I no cannuccia [straw, in Italian] blue.)

Anyone reading this dialogue – particularly the last line – will notice that the girl’s sentence follows the word order of her L1, Italian. Not only is the adjective *blau* not declined (unlike in the teacher’s German sentence: *dein blaues Glas*), but it is also placed after the noun, as in Italian (*la cannuccia blu*). The negation is also structured according to Italian grammar: instead of the correct German negation *nicht* (‘not’), the girl uses *nein* (‘no’) immediately after the subject, mirroring the Italian structure *io non ho la cannuccia blu* (‘I don’t have the blue straw’). Additionally, the verb is omitted entirely. The most immediate conclusion is that the child is acquiring the foreign language based on the structural principles of her first language. In other words, the new language appears to be embedded within the framework of her native Italian.

This is the basis of the contrastive hypothesis on L2 acquisition: from this perspective, the brain would be linguistically dominated by the first language already at an early age (four years old, in the example above), when children are still processing their L1.

Actually, there are other explanations for this phenomenon – perhaps less immediate, but more strongly supported by empirical data. The first hypothesis is that language development does not occur ‘by contrast,’ i.e. through the more or less spontaneous integration of the foreign or second language into the first language system, but that, on the contrary, the first language is neither the cause nor the origin of the first expressions in the foreign language. Instead, it can be assumed that the child, in this case, is already within a process of linguistic development that is subject to certain rules. The lexical transfer, under these conditions, of the word *straw* from the first language, denotes not only that the child lacks that lexical element in the foreign language, but also her intention to express a meaning with the linguistic resources available to her. While this is undoubtedly an instance of transfer, our focus should shift away from non-target-like structures and instead consider the child’s intent and effort to express her thoughts in an authentic interaction with the teacher. The real question, then, is: what factors induce transfer?

We know that not all transfers are equal – some are positive, while others are negative. We speak of a negative transfer when structures from the L1 are carried over into L2 due to gaps in L2 knowledge, either consciously

or unconsciously. In this case, transfer is often referred to as interference. In the example above, the child uses L1 structures as a strategy to explore the new language system, much like in the L1 acquisition process. The child demonstrates an ability to navigate the new language, German; otherwise, she would not explicitly express the subject *ich*, as this is not required in her L1, Italian. This suggests that while she draws on her L1 when needed, she has already internalised a key syntactic feature – overt pronominal subject – where German (L2) differs from Italian (L1).

Which Factors Lead Speakers to Transfer?

No one denies that L1 transfer occurs in L2 learning. The crucial question is: what factors constrain transfer? Every learner, including children, discovers features of the L2 through the input they receive, process them based on the structures they already know, and store them as suitable for their L2 production. Unless they receive further input that contradicts their assumptions, learners tend to assume that the L2 functions like the L1 – a phenomenon known as ‘transfer to somewhere’ (Andersen, 1983).

The distinction between a communicative strategy and a learning strategy is subtle, as communication in the L2 can play a key role in acquisition. For this reason, the term *learner strategy* (McDonough, 1999) is often preferred over general learning strategies. Thus, the contrastive hypothesis cannot be regarded as absolutely true; rather, it serves as a starting point in the learning process. If supported by broad, rich, and authentic input, it corresponds to the initial stage of L2 acquisition. Once this stage is surpassed, acquisition proceeds in sequences similar to those of L1 acquisition, albeit with a time lag. According to Tracy (2008), this delay is approximately one year compared to the L1 acquisition phases.

From a strictly cognitive perspective, one can view this phase as a period in which the L2 is not yet fully integrated or automatised, in Edmondson’s (1999) sense. In other words, the new language has not yet been processed or proceduralised (Andersen, 1983). At this stage, the learner can only access the L2 in a controlled manner. Since readiness for L2 use depends heavily on communicative situations, the learner’s performance may vary. Over time, the learner may recognise the inadequacy of their own production if conditions permit. This type of transfer is therefore called *procedural* because it marks a specific stage in the acquisition process and represents a step toward proceduralisation – provided that communicative conditions allow for further development.

