Week 5 – Answers


Additional readings (optional):

1. Looking at several of the different readings for this week, what is transfer? Try to come up with a brief description of the basic ideas underlying the phenomenon. Hint: the introduction in Crompton (2011) is a good place to start.

Before moving into our discussion of the issue this week it seems necessary to first go over terms. As mentioned in these questions, transfer is a somewhat older term used to denote the movement of knowledge or skills from one linguistic system to another. For example, when one is endeavoring to learn a new language at first, the implicit knowledge they have of the phonological system, for example, of their L1 will transfer onto their fledgling knowledge of their L2 phonological system. So basically, transfer is taking knowledge from one area and using it for another. To take an example from outside the realm of language, if one can already ride a bicycle and has recently bought a motorcycle then the knowledge they have about riding a bike will be transferred onto the riding of the motorcycle. This will happen in part because of the perceived similarity of the two activities. A bike rider who buys a new a fussy houseplant will not transfer knowledge of bike riding to taking care of the plant because they are quite different endeavors. Thus, in a very general sense, transfer is about how prior learning can be used and affects current learning. It is a very basic and highly common form of learning.

Many years ago Gagné (1965) made a distinction between vertical and lateral transfer. In vertical transfer the knowledge one already has within a certain area is used to help facilitate further learning in that area. Thus, in the area of language use knowing that English phrases are head first (e.g. in the prepositional phrase *in the store*, the head *in* precedes the subordinate NP *the store*) can help one learn and produce more complex structures. Vertical transfer is basically the idea that we use what we know to help us learn more and more complex things within a given area. Lateral transfer is the use of knowledge over a set of situations that are somehow similar in their level of complexity. In lateral transfer we take knowledge and apply it to different endeavors.
When thinking about second language learning obviously both apply, but the focus in SLA research has been on lateral transfer. Royer (1978) makes an important distinction between literal and figural transfer. Literal transfer, in his definition, involves the transfer of a developed skill or known bit of knowledge to a new learning task or situation. Figural transfer is when we use knowledge to think about something. Metaphor and metaphoric thought is one of the key examples of figural transfer. Figural transfer is a cognitive theory that employs the idea of schemas and whole systems of knowledge rather than just specific bits. Again, it is not hard to see how both of these also apply to L2 language development.

Transfer has had a spectacular rise and fall in the history of SLA. And it is now making somewhat of a comeback. Within the field of SLA transfer has typically related to the effects of the L1 on the L2 (Pavlenko and Jarvis, 2002). Although transfer was conceived as a generally positive phenomenon within educational psychology, as it was adopted in the field of second language research it made a subtle shift first to a more neutral position and then quickly turned into something more negatively focused, in large part due to the way the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) was used, as is discussed below coupled with the ideas of native speaker norms which we have discussed in this class already. Early SLA often sought to answer the question of why L2 learners fail. Because of its particular focus on the received problem areas of language learning and the idea prevailing at the time that the L1 was the singular cause of these problems research in second language learning came to focus first on negative transfer and this led to an even deeper focus on the types of errors that second language users produce. Hefty research into error analysis in the latter half of the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s spearheaded by Corder found that there are many causes for L2 errors with the L1 not, in fact, being the major culprit (See James, 1998 for a concise summary of this issue). This development coupled with the rise of generative linguistics, or theoretical linguistics as a separate field of study really, had the effect of basically burying transfer studies. Much of the focus shifted toward similarities and differences between L1 and L2 learning/acquisition and since the idea of negative transfer as playing a pivotal role in second language learning had been refuted by error analysis, transfer was left by the wayside.

Still, however, the idea of transfer endured in the backs of people’s minds. It is simply too obvious that there are indeed transfer effects. A person learning a second language when the two languages they are typologically similar (Korean and Japanese, Spanish and English) or which share a lot of vocabulary (Korean and Chinese, French and English) will learn faster and with more ease (at least in the initial stages) than someone learning a new language that is typologically different (Korean and English, English and Arabic) or has vocabulary with different roots than the L1 (Korean and French, English and Tamil). L1 effects are real and enduring and as more languages are learned these effects shift over onto all the languages that one possesses.

