An Empirically Tested Contrastive Error Analysis of Tense Errors Committed by Punjabi Learners of English

Dr. Shivani, M.A., Ph.D., NET
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Abstract

The role of transfer or cross linguistic influence in second language learning is irrefutable. The learners of a second language (L2) always have an inherent tendency to fall back on their first language (L1) while learning the structures of target language. This transfer may have positive or negative influence on learning a L2. The present article attempts to study the tense errors committed by learners of English due to the influence of their L1 (Punjabi). The methodology used in this study is contrastive error analysis of the written data (in English) of learners. In other words, this study involves a complementary amalgamation of contrastive and error analyses to analyze and explain the tense errors committed by learners of English due to transfer. It will help to discover how learners of English at the undergraduate level use their L1 as they learn, write and develop academic English.

Keywords: Transfer; Cross linguistic influence; First language (L1); Second language (L2); Contrastive Error Analysis

Introduction

Transfer or cross linguistic influence is a universal phenomenon which is indispensable in second language learning. There is little doubt that what the language learner already knows is the first language, through which, more or less consciously, s/he tries to perceive and assimilate the elements of the second language. This leads to language transfer which considers how the learner's existing knowledge influences the course of L2 development.

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Transfer effects can be examined in terms of either reception (listening and reading) or production (speaking and writing). Ellis (2008) gave a comprehensive definition of transfer:

> Language transfer refers to any instance of learner data where a statistically significant correlation (probability-based relation) is shown to exist between some feature of the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired.

This paper examines the role of transfer by studying the tense errors in the written data of learners of English as a second language. It is focussed on those errors which are committed by learners due to the influence of their language (here Punjabi).

The setup of the study is Post Graduate Government College for Girls, Chandigarh, India where Punjabi undergraduates were chosen as the subjects of the study. The present contrastive study seeks to find out the components of L1 (Punjabi) grammar that Punjabi undergraduates use frequently in their daily writing in the L2 (English). This research hopes to seek further understanding regarding the theoretical debate on inter-language grammar influence.

Present Study: A Contrastive Error Analysis

The present study is a juxtaposition of contrastive as well as error analyses (where EA leads to CA) as the focus of the study lies in the overlapped area where contrastive analysis and errors analysis complement each other rather than acting as foes. This study conducts a contrastive error analysis of the errors in the written compositions (in English) of learners at the undergraduate level.

Both Contrastive and Error Analyses have a vital role to play in accounting for L2 learning problems. They should be viewed as complementing each other rather than as competitors for some procedural pride of place (James 1980). There is little gain in adopting an exclusive 'either-or' approach and the results of doing so can be positively debilitating.

Contrastive Analysis is normally considered as a predictive device. Wardhaugh (1970) suggests that the 'CA Hypothesis' exists in two versions, a strong version and a weak version. While the two versions are equally based on the assumption of L1 interference, they

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differ in that the strong claims predictive power while the weak, less ambitiously, claims merely to have the power to diagnose errors that have been committed. The strong version is *a priori,* the weak version *ex post facto* in its treatment of errors.

Wardhaugh suggests that predictive CA is really a sham in that no contrastivist has ever really predicted solely on the basis of the CA. It is also, he claims, a 'pseudo-procedure', which is to say a procedure that could in theory be put to use, if enough time were available, but in reality never resorted to. But let us not throw the baby with the bath water. Let us have both CA and EA exist in a harmonizing existence with each other.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study is to study the grammatical influence of the first language of the learners of English in the writing of English in the form of learners' errors in depiction of tenses in writing English. It will help to discover how learners of English at the undergraduate level use their first language as they learn, write and develop academic English.

In order to diagnose the grammatical influence of the first language in the writing of the learners of English, contrastive error analysis of the written compositions of the L2 learners was conducted. This contrastive error analysis is focussed on the tense errors committed by the learners due to the influence of their first language (Punjabi).

Analytical Procedure

Sample

The present study is conducted with a random sample of one hundred and five students with thirty five students each from B.A. (Bachelor of Arts), B.Sc. (Bachelor of Science) and B.Com (Bachelor of Commerce). The subjects were selected taking into consideration that all of them must have a common first language (in this case Punjabi).

Analysis of the Sample Written Compositions of Students

The written work of the students was read and analyzed to identify the syntactic transfer errors made by them in their daily writing activities. The students were asked to write an English composition each of 100-150 words. They were given some topics for

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composition writing and they were instructed to choose any one topic. Such topics were chosen that are related to their daily life experiences, feelings and current affairs so that they do not have any problem in expressing themselves.

The results of the errors analysis were classified and categorized according to linguistic items. This written data provided valuable information pertaining to students' L1 influence on their L2 writing. The tabulated items were compared and corroborated to substantiate the theoretical arguments in the field of language transfer. It helped to find out the frequency of tense errors which are made due to the influence of the first language of the learners, thereby establishing a hierarchy of difficulty of grammatical features under investigation.

