



# Knowledge Factors Affecting Language Learning: Cross-Linguistic Transfer Of Literacy Skills

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aspires at discussing the interdependence model (Cummins, 1981; 2000) predicting a positive transfer of literacy-related and academic language skills between languages as they are manifestations of a common underlying proficiency (CUP). It is reinforced that the process of cross-linguistic transfer of literacy skills is determined and hence is interacting with such factors as the sociocultural status of the languages, the amount of exercise learners may receive, or the quantity and quality of teaching offered. It is also maintained that inter-lingual transfer can occur, but the patterns and strength of this transfer varies according to first language background, language typology, L2 language proficiency and other aspects of educational background experience. More to the point, Baker's "Central Operating System" (1996) and Francis' "Text Processing Formal Schemata" (2000) are endeavors highlighting that core discourse competencies, text comprehension proficiencies, formal schemata and organizational skills are not language bound. They are learned by means of language use in L1 and L2. Hence, they are available for application to academic language tasks in either language, rather than transfer from L1 to L2, or L2 to L1. Even though evidence concerning the transfer of literacy related skills abounds, what is still a current issue, which requires further investigation is the exact processes and conditions that insure the effectiveness of this transfer in both reading and writing.

**Keywords:** *Literacy Skills; Cross-Linguistic Transfer; Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP); SLA.*

## 1. Introduction

Learning a second language is a complex, dynamic and nonlinear process with so many interacting factors and variables. Scholars differ widely on the choice of "intake factors", i.e., the factors facilitating the subset of all input that actually gets assigned to our long-term memory store. For instance, according to Krashen (1981), the only two factors determining "intake" are comprehensible input and low affective filter. Yet Sharwood Smith (1985), suggesting the limitation of this view and emphasizing the role of cross-linguistic language transfer features in intake processing, argued, "it is particularly unreasonable to give L2 input the unique role in explanation of intake." Swain (1985), on the other hand, maintained that "comprehensible output" is crucial for converting input into intake. Nevertheless, any viable theory is supposed to take into consideration not only the input role, the innate/cognitive, affective and environmental factors, but also the role that the previously acquired languages may play in language learning.

Indeed, learners are said to bring an enormous amount of knowledge to the task of learning a second language. As they have already learned their mother tongue (L1), they are thus expected to draw on this when they learn another language (Jiang and Kuehn, 2001). During long years, the assumption that prevailed is that the influence of the mother tongue on acquiring a second language is a negative one. Nevertheless, a great deal of research is suggestive of the fact that the native language may facilitate the acquisition of another language, notably the development of literacy in the second language. The saying that « children acquire literacy only once » implies that the proficiencies and skills in the L1 literacy apply and transfer to the second language literacy. In a similar vein, the development of the second language literacy is likely to affect the development of the L1 literacy. Hence, the present paper aspires at shedding light on the ways in which literacy interacts with transfer. As both notions are complex, referring back to the origins and evolution of the concept of

“transfer”, and considering the definition of literacy and its relation with cognitive development may be worthwhile. Then, the tenets and conditions, under which correlation between literacy development in first and second languages may be attained, are to be addressed. Some empirical evidence for literacy skills transfer is provided.

## 2. Conceptual Background

The conceptual framework is divided into two sub-sections delving into the nature of both transfer and literacy.

### 2.1 Language Transfer: Overview

The notion of transfer was invoked during the Contrastive Analysis (CA) era, which was linked to behaviourist views of language learning and to structural linguistics. The effect that the L1 had on using a second language, mainly at the level of pronunciation, led researchers, in the 1960s, to forward the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis (CAH). Nevertheless, earlier thinking on transfer may date back to work on language contact and historical linguistics in the nineteenth century as maintained by Odlin (1989) who provided a comprehensive historical context and discussion of cross-linguistic influence in language learning. In the foreword to *Linguistics Across Cultures*, a highly influential manual on contrastive analysis by Lado (1957), Fies stated: Learning a second language...constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special “set” created by the first language habits.