Although the idea of transfer was put on the back burner in the field of SLA, it was always one of the main issues in the field of bilingualism and it was from the fields of bilingualism and contact linguistics that transfer made its way back into SLA. This came about as a result of Cook’s (1991) concept of multi-competence. Generative linguistics and the Chomskyan model proposed the languages a speaker has as being separate. This fit in nicely with the idea that the L1 was not the cause of L2 errors, but Cook proposed that there were not only L1 effects on the L2 but also L2 effects on the L1. In effect the languages one has are linked at some or in fact many levels and do affect each other. This as led to the use of the neutral term cross-linguistic effects rather than transfer, but the ideas were more or less the same. The repercussions of this model have been many and they have only been made stronger by the recent trend to question the once
an unassailable theory of native speaker infallibility that once formed the basis of much of how L2 learning was perceived. L1 users are not nearly as identical as people once thought, nor is there any workable definition of what L1 users are and can do. As far back as 1985 Thomas Paikeday wrote an interesting book called The native Speaker is Dead! (http://www.paikeday.net/speaker.pdf) and Cook (1999) has long questioned the often misused idea of native speaker in the language classroom. The modern view of second language learners is not to see them as faulty or impaired native speaker since we do not really know what a native speaker is exactly, but rather as a developing user of the L2. The European common Framework for Languages is a modern tool that assesses L2 users positively based on what they can do. It is expected that the learners’ L1 will affect their L2 use and that is not seen as a problem but rather a blessing.

2. Wardbaugh (1970) discusses the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) which is the first theory of what we might today call transfer or, using even more modern terms, cross linguistic effects. What does the CAH basically claim and what are some of its problems? Link this as well to some of the discussions made in Odlin (2002).

The CAH is a theory developed by Robert Lado, which we can see from Crompton’s (2011) article is making a comeback in certain circles. It states that language learning is determined (strong version) or affected (weak version) by the similarities and differences between the students’ L1 and the Target Language (TL). By comparing the linguistic systems of the learner’s two languages and determining where and how the systems approximate each other and how and where they differ one can make predictions about what aspects of the TL learners will have difficulty. The hypothesis states further that teachers can then use this knowledge to teach more efficiently. Since the CAH can, in theory, predict areas of difficulty then these are the areas upon which instruction should focus. This had a huge effect on the field at the time and is often touted as the first real SLA theory. As mentioned above, it also brought a decidedly negative tint to SLA studies. Were errors and difficulty were seen as the definitive areas of inquiry. The focus of language instruction came to be almost exclusively on areas of difficulty. The main idea being that teacher and materials developers had to try to make the learning process smoother by nipping problem areas in the bud. It also beards mentioning that the CAH was also highly influenced by the behaviorist model of learning. Although transfer was seen as occurring in different ways, facilitative (positive) and debilitative (negative), no attention was given to positive transfer as it was believed to occur naturally wherever the systems approximated each other (but is this true?). In the attempt to make teaching and materials as efficient as possible only (potentially) negative issues were addressed.

Problems generated by the CAH are first and foremost the negativity that crept in to SLA as a field and the obsession with errors, which has sadly trickled down into the classroom. In the traditional view of language use where a strong distinction is made between accuracy and fluency, accuracy is generally of the foremost concern and fluency is often thought of as something that can only be dealt with after a sufficiently level of accuracy has been achieved. Second language learners were described as error prone and were defined by the types and amount of errors they created (Brown, 2007). In Selinker’s (1972) interlanguage hypothesis (an idea first laid out by Weinreich, the father of contact linguistics and quite possibly bilingualism) learners move through stages taking them closer to approximating norms in the L2, again based on the types of errors they make. So, an obsession with errors became the norm. This obsession has led to students and teachers feeling inferior and vulnerable in their L2 and generally being scared to use the language.
L2 learning becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy of doom wherein the perception of errors balloon out of proportion causing learners to simply give up.

The CAH also was based on comparisons made between the learners’ L1 and TL. The extension of this idea, coupled in a timely way with the rise of generative linguistics which stated that native speakers were infallible and did not make errors, led to the idea that the goal of second language learning was to approximate the language use of native speakers. Still, I have students complain that their English is not ‘perfect’ or enough like a native speaker but in many ways the language use of these people eclipses that of native speakers. Although the idea of multi-competence should, in theory, kill this idea and the realization that a bilingual is NOT one person who equated two native speakers has long been recognized and fully embraced by researchers in the field of bilingualism, the idea that L2 learners/users are forever flawed speakers of their L2 still runs strong in SLA.