In this case, we observe a cognitive transfer, as the child has not yet fully

internalised the structures of the second language (L2). Frequently, the principles underlying this transfer stem from the idea that ‘the initial state of L2 acquisition is the final state of L1 acquisition’ (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996, p. 40). From this perspective, the phenomenon does not align with the contrastive hypothesis. Instead, it occurs at a stage when L1 acquisition has been completed – resulting in the automatisisation and proceduralisation of L1 – but before the development of metalinguistic competence. According to Oerter (2000), this competence typically emerges around the ages of 7–8, meaning that younger children have not yet reached this stage.

Last but not least, there is also the possibility of a transfer that cannot be explained by reference to L1. Kellerman (1995) refers to this as ‘transfer from nowhere:’ transfer often occurs on the basis of the relative transparency or markedness of linguistic structures. For example, studies on Swedish learners acquiring German have shown unexpected transfer patterns. Although Swedish and German share the same verb-second word order, learners sometimes produce structures influenced by English, which follows a subject-verb-object order, as exemplified in (2):

- (2) a. Swedish: *Idag äter jag glass.*
b. German: *Heute esse ich ein Eis.*
c. English: *Today eat I icecream.
d. Learner’s production: **Heute ich esse ein Eis.*
e. Correct English: Today I eat icecream.

Whether this learner’s production was directly influenced by English remains uncertain – this is one of the hypotheses in multilingual transfer research. However, what is certain is that the analogy between the target language (German) and the L1 (Swedish) does not necessarily lead to transfer, as the contrastive hypothesis would predict. This suggests that other explanatory factors are at play. Indeed, multiple typologies of transfer exist, and most indicate that children have already activated the acquisition process.

How Can We Facilitate L2 Learning Or Acquisition in Case of a Transfer?

How should a teacher respond to L1 transfer to support a child’s interaction in L2? As we have seen, transfer reveals two key facts:

1. The child is motivated to produce output in L2 within a meaningful context – in our case, an authentic, real-time interaction with an adult who speaks a different language.
2. The child lacks certain elements of L2 necessary for full interaction.

From a pedagogical perspective, the teacher's primary focus lies on the first point. Rather than correcting the child or discouraging transfer, the teacher should ensure that the interaction continues. Maintaining engagement is crucial, as it fosters motivation and provides opportunities for further language exposure. This can be achieved through various strategies, such as:

- Prompting with a follow-up question: 'Oh, you don't have a blue straw? Do you like blue straws? Or do you prefer yellow ones?'
- Providing an observation: 'I have a red straw, but I don't have a blue glass.'
- Confirming with a response: 'No, you don't, indeed. You have a red straw.'

By responding in this way, the teacher sustains the dialogue initiated by the child, provides correct and meaningful L2 input, and supports the child's language processing. This interactive approach ensures that the child remains engaged, encouraged, and exposed to rich linguistic input, all of which are essential for successful L2 acquisition.

Reflection Point

1. Discuss transfer episodes that you have personally experienced or observed. How did they manifest, and what impact did they have on communication?
2. Do you occasionally experience interference from your first language when speaking a second language, or from the second language when using a third?
3. Observe and analyse common features of a foreign or second language that differ from children's L1 but are typically processed and incorporated by them in their language development.

All That Glitters Is Not Transfer

Assessing students' L2 output through the lens of L1 transfer is often tempting. Yet this can be a fairly controversial matter. Over around fifty years of research in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) it has become clear that, with regard to grammatical development, all learners undergo the same obligatory, cognitively-founded developmental stages, regardless of factors such as L1 background, L2 complexity, age of exposure to the L2, or learning environment. Following Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998), such stages can be summarised as in (3) with reference to English L2 grammar.

- (3) a. I play football
 b. I like cats/Mum working/Peter play tennis?

- c. I have three black cats/Mum have worked/Do Peter play tennis?
- d. Is mum home?/Can Peter sing?
- e. Mum loves rice/Why are you laughing?
- f. I suggest that she go home/I wonder why you are laughing

Nevertheless, while all learners follow this universal developmental sequence, their rate of progression and level of accuracy may vary. Who will learn English L2 more quickly? And who will achieve greater accuracy? The factors at play here are many and varied, and crucial among them is the proximity between L1 and L2. However, while such factors can accelerate learning or enhance accuracy, they do not alter the fundamental order of development.