CAH is based on the assumption that when two languages are different, learners may experience difficulties in producing the target language resulting in negative transfer or interference; i.e. the production of errors. On the other hand, according to the contrastive analysts, when two languages are similar, learning will be facilitated as positive transfer is likely to occur and no errors would emerge. Accordingly, CAH assumes “...a scientific, structural analysis of the two languages in question would yield taxonomy of linguistic contrasts between them which in turn would enable the linguist to predict the difficulties a learner would encounter.” (Brown, 2000: 28) Lado’s influential book (1957) advocating the comparison between languages with the aim of predicting errors committed by learners promoted contrastive linguistics research in the United States. Researchers started comparing the English language with the major European languages. In the 1970’s, CA started to spread from the US to other parts of the world (Europe, the Far East).

By virtue of Chomsky’s claims on the nature of learning, a cognitive approach to second language acquisition (SLA) emerged bringing about a radical shift of perspective. This approach emphasized the developmental nature of language acquisition, placing little, if any, importance on the influence of the L1. Behaviourism, therefore, fell out of favor, and the CAH became theoretically and practically untenable (Odlin, 1989). This led to two different ways of accounting for the role of the L1 in SLA. In one way, transfer was treated as one of several processes involved in SLA, moving from product-oriented to process-oriented approach to account for L1 influence. This approach was adopted by Selinker (1972) who considered that the learners’ L1 was one of the major determinants of their interlanguage, although not the only one. The second way of dealing with transfer was what Ellis (1994: 309) called as ‘the minimalist approach’ which sought to minimize the importance of the L1 and to stress the contribution of Universal processes of language learning, thus, emphasizing the similarity between L2 and L1 acquisition.

As the notion of transfer was closely associated with the behaviourist theories of language learning, Sharwood Smith and Kellerman (1986. Cited in Ellis, 1994) have proposed a neutral concept: Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) that came to imply much more than simply the effect of one’s first language on a second. CLI is an important linguistic factor at play in SLA as this approach highlights the mutual influence of languages on each other. Put otherwise, if L1 influences L2, L2 also influences L1. Indeed, subsequent languages (L3, L4, etc.) in multilingual learners all affect each other in various ways (in the form of contrastive lexicology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics...)

Moreover, the term came to include ‘such phenomena as transfer, interference, avoidance, borrowing and L2 related aspects of language loss...’ (Sharwood Smith and Kellerman, 1986. Cited in Ellis, 1994: 301)

The theory of Cross-linguistic Influence (CLI), hence, recognises the significant role played by prior experience in any learning act. Indeed, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) define transfer as “the use of previous linguistic or prior skills to assist comprehension or production (p 120). It is thus worth pointing out that the focus in recent research has been on positive transfer (e.g. Chen, 2020; Lu, 2002; Wang, 2017) as it is the case of literacy skills. As a matter of fact, literacy in the native language may be conceived as an asset in acquiring second language literacy (McKay, 1993). However, before discussing the phenomenon of literacy skills transfer, a definition of literacy is worth mentioning.

### 2.2. Literacy: Definition and Cognitive Development

Defining the term literacy is problematic (Odlin, 1989), as determining the abilities and practices that are necessary to be considered literate is a difficult task. Understanding what it means to be literate stands at the core of this task (McKay, 1993).

As a matter of fact, all definitions of literacy entail the ability to deal with the written word. However, the term literacy is more inclusive than “reading and writing”, since it requires an understanding that these “skills” are

impacted by each other as well as by speaking and listening (Carson et al, 1992; Harris, 1990; Cited in Johns, 1997). Literacy refers to strategies for understanding, organising, discussing and producing texts. In addition, it relates to social context. Indeed, literacy can be regarded from two perspectives. In the first perspective, literacy is generally viewed as an instrument of cognitive development. An autonomous model of literacy, as it is termed by Street (1984. Cited in McKay, 1993), approaches literacy as an individual accomplishment, generally within an educational context. It should be noted that the skills and strategies needed to understand a text and respond to it may involve such activities as being able to infer meaning, being able to interpret and understand ambiguity, and being able to recognize implicit meaning in texts. Moreover, predicting, searching, selecting, scanning and decoding are strategies to be used in order to read fluently and effectively (Field and Aebersold, 1997). As regards writing, writing proficiency includes not only the mechanisms of writing, but also expressing thoughts coherently and appropriately for a given audience using the relevant genre organization. In addition, according to Widdowson (1983. Cited in Saidoun, 2006), the core of the writing process lies in the writer's ability to respond and anticipate the possible questions and expectations of their audience.