The error analysis conducted in this study is purely contrastive in nature as the analysis of the data collected in this study includes identification, categorization and description of those syntactic deviations from the target language which are caused due to the influence of the first language. In other words, the error analysis is exclusively based on the tense errors made due to the transfer of linguistic items of L1 to second language writing.

Some of the errors which are shown as transfer errors here may have some other sources of errors too. For example, some of the transfer errors are sometimes termed as overgeneralization errors or developmental errors. Over-use or overgeneralization can also result from transfer-often as a consequence of the avoidance or underproduction of difficult structures (Ellis 2008). There are many instances when it is not possible to decide whether over-generalization or transfer is the cause of a specific error. Over-generalization and transfer can be seen as forms of simplification. Transfer and overgeneralization are not distinct processes. Indeed they represent aspects of the same underlying strategy. Both result from the fact that the learner uses what s/he already knows about language, in order to make sense of new experience.

Since this study is purely contrastive in nature, the other sources of errors are not taken into account as they are beyond the scope of this study.

Tense Errors

The choice and application of a correct tense in an English construction seems to be a hard task for the learners of all groups as quite a large number of errors are observed in this

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area. It is quite obvious from the analysis of the written compositions of the learners that they face a great difficulty in selecting the correct tense and then using it in a correct manner. There are many such errors which are transfer-induced. The frequency of different kinds of tense errors induced by the knowledge of L1 is given in the following table:

Types of Tense Errors	Number of Errors		
	B.A. group	B.Sc. group	B.Com. group
Incorrect use of Simple Present and Past Tenses	32	29	30
Incorrect use of '-s' inflection	40	41	24
Incorrect use of Future Tense	9	6	2
Incorrect use of Progressive Tenses	12	5	5
Total	93	81	61

Table 7: Frequency of Tense Errors

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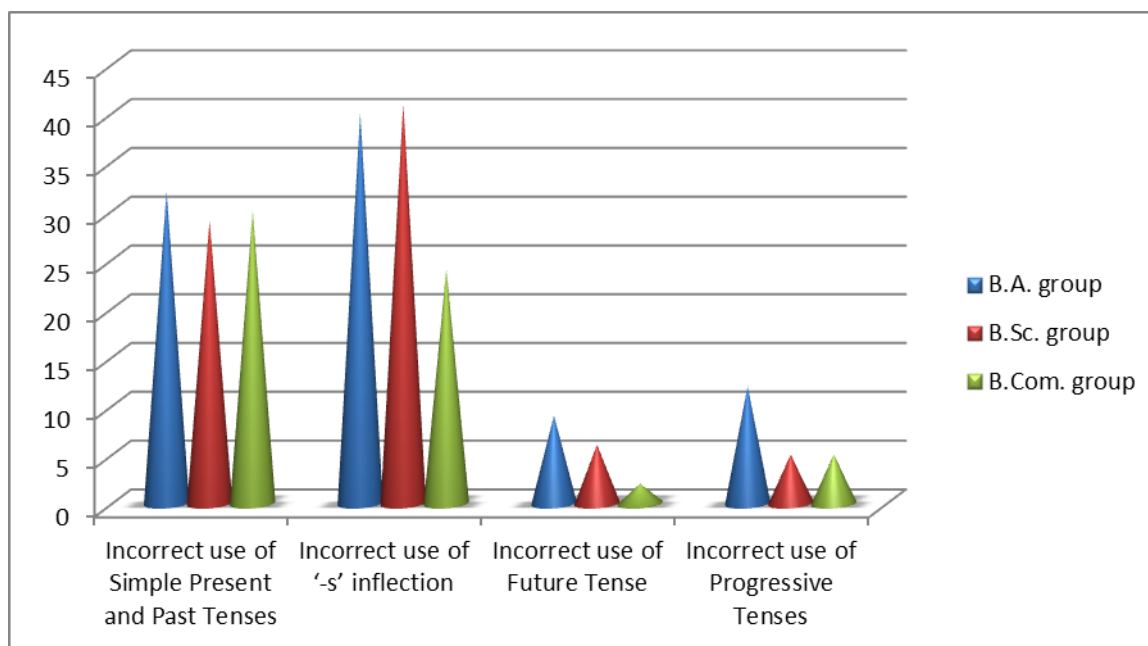
Figure 5: Frequency of Tense Errors

Incorrect Use of Simple Present and Past Tenses

The verbs in Punjabi take forms for future tense only and for present and past tense, an appropriate auxiliary verb form is used. While in English, different forms of the main verb as well as auxiliary verb are used for depicting present, past and future tense.