Producing a deviant L2 form that resembles the L1 pattern is therefore not an automatic sign of transfer. For example, if an English student of L2 Italian, a null-subject language, formulates a question as in (4), using an unnecessary subject (*tu* 'you'), does this mean that they are straightforwardly translating their L1 English structure? Or are they simply going through an earlier universal developmental stage?

(4) *Cosa tu vuoi?* (What you want?)

While it may seem tempting to assume that the influence of the L1 is more significant in this case, extensive SLA research on the acquisition of pronominal subjects suggests otherwise. Even at advanced levels of proficiency, many learners tend to oversupply overt subjects in the target L2, regardless of the typological characteristics of the L1 (i.e. whether or not the L1 allows null subjects).

In this section, we will focus on a number of cases in which, contrary to what one may expect at first sight, transfer does not occur. On the one hand, we will show how typological proximity (i.e. the presence of similar, if not identical, structures between L1 and L2) does not automatically result in positive transfer, nor does it guarantee the immediate acquisition of the L2 structure. On the other hand, we will examine the reverse scenario, showing that typological distance (i.e. the presence of substantially different structures in the two languages) does not necessarily lead to negative transfer or hinder the learning process.

L1–L2 Proximity without Positive Transfer

Within the framework of Processability Theory, the Developmentally Moderated Transfer Hypothesis (Pienemann et al., 2005) predicts that:

- transfer from the L1 is only partial, meaning that the initial stage of L2 learning does not coincide with the final L1 stage;
- learners can transfer a structure from their L1 only when they are developmentally ready to produce it.

Håkansson et al. (2002) have proved this hypothesis by conducting a cross-sectional study on 20 Swedish L1 learners studying English L2 and focusing on the acquisition of the verb-second (V2) structure. As anticipated in the section ‘Which factors lead speakers to transfer?’, this structure is present in both Swedish and German. In both languages, the fronting of adverbials for discourse and pragmatic reasons entails that the subject comes immediately after the verb, as illustrated in (5).

(5) a. Swedish	<i>Idar</i>	<i>dricker</i>	<i>Peter</i>	<i>mjök</i>
b. German	<i>Heute</i>	<i>trinkt</i>	<i>Peter</i>	<i>Milch</i>
	Today	drinks	Peter	milk

Given such structural similarity, it may seem reasonable to expect that all Swedish L1 learners who took part in the study can correctly produce the V2 structure in German L2. However, the findings showed the opposite: only 5 out of 20 learners provided positive evidence of this structure. Among the remaining 15 students, 6 never initiated their sentences with a time or place adverbial, and 9 produced the incorrect adjunct-subject-verb order.

Håkansson et al. (2002) argue that the V2 structure is a complex one, which is expected to emerge at Stage 4 (out of a total of 6 hypothesised stages) along the developmental sequence predicted by Processability Theory. For this reason, learners who are still at lower stages cannot produce this structure in German L2, even though the same structure exists in Swedish L1. In order to transfer that structure, learners must be developmentally ready to acquire it.

Along similar lines, Artoni and Magnani (2021) have looked at the acquisition of case in Russian L2 by adult learners divided into three groups based on their L1: (a) learners with L1 Italian, a language with no case marking on nouns; (b) learners from a non-Slavic L1 with a case system that is radically different from the Russian one (e.g. Azeri and Georgian); (c) learners from a Slavic L1 with a case system akin to the Russian one (e.g. Serbian, Slovak).

Following Processability Theory’s developmental hierarchy, Artoni and Magnani (2021) hypothesise that learners will learn the opposition between nominative and accusative first only based on positional criteria, then also

based on functional criteria, regardless of word order constraints, as exemplified in (6).

(6) *Positional case marking:*

pre-verbal noun = nominative case

post-verbal noun = accusative case

Functional case marking:

subject (regardless of its position) = nominative case

object (regardless of its position) = accusative case

Results show that all learners across three groups, i.e. irrespectively of their L1 background, go through this implicational sequence. However, accuracy rates are lower for Italian L1 learners compared to those from an L1 that has case marking; and among the latter, learners from a Slavic L1 background perform better than others. This suggests that while the L1 does influence the L2 outcome, it does not alter the developmental sequence. In other words, learners from an L1 with case will not transfer this structure to the L2 unless they are developmentally ready to do so.