In the second perspective, the focus is on the larger social context in which the individual operates. Thus, literacy is considered as a social practice with functional role. What is meant by literacy depends therefore on the historical, economic, political and socio-cultural context; and consequently, literacy cannot be separated from how it is used by individuals within their community and how it is valued.

The first kind of literacy is said to transfer across languages (Odlin, 1989). An examination of the relationship between literacy and cognitive development is necessary, since it is regarded as a skill with important value in developing individual's cognitive abilities. Moreover, as it will be highlighted later, the cognitive proficiency is to be transferred across languages.

Such researchers as Olson (1994), Goody and Watt (1968. Cited in McKay, 1993) maintain that the ability to process the written word imparts a degree of abstraction to thought, which is absent from oral discourse. Moreover, literacy contributes to the growth of rationality and consciousness, and it creates the ability to think independently, as it provides the route of access to genuine knowledge (Olson, 1994). Some researchers like Cummings (1990. Cited in McKay, 1993) assume that literacy offers unique cognitive benefits that include the ability to view text schematically, the use of problem-solving strategies to control thinking while reading and writing, and the ability to transform knowledge gained in reading and writing into new understanding and ideas. Moreover, according to Olson (1994) literate thought is the conscious representation of such activities involved in thinking as perception, expectancies, inference, generalization, description and judgment.

Luria (1981. Cited in Francis, 2002), considers literacy-related, academic-type (secondary) discourse, in contrast with conversational (primary) discourse, as a tool of higher-order cognitive operations. Literate thought, therefore, tied to the practice of reading and writing, is assumed to be the deliberate manipulation of thinking activities. Bruner (1975. Cited in Francis, 2002), in line with these assumptions, maintains that the written language facilitates a distancing from concrete referents. He further highlights that schooling and literacy help lay the basis for performing the higher-order skills or cognitive processes which play a pivotal role in the development of analytic context independent thinking.

### 3. Cross-Linguistic Transfer and Literacy Skills

Cummins (1981, 2000) makes the most salient and cited claim about the transfer of literacy-related skills. He holds that L1 and L2 academic skills are interdependent; that is, they are manifestations of a common underlying proficiency (CUP). The latter refers to the conceptual knowledge that acts as the foundation on which new skills are built. But before further exploring the relationship between L1/L2 academic language proficiency and transfer, it is worth examining the notion of language proficiency which has been conceptualized according to different contexts.

#### 1.1. Cross-Lingual Dimensions of Language Proficiency

As regards teaching methodology, the conception of what it means to be proficient in a language has expanded significantly to encompass students' sociolinguistic and discourse competencies, in addition to their grammatical competence, as the movement towards communicative language teaching has been associated with the ability to use language appropriately in different contexts (Harley, Allen, Cummins, and Swain, 1990). An alternative conceptualization of the nature of language proficiency has been proposed by Cummins' (1984) model of language proficiency, particularly relevant to bilingual settings. This model describes language proficiency in terms of two types of skills. The first type relates to basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) that refer to conversational level of language proficiency, that is, the ability to communicate interactively in familiar situations. In addition, the second type pertains to the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) which refers to the ability to understand and produce cognitively complex and abstract concepts in the language, especially in academic contexts. Hence, a distinction between 'surface fluency' and 'conceptual linguistic knowledge' has been made. (Cummins, 1979 . Cited in Cummins, 1984)

If this theoretical framework is to be related to language pedagogy, it can be noticed that the major purpose of schooling is to develop student's ability to manipulate and interpret cognitively demanding context-reduced text (Cummins,1984).