Both these concerns have also played an important role in limiting instruction to forms at the expense of functional language use. In part because of the idea of thresholds and the accuracy performance distinction we limit instruction to the problem area we encounter in our students rather than moving them vertically up on some sort of scale. Instead we run in circles, moving laterally back and forth on the assumption that this is best way to fix these errors.

The CAH, with the resulting negative focus, has led to the avoidance of any kind of transfer as the supposed main outcome of transfer was negative. Thus, in many cases students are strongly encouraged to try to keep their languages as separate as they can (as if this were possible). Teachers of English typically make few references to the learners L1 for fear that it might lead to negative transfer. Translation is seen as a crime in additional language learning and students feel guilty and apologize vehemently for doing what comes naturally. The L1 is seen not as something that is any way useful but rather an evil that needs to be curtailed and that is a real shame because the L1 is a pivotal tool in L2 development.

3. Odlin (2002), in addressing some of the bigger issues in language transfer, focuses on two contrasting theories linguistic relativity and universals. Very briefly, what are these theories? Also, and more importantly, how might they affect transfer?

In this paper Odlin contrasts two theories, linguistic relativity or relativism and universalism in relation to transfer or cross-linguistic effects. These are important concepts in the area of transfer in that relativism predicts an all-encompassing, unrestricted transfer while universalism predicts limited transfer, if at all.

The major idea, or the logical conclusion, of relativism is that one’s language affects one’s thoughts. Like many theories and even theories of transfer to which it is very strongly connected, relativism has risen and fallen in popularity. For the last ten years or maybe even a bit more it has been on the rise again after a stunning fall due to the strong position in generative linguistics that language and thought are not connected. We may even take this further from the system of cognition (thought) specifically and posit that all other cognitive systems are also affected by each other and that language plays a special role in all these areas. These systems would include perception, attention (and consciousness), movement, memory, emotion, language and cognition (thought) (Ratey, 2001). It is not hard to imagine the important role that language, or a language, plays in helping to shape and then also run each of these systems since these systems are formed and altered on the basis of their use (LeDoux, 2002). In a hierarchically organized system of functions in the brain cognition (thought) is the highest of these different systems and as a result
is a product of all of them. Within language itself there are of course also specific concerns related to linguistic forms, structures (linguistically internal) and patterns (both internal and external) which are of concern in relation to transfer. The basic idea is that the brain self-structures around use. Thus, over time the brain becomes more and more adept at efficiently making use of the structures that are present and vertical transfer becomes a very powerful force. While lateral transfer also applies, when considering two different but similar systems lateral transfer takes on the aspects of both positive and negative aspects.

Of several universal theories of language, the most influential of which is Chomsky's UG. Although this theory has gone through many far-reaching manifestations since its inception, one of the very basic core principles of UG and all other universal theories is that languages differ from each other in limited and principled ways. Universals impose limitations on the structures of languages. Thus, no two languages can be different in unlimited or even unpredictable ways. As for UG, these differences can be traced back to highly controlled differences in parameter settings, so in effect all the differences we see between languages are finite (limited) and principled. This in and of itself is going to impose strong limitations on transfer. But as we shall also see next week UG does not cover all aspects of language. Other models of universals, such as the less influential Greenberg model may cover more different aspects of language, such as language change, but recent research into contact linguistics has shown that there may not be universal limitations on language change (McWhorter, 2000).

In conclusion Odlin takes a middle of the road approach in trying to somehow reconcile what seems to be irreconcilable. He sees universalist positions as laying an important role in trying to limit and in some ways possibly define relativist approaches. This was a valid approach at the time of publication but Odlin has also seen future trends in that the pendulum of theory has shifted away from universalist approaches and swung more in the direction of a stronger relativist position on language and the way in which language systems affect each other in both learning and use.

4. We read three different studies of transfer. What do these studies tell us about where transfer occurs and how? Provide a brief description.