L1–L2 Distance without Negative Transfer

To conclude this section, we report on the results of a study by Kawaguchi (2002), who has investigated the acquisition of Japanese L2 syntax by two Australian adult learners tested longitudinally, i.e. at four subsequent times during their process of L2 learning.

From a syntactic point of view, English and Japanese are typologically different. Whereas the canonical word order in English is subject-verb-object (SVO), in Japanese it is subject-object-verb (SOV). Thus, if we assumed a full transfer hypothesis, as suggested by Schwartz and Sprouse (1996), we should expect both learners to initially overextend the English L1 pattern, and hence produce incorrect SVO sentences in Japanese L2. On the other hand, a cognitively founded framework such as Processability Theory would predict that canonical word order, regardless of the L2, is the least costly choice in terms of processing procedures, and hence it is assumed to emerge early in learners' interlanguage.

The results of Kawaguchi's (2002) study completely falsify the full transfer hypothesis and provide evidence in favour of the Processability Theory's hierarchy. In particular, Kawaguchi (2002) finds that none of the learners in her study ever produce verbs in a non-final position, even at initial stages of interlanguage. This is an important indicator that, when learners are cogni-

tively ready to produce a certain structure, the typological distance between L1 and L2 does not necessarily hinder the learning process.

All That Transfers Is Not Glitter

Of course, there are contexts in which transfer does occur, i.e. when learners are developmentally ready. In some cases, the outcome will be positive, in others, it will not. Concrete language material, abstract structures, and meanings can be transferred from one language to another. In the case of language material (sounds, words), we talk about matter borrowing, with abstract structures at the syntactic or prosodic level about pattern borrowing, and the transfer of meanings is usually referred to as semantic transfer (Riehl, 2014, p. 108).

However, as we will show, in some cases, what is transferred can be at a more abstract representational level rather than at the superficial realisation of the sentence. In other words, some instances of transfer may not be visible directly in learners' output, and it is the job of linguistic research to carefully analyse learners' productions.

L1–L2 Proximity with Positive Transfer

Positive transfer occurs at different linguistic levels, including grammar and lexicon. It is important to foster positive transfer both at the receptive and productive level. As regards reception, lexical similarities between Germanic, Romance or Slavic languages can facilitate comprehension. Words with the same roots that have a similar sound and (nearly) the same meaning are called cognates. They are the basis of intercomprehension between languages belonging to the same family, i.e. of the ability to understand a word's meaning relying on a similar word in a different language (Hufeisen & Marx, 2014).

For children with German as a first language, it will thus be easy to understand and acquire certain words in English L2 belonging to the semantic field of family members, colours and animals such as *brother* (Ger. *Bruder*), *green* (Ger. *grün*), *bear* (Ger. *Bär*), etc. Not all similarities can be detected at first sight, as spelling or pronunciation can differ (e.g. Engl. *cow* is spelt with <c> while Ger. *Kuh* is spelt with <k>). For this reason, it is important to draw pupils' attention to interlinguistic analogies, e.g. 'Listen, *cow* in English is almost like *Kuh* in German!'

Positive transfer in terms of communicative strategies can be found already in very small children. As Tracy (2008) shows, in bilingual children code-mixing, i.e. the use of two languages in the same utterance, can be related

to the fact that the two languages do not develop at the same speed. The language in which the child has reached a more advanced acquisition stage serves to compensate for a structural gap in the ‘weaker’ language. In this sense, in the German-English mixed utterance *Cleanst du dein teeth* (‘Are you cleaning your teeth?’; Tracy, 2008, p. 114), the child relies on the language in which the morphological competence is more advanced, in this case German (verbal ending *-st* for the second person singular), producing a perfect bilingual utterance. Code-mixing thus becomes a powerful means of boosting the other language, a process known as bilingual bootstrapping. Similarly, in some cases children acquiring German as L2 transfer typical German morphemes to otherwise Italian lexemes, as in *ein *foglien*, *ein *gatten*, where the child attaches the German plural ending *-en* to the Italian word *foglie* (Ger. *Blätter* ‘leaves’) and *gatto* (Ger. *Katze* ‘cat’). Despite the fact that the result is not correct in terms of accuracy, we have to acknowledge that the child already knows something about German grammar (Salzmänn & Videsott, 2024).