### 1.2. The Relationship Between L1/L2 Academic Language Proficiency and Transfer

The interdependence between L1 and L2 academic skills has been stated by Cummins (1981: 29) as follows: The extent that instruction in L<sub>x</sub> is effective in promoting proficiency in L<sub>x</sub>, transfer of this proficiency to L<sub>y</sub> will occur provided there is adequate exposure to L<sub>y</sub> (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn L<sub>y</sub>.

Accordingly, despite the fact that the surface aspects of language are separate, there is an underlying cognitive academic proficiency that is common across languages. Supporting the idea of the existence of some form of common underlying proficiency, McNamara (1970:25-26. Cited in Cummins, 1984:23) has pointed out that if L1 and L2 proficiencies were separate; that is to say, if there were not a CUP, the bilingual "would have great difficulty in communicating with himself, whenever he switched languages, he would have difficulty in explaining in L2 what he had heard or said in L1". Immersion education in a wide variety of countries around the world may find such a finding of great importance as it may lead "to achieve a full additive bilingualism" (Johnson and Swain, 1997: 15). It is noteworthy that the major features of immersion programs are conceptualised by Johnson and Swain (1997) as follows:

- The L2 is a medium of instruction
- The immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum
- Overt support exists for the L1
- The program aims for additive bilingualism
- Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom
- Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency
- The teachers are bilingual
- The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community

The interdependence or common underlying proficiency principles imply, therefore, that experience with either language can promote development of the proficiency underlying both languages. Saville - Troike (1984. Cited in Herrera and Murry, 2005) shares the same assumption as Cummins', by arguing that when the context-reduced tasks of reading, writing, drawing inferences and forming schemata are targeted in the native language, the skills attained and the processes learned will transfer to a target or a second language. As a matter of fact, according to Cummings (1984), the conceptual knowledge is perhaps the most obvious instance of the skills involved in the CUP. Further, subject matter knowledge, higher order thinking skills, reading strategies, writing composing skills developed through the medium of L1 transfer or become available to L2.

Accordingly, it is worth pointing out that the development of particular lexical items or syntactic structures in the L1 does not appear to be the important factor in the development of general cognitive academic ability. Rather, it is the higher order mental skills, sometimes called thinking skills, developed and implemented through the L1 initially, which can be transferred into the L2, and improve academic achievement in and through the L2.

### 1.3. Prerequisites for Literacy-Related Skills Transfer

Before highlighting the conditions revealed as primordial so that literacy-related skills can transfer across languages, it is worth pointing out the word of caution made by Odlin (1989) when he maintains that the success of literate bilingual does not as clearly indicate the importance of language transfer in the sense of native language influence as it suggests the importance of transfer of training. In other words, literate learners take advantage of problem-solving skills that may be acquired in the course of their education.

Cummins (1979. Cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) notes that a minimum level of competence in L2 or a threshold level of language proficiency in the target language should be attained so that the literacy related skills can transfer inter languages. Nevertheless, McLaughlin's (1987. Cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) data suggests that transfer of literacy skills may not be as automatic as Cummins claims. He suggests that threshold may be necessary but not a sufficient condition for transfer to occur, since he stresses the need for learners to restructure their L1 literacy strategies when applying them to L2. Rumelhart and Norman (1978. Cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 67) highlighted the importance of restructuring, which is "a process by which second languages learners replace previous strategies with new approaches instead of simply performing the same reading processes more quickly as they become more proficient." Next section will shed light on some findings from research delving into literacy skills transfer.

## 2. Empirical Evidence for Literacy Skills Transfer

Comprehensive reviews of the extremely large amount of data supporting the CUP principle have been carried out. Indeed, a great deal of research findings of, particularly, bilingual education programs, studies relating both age on arrival and L1 literacy development to immigrants students' L2 acquisition, studies relating bilingual language use in the home to academic achievement, and studies in L1/L2 learning context, were interpreted within a theoretical framework concerned with the nature of language proficiency and its cross-lingual dimensions (For instance Stotsky 1979, Chamot and O'Malley, 1986; Cummins, 1979, 1984. in Kuehn, P and Jiang, 2001). An overview of some selected studies that provided empirical evidence for the transfer of literacy skills is worth being considered.