For example, 'ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈ' – '(he) goes' for simple present tense

'ਜਾਂਦਾ ਸੀ' – '(he) was going' for past tense

Due to this contrast, learners always tend to believe that the depiction of present and past tense is possible only with the help of auxiliary in both the languages (Punjabi and English) which always leads to faulty sentence constructions in English by the learners.

1. She is *teach* me good lessons of life. (B.A. group; She teaches me good lessons of life)
2. I was *help* her to locate the room. (B.Sc. group; I helped her to locate the room.)
3. She is *go* to temple daily. (B.Com. group; She goes to the temple daily.)

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The possible reason for these errors is that while in English, different forms of the auxiliary verb and the main verb are used for depicting various tenses, in Punjabi, only appropriate forms of the auxiliary verb is used for the depiction of present and past tenses.

Incorrect Use of '-s' Inflection

Another contrast of form in the verb system is the occurrence in the English simple present tense of the '-s' inflection in the third person singular. Apart from the auxiliary, the only verb forms that inflect for person and number in Punjabi are the future and the subjunctive forms. In other words, the verb forms do not inflect for person and number in present and past in Punjabi. It is only the operators that inflect for number and person in Punjabi. This contrast leads to following kinds of errors:

1. She always *help* her to do any kind of work. (B.A. group; She always helps her to do any kind of work.)
2. We *spends* good time together. (B.Sc. group; We spend good time together.)
3. She *get* up at 5 o'clock in the morning. (B.Com group; She gets up at 5 o'clock in the morning.)

The learners are quite aware of the usage of '-s' inflection in English but these errors are made by the learners because they are confused over the use of '-s' inflection in English as no such kind of inflection exists in Punjabi especially in the present tense. The researcher has felt in her teaching experience that the learners just sprinkle the '-s' inflection randomly over different verbs in any piece of writing in English just to show that they have a good knowledge of English.

Incorrect Use of Future Tense

As already mentioned, the verbs in Punjabi take forms for future tense only. No auxiliary verb is used for future tense which is in sharp contrast to the depiction of future in English as an auxiliary (will, shall, would) is used with the main verb to show the action taking place in future. For example, ਜਾਵੇਗਾ – (he) will go, ਕਰੇਗਾ – (he) will do, ਲਿਖੇਗਾ – (he) will write.

This makes learners to omit auxiliary verb in the sentences having actions taking place in future.

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1. She *go* to her workplace. (B.A. group; She will go to her workplace.)
2. I *become* a social worker. (B.Sc. group; I shall become a social worker.)
3. My brother *bring* me a new bag. (B.Com. group; My brother will bring me a new bag.)

Incorrect Use of Progressive Tenses

English and Punjabi are the same in that they in they both have progressive and non-progressive tenses as in:

ਮੈਂ ਚੱਲ ਰਿਹਾ ਹਾਂ।   I walk or I am walking.

They differ, however, in that the form of the present progressive tense in English is the same as that of the simple present tense in Punjabi, except for the order.

English Present Progressive: Auxiliary + Present participle

Punjabi Simple Present: Present Participle + Auxiliary

The present and past progressive in Punjabi are formed with: Verb root + Progressive particle (ਰਿਹਾ) +Auxiliary, thus having some similarities with the English present and past progressive form, for example presence of 'auxiliary'. These contrasts are a source of interference errors and clearly explain the following kinds of errors:

1. The girls are *enjoy* in the college. (B.A. group; The girls are enjoying in the college.)
2. I am *wait* for the right time. (B.Sc. group; I am waiting for the right time.)
3. She was *wait* for her parents. (B.Com group; She was waiting for her parents.)

This is again a transfer-induced error as the formation of progressive tenses in English and Punjabi is not the same.

English progressive tenses- Auxiliary + Present participle

Punjabi progressive tenses- Verb root + Progressive particle + Auxiliary

By and large, results of the contrastive error analysis carried out in this study show that there is a considerable amount of influence of L1 in the L2 writing of undergraduates. Teachers of English as a second language need to be aware of the "transfers" and "borrowings" that students may make as they acquire a new language.

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Conclusion

It may be concluded from the results of the empirically tested contrastive error analysis that a significant number of tense errors committed by the learners of English are due to L1 influence. This again confirms the fact that the cross-linguistic influence in L2 learning cannot be denied. Rather than trying to overcome the influence of first language, teachers as well as learners of English should make the judicious use of L1 in English classrooms. This study further gave an insight into the components of Punjabi grammar which are transferred while learning English as second language.

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Dr. Shivani, M.A., Ph.D., NET
Assistant Professor
Post Graduate Government College
Sector 11
Chandigarh 160011
India

Address for Correspondence:
House No. 426
Sector 25
Panchkula 134116
Haryana
India
shivanisaini49@gmail.com

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