Moreover, positive transfer also occurs at the syntactic level. Unlike late L2 acquisition in adolescents and adults, the errors found in simultaneous bilingual and early L2 acquisition are only to a limited extent caused by negative transfer (Grimm & Cristante, 2022, p. 14). As Habertzettl (2005) points out, in German L2 the V-final position in subordinate clauses (e.g. *weil ich krank bin*, literally ‘because I ill am’) is acquired faster by children with Turkish as L1 than by children with Russian as L1, since Turkish is characterised by SOV-structures in subordinate clauses while Russian is not. Nevertheless, the acquisitional advantage of the Turkish over the Russian children is only transitory and, as underlined above, positive transfer is possible only if the learners are developmentally ready in terms of acquisition stages.

Another striking example of positive transfer is the acquisition of the V2 principle in German, which in simultaneous bilingual children can even be accelerated. While some monolingual German children at a certain stage tend to mix the V2 rule in main clauses with the V-final rule in subordinate clauses, producing interrogative clauses with the V-final position (e.g. *was die Mama einkauft?** ‘what the mummy buys’ instead of *was kauft die Mama ein?* ‘what does the mummy buy?’; Tracy, 2008, p. 95), as if it was a subordinate clause, in bilingual German-Italian children these structures do not occur, probably because of the positive influence of the Romance language, which does not present the V-final position in subordinate clauses (Müller et al., 2007, p. 131). Grotesquely, in this case it is the L1–L2 distance that leads to a positive outcome.

Reflection Point

1. Think of some lexical similarities between related languages (e.g. Slovenian/Croatian-Russian, German-English, Italian-Ladin) and imagine how you could transmit those similarities to your learners.
2. How do you react to instances of lexical transfer (code-mixing)? Why is it important for bi- and plurilingual speakers to be able to draw on their whole language repertoire?
3. Try to think of a grammatical phenomenon (e.g. cases, word order, articles) where in second or third language acquisition you could benefit from your L1.

L1-L2 Distance with Negative Transfer

Apart from negative transfer on the semantic level of single words (so-called false friends such as Ger. *Regal* ≠ It. *regalo*, since *Regal* means *scaffale*, i.e. 'shelf', and *regalo* *Geschenk*, i.e. 'present'), interferences often occur at the phraseological level, i.e. when learners make mistakes in combining words. Here are some examples of negative transfer regarding idiomatic expressions and the use of prepositions produced by children growing up bilingually with German and Italian in South Tyrol, an officially bilingual region:

- (7) Ger. *ich *habe kalt* (< It. *ho freddo*) instead of *mir ist kalt*, 'I'm cold'
- (8) It. *ti *ho bene* (< Ger. *ich hab' dich lieb*) instead of *ti voglio bene*, 'I love you'
- (9) Ger. *das *macht nicht weh* (< It. *non fa male*) instead of *das tut nicht weh*, 'it doesn't hurt'
- (10) It. *Il mio compleanno è *all'8 gennaio* (< Ger. *Mein Geburtstag ist am 8. Januar*) instead of *Il mio compleanno è l'8 gennaio*, 'My birthday is on the 8th of January'

Moreover, certain instances of transfer are due to polysemy, i.e. the fact that a word has several meanings in one language, while it has only one meaning in the other. In this way it is possible to explain the following utterance produced by a four-year-old child growing up with Italian and German: while holding a flower to the mother's nose, the child says *hör!* ('listen') instead of *riech!* ('smell'). This anomalous usage of the German verb *hören* ('to hear/listen') clearly can be traced back to the Italian perceptual verb *sentire*, which is polysemous, meaning to hear/listen, to taste, to feel and to smell. In all these cases the adult should repeat the correct form in the target language (e.g. *Genau, das TUT nicht weh*. 'Exactly, it doesn't hurt' or: *Ah, ich soll an der Blume RIECHEN*. 'Ah, I should smell the flower'), possibly stressing

the word the young learner lacked. In general, at pre-primary level implicit teaching should be favoured over explicit language instruction, which can gradually be introduced at primary school level.