Each of these articles offers us something a little different. The article from Paradis and Crago on the use of pronominals in French and English is a rather straightforward study based on aspects of the CAH but is innovative in its use of participants with SLI. Crompton’s article on Arabic students use of articles in English shows us the current shift back to the L1 as a major cause of errors in L2 even where the languages are actually quite similar. The Paradis and Crago article is also a good example of literal transfer in that it deals with a specific aspect of linguistic structure which does not need to be evaluated from a metaphorical perspective. Crompton’s subject, articles straddles both literal and figural transfer in that the use of articles is based on a frame or conceptualization of what the definite article does. The Gomez and Reason article on the transfer of phonological skills is again different in that it provides an example of figural transfer in that it is dealing with a skill area. Skill areas such as phonological awareness and sound-to spelling correspondences are based on a wide array of integrated knowledge and are therefore figural.

Thus, we can see in these three different studies some of the trends related to studies of transfer. Of these studies the one by Paradis and Crago is the most traditional and it even likens L2 learners to those with language impairments. I am not sure I am completely comfortable with this comparison but it does provide us with a model of how many people still view L2 learners as ‘damaged’ as compared with L1 users. The Crompton article is a modern day study of error
analysis. It also brings us full circle in that it suggests that negative transfer from the L1 is also a major contributor. Interestingly, it is also quite a throwback to the days of error analysis and a negative focus in SLA. It seems to me that the learners are actually doing quite well. With an accuracy score for articles hovering around 90% things don’t look so bad. There are also some aspects of this study which were not taken into account, specifically the setting of the study. Since it has been shown that peoples linguistic performance in both L1 and L2 varies based on context this might be a concern here. Grosjean’s (2001) theory of language mode states that people function in different modes that involve more or less simultaneous use of the speakers different languages in gradients from predominantly monolingual to fully bilingual. The Gomez and Reason study of transfer of phonological skills from Malay to English is an interesting study in that it has a positive bend. It shows clearly that the learners’ L1 can have a facilitating effect on the L2 and in possibly predictable ways. This is quite different from the other papers we read but one is beginning to see more studies like this emerging in second language learning publications, thus blurring the once very clear distinctions between bilingualism and SLA as fields of study.

5. Transfer has often been focused on in a negative light. Do you think transfer can be positive? Provide some examples and explanation.

We would like to see transfer as a positive thing rather than something negative, but this requires us to change our perceptions about much of what has formed the basis of what has been important in SLA and also language teaching. If we look at the small bits of language (as exemplified in Crompton, 2011) we will always be able to find problems that students have with an L2 and undoubtedly these problems do arise, at least in part, due to L1 effects. But to focus on these problems at the expense of the big picture is a real shame. Once more, to attempt to keep languages separate and actually compel learners to miss opportunities to make language learning through positive L1 transfer is a serious problem. In effect we are making the TL much harder to learn by not focusing on positive, facilitative transfer. One of the more promising ways to do this is to look beyond literal transfer of structural and semantic elements of language but look at figural transfer. The transfer of schemas and concepts underlying language and language use are bound to be facilitative, if even only partially. For example, instead of focusing on individual phonemes as a problematic area of language learning, by teaching the different systems and reminding people of how these things work in their L1 as a system. We also need to look at levels areas above those that are purely structural. A key area for transfer and actually more positive transfer would be that of pragmatics (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Since pragmatics is where language and the world interact directly and the world itself is much more similar than languages and their forms then it has been argued that there are more universals in the area of pragmatics than in structural areas of language. The underlying concepts of language use are often similar, even across languages that are aligned with significantly different cultural traditions because language plays similar roles across cultures.

As discussed in class positive transfer is based on similarities found between languages. We need to think beyond just structural elements but into functional realms. It is important to think about what we ask our students to do with the TL. If we ask students to do things with English that they also do and do well with Korean then we can expect positive transfer as we have done something to facilitate it. As with the Malaysian study we read, a situation has to be created where transfer is necessary. As language is a tool we use for solving problems then we need to confront our students with situation involving the use of language to solve problems, even mundane ones such as a decision making task regarding where one should eat or what exit to take to escape the
Language is above all else situational. Planning considering situations and functional goals first will lead to more transfer. We can tend to forms and accuracy as something that is very much secondary.

References


Cook, V. (1999). Going Beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching. TESOL Quarterly 33,2, 185-209.