Cummins and Nakajma (1987. Cited in Cummins et.al. 1990) carried out a large scale study that tackled the relationships between age of arrival of immigrants to the country of the target language, length of residence

variables and interdependence of literacy skills. This piece of research involved 273 Japanese immigrant children of relatively high socioeconomic background. The participants were enrolled in grades 2 and 8 attending Japanese school in Toronto. The focus of this study was on reading using the Gates-McGinitie reading test and on writing skills in English using a letter - writing task. The results did show that the older the students were on arrival in Canada, the more likely they were to have strong second language reading skills. A similar but somewhat weaker effect was also observed on a number of aspects of English writing skills. This finding further support Cummins' (1984) interdependence hypothesis, by suggesting that the older-arriving children have benefited from prior literacy experience in Japanese. The study revealed also that the longer student had been in Canada, the weaker their reading skills in Japanese, suggesting that there is a tendency for older-arriving students to maintain academic skills in their first language better than younger-arriving students, who would have less experience of reading in the first language. Gains in English therefore have been accompanied by declines in aspects of the Japanese students' L1 proficiency.

If the interdependence model predicts a positive transfer of academic language skills between languages, the question of why do the native language skills seem so vulnerable imposes itself. This may imply that other factors like the sociocultural status of the languages, the amount of exercise learners get, or the quantity and quality of teaching are interacting with the process of cross-linguistic transfer of literacy skills (Alison d'Anglejan, 1990. Cited in Cummins et. al. 1990).

The findings of an exploratory study, undertaken by Carson, Carrel, Silberstein, Kroll and Kuehn (1990), that sought to investigate relationships between literary skills in Japanese and Chinese and literary development in English (L2), suggest stronger relationships between reading abilities across languages than between writing abilities. Moreover, the data highlights that interlingual transfer can occur, but the patterns and strength of this transfer varies according to first language background, L2 language proficiency and other aspects of educational background experience. This is assumed, although the total of 48 adult native speakers of Chinese and 57 adult native speakers are all high school graduates and almost all (102) graduates from high school in their native countries. The participants were asked to write an essay and to complete a cloze passage in both their first and second languages. As regards readings, the transfer from L1 to L2 was similar for Chinese and Japanese, but for writing, the transfer was different, in that, there was a weak correlation between L1 and L2 writing for the Chinese (whose proficiency was higher). The outcomes also suggest that the higher the level of L2 education, the worse the L1 writing score. Further research was thus recommended to determine whether the different variables that predict Chinese and Japanese writing scores are the result of L2 proficiency differences or whether these variables reflect real cultural differences in the literacy practices and abilities of the two groups, and to account for the worse L1 writing scores.

It is pointed out that literate learners may have an advantage because of problem -solving skills. Yet, there does appear to be a specifically linguistic factor in bilingual literacy, as Genesee (1979. Cited in Oldin, 1989) indicates in a discussion of the reading skills of Canadian children who were literate in three languages: French, English and Hebrew. Genesee notes that tests of literacy in three languages yielded higher correlations between French and English skills than between English and Hebrew reading skills. Differences in writing system, it is maintained, can make the acquisition of a second language more difficult, since Hebrew uses a writing system very different from those of French and English. In this regard, research suggested that learners who are learning a third language do not necessarily transfer more from L1, but from the language (perceived as) typologically closer to the target language, be it L1 or L2 (Cenoz, 2001).