The following example (11), in which a three-year-old child (CH) with Italian L1 and German L2 is looking at a picturebook about wolves, contains several instances of lexical and syntactic transfer. After imitating the wolf's howling, the girl asks in Italian why the wolf makes this noise and the adult (A) answers in German that this is because he is calling the other wolves. The child then asks in German why he does so, using the conjunction *weil* instead of the interrogative pronoun *warum*, probably because she transfers the semantics of the Italian *perché*, which both means 'why' and 'because,' to the German *weil*, which however cannot introduce a question. Moreover, she omits the obligatory subject pronoun in German (*er*), most probably due to the fact that Italian in this case does not foresee the pronoun. Nevertheless, it has to be underlined that the child, after starting the conversation in Italian, makes a huge effort to switch to the L2 German producing an utterance which, from the communicative point of view, is perfectly understandable. What is more, the utterance contains characteristics which could be considered typical of monolingual German children at that age as well, for instance the mixing of different conjunctions and the overgeneralisation of the plural form *Wolfe* instead of *Wölfe*, in which the ending *-e* for plural (e.g. *Tisch-Tische*) is erroneously applied to the noun *Wolf*. For this reason, not all utterances deviating from the norm should automatically be considered as instances of transfer, as they could also be natural acquisition steps, identical or at least similar to the first language acquisition process, especially in early second language acquisition (Tracy, 2008, p. 154). Finally, we should also have a look at the adult's utterances. While the child at first replies in Italian, the adult sticks to German and thus provides important linguistic input which the girl could re-use in her utterances (e.g. the verb *rufen*, the overt subject pronoun *er*).

- (11) CH: *Lupo*. (Wolf. [in Italian])
A: *Was macht der Wolf?* (What does the wolf do?)
CH: *uuuuh*
Perché fa così il lupo? (Why does the wolf do so? [in Italian])
Perché fa questi versi? (Why does he make these noises? [in Italian])
A: *Weil er ruft*. (Because he calls.)
Er ruft die anderen Wölfe. (He calls the other wolves.)
CH: *Weil ruft anderen Wolfe?* (Why does he call the other wolves?)
A: *Weil er sie sucht*. (Because he is looking for them.)

As far as the transfer of syntactic structures is concerned, it is important to underline that in many cases we do not find instances of full transfer, but only a delay (i.e. a quantitative difference) in the acquisition of certain phenomena, as is the case of subject pronouns in Italian as ‘weaker’ L1 or L2. All bilingual children growing up with German and Italian sooner or later discover that Italian is a null-subject language and German not, but the frequency of overt subjects tends to be higher in bilingual children than in monolingual Italian children and adults (Müller et al., 2007, p. 171).

Finally, in bi- or plurilingual children at primary school age negative transfer often occurs in spelling, especially when they are alphabetised in only one language. Children with Italian L1 growing up in Germany who possess literacy only in the L2 German often transfer the spelling rules of German (e.g. [j] spelt as <sch> and [v] as <w>) to their first language, e.g. *Il pesche die Luka e dschallo e werde* (= *Il pesce di Luca è giallo e verde*; Engl. ‘Luca’s fish is yellow and green’) (Belke, 2003, p. 93).

For bilingual children with a heritage language spoken only or mainly at home, it would be of great importance to acquire the spelling rules of both languages, otherwise they risk to become literate only in the language of instruction.

In general, negative transfer and other deviations from the norm should be considered as necessary steps towards a higher language competence and not as errors to be condemned. In order to detect and avoid negative transfer, it is fundamental for teachers to have knowledge of the main characteristics of their learners’ language systems and to offer, whenever possible, modules of integrated language teaching focusing on the similarities and differences between the languages involved.

Key Takeaways

- Transfer is an important part of linguistic development and does not hinder the language acquisition process.
- Transfer cannot be explained by the contrastive hypothesis alone, i.e. positive transfer in case of L1–L2 proximity can only occur when learners are developmentally ready. Conversely, L1–L2 distance does not necessarily lead to negative transfer.
- Lexical transfer is a fundamental communication strategy, with regard both to the reception of cognates and to bridging lexical gaps in production.
- It is possible to promote transfer through special strategies, such as stimulus questions and repetitions, and by drawing the children’s attention to similarities (and differences) between languages.

Note

This contribution stems from the close collaboration among the three authors. For the concerns of the Italian academy, Federica Ricci Garotti takes responsibility for the section 'Language Transfer: Old Misconceptions, New Definitions,' Marco Magnani for the section 'All That Glitters Is Not Transfer,' and Katharina Salzmann for the section 'All That Transfers Is Not Glitter.'

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