The findings of a case study of ten Algerian students, carried out by Saidoun (2006) that tackled transfer of the writing abilities in exposition from Arabic, French into English, correlate with those advanced by the previously mentioned study. Indeed, the major purpose was bringing into light the extent to which writing in English in Algerian settings (where English is a foreign language) is influenced by the writing experiences in the previously learnt languages (Arabic and French). The sample was composed of ten third year University students who were given a written task in English, French and Arabic and a questionnaire in the language of the written tasks. The findings suggest that a good composing ability in both languages (Arabic and French) always correlates with good English writing. However, the composing ability transfers, in the greater easiness from French into English. As Saidoun has discussed, it seems that the different writing characters and linguistic origins between Arabic and the two languages (French and English) has an impact on the transfer phenomenon. Indeed, students will tend to transfer only those structures or lexical items that they deem transferable because of similarity with structures in the target language (Kellerman, 1977).

Kim and Piper (2019) conducted a longitudinal experimental study with Grade 1 and 2 children learning to read in Kiswahili and English, two official languages in Kenya. The literacy intervention consisted in systematic instruction in phonological awareness, phoneme-grapheme correspondences, among other aspects, in Kiswahili and English. The control group received no treatment. The merit of this study is that, unlike previous research studies exploring Cummins' hypothesis stressing a unidirectional relation from L1 to L2, the present one investigated bidirectional influences of literacy skills in multilingual contexts. The major findings are congruent with the bidirectionality or reciprocal of literacy skills relations in both languages.

All in all, it is to be stressed that literacy skills transfer is determined by a wide range of factors, namely language typology, age of arrival of immigrants to the country of the target language, length of residence variables, the sociocultural status of the languages, the amount of exercise learners receive, or the quantity and quality of

teaching. All these variables, and may be others, are likely to interact with the process of cross-linguistic transfer of literacy skills.

### 3. A proposed Elaboration of Cummins' Model

Baker (1996) and Paivio (1991) (both in Francis, 2000) assume that what researchers (for example, Williams and Snipper, 1990. Cited in Francis, 2000) refer to when they hold that concepts and skills transfer from one language to another, is that core discourse competencies, text comprehension proficiencies, formal schemata and organizational skills are not language bound. They are learned by means of language use in L1 and L2. Hence, they are available for application to academic language tasks in either language, rather than transfer from L1 to L2, or L2 to L1. This is accounted for as cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) type skills do not "reside" or "belong" to either in the strict sense, they are accessed from a common underlying proficiency (CUP), that in essence is a kind of shared non-verbal conceptual store.

Indeed, while Cummins' common underlying proficiency explicitly encompasses academic discourse abilities (part of language proficiency), Paivio's *shared conceptual system* appears to be more autonomous from the L1 and L2 verbal systems. It is, therefore, advocated that further investigation may probe the possibility that general text processing strategies are actually stored or represented in a network of interacting verbal domains. These might correspond to inferencing, predicting strategies and access to the universe of script. They reside within the domain of what Baker (1996. Cited in Francis, 2000) terms as 'a central operating system', that implies that general cognitive development proceeds separately, but maintains an ongoing interaction with the language faculty. Accordingly, Francis (2000) proposes that a more apt metaphor might be access to 'text processing formal schemata' rather than transfer, since under the category of cross-linguistic influence between the L1 and L2 linguistic domains, what is observed is transfer of grammatical features, which are broadly defined to include phonology, syntax and morphology, and sentence level semantics.

### 4. Conclusion

At length, it is worth pointing out that literacy in the native language may be an asset for learners in their endeavor to become literate in L2. Indeed, if the process of learning academic language is pictured as a journey, perhaps by train, students may reach the final destination at different speeds, at different times, and by using different methods to get there. As noted above, learners with L1 education and prior knowledge may progress faster because of the active transfer that may help to facilitate their learning process and accelerate them on their journey. Nevertheless, data suggest that L2 literacy development is a complex phenomenon for already literate learners, involving variables such as L2 language proficiency, L1 and L2 educational experiences, cultural literacy practice that may be related to different patterns of L2 literacy acquisition. Moreover, even though evidence concerning the transfer of literacy related skills abounds, what is still a current issue, which needs further investigation is the exact processes and conditions that insure the effectiveness of this transfer in both reading and writing. At an instructional level, we should be asking how we can build on this potential advantage in the classroom by focusing students' attention on language and helping them become more adept at manipulating language in abstract academic situations.

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