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The Impact of L1 Interference on Second Language Learning: A Case Study of Fante Second Language Learners of English

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex dynamics of first-language interference in second-language learning, with an emphasis on how it affects Ghanaian Fante students learning English. To address this, the study adopted a thematic analysis through semi-structured questions that involved 20 junior high school students in the central region of Ghana. Utilising a word association task, the study's results revealed significant contributing factors such as confidence, lexical knowledge, and translation (L1 interference), which substantially strengthened our understanding of its influence on second language learning among Fante speakers. This study significantly advances the subject by offering complex insights into the challenges and implications associated with L1 interference in language learning among Fante students in Ghana. These findings provide educators, stakeholders, management, governments, policymakers, and researchers with fresh insights into second-language acquisition in Ghana and the struggles of Fante students in learning the second language, English.

KEYWORDS: *Word Association, L1 interference, Lexical development, L2 acquisition*

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1. INTRODUCTION

An individual's first language is the language he or she learns to communicate with before the age of three. It is also referred to as the mother tongue, as it is mostly passed on by the mother to her child, and as the native language since it is passed on to the child during primary socialisation. This language (the first language) serves as the foundation and a vital tool in the second language learning process, and for this study, the Fante language is spoken mainly in the Central region of Ghana. Although it's necessary for communicative purposes and second language acquisition, the first language tends to interfere with second language acquisition (Karim & Nassaji, 2013), because, in the production of the second language, be it writing or speaking, the language learner tends to rely on their first language structures to be able to communicate efficiently, regardless of how right or wrong they come out (Albuquerque & Duarte, 2020; Bhela, 1999). Therefore, learning a second language is influenced by the similarities between the first and second languages. This means that learners of a language are less likely to make structural errors when the first and second languages have similar language structures but more likely to make errors when the structures differ (e.g., Aronin & Toubkin, 2002; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Kakar & Sarwari, 2022)

The part of the brain responsible for the retention of words is the mental lexicon. It is the space where the meaning of the word, its structure, and its use are stored in memory (Elman, 2004). Most scholars have acknowledged that how the mental lexicon is arranged is unknown; therefore, there is a need for its investigation (e.g., (Aitchison, 2003; Channell, 1990; Meara, 1990). It is believed that the mental lexicon should have an organisational system that aids the language learner in language learning.

Thus, scholars in recent years have fallen onto the word association task, which involves producing the first thing that comes to mind at the sight of a word or image, to investigate the arrangement of the mental lexicon of the second language learner (e.g., Appel, 1989; Galton, 1879; Kohlmann, 2014; Spätgens & Schoonen, 2020). These investigations have led to the development of various organisational models, such

as the hierarchal network model (BÁTYI, 2012; Collins & Ross Quillian, 1969; Kroll J & Stewart, 1994), the spreading activation model (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Monaikul, 2015), and the distributed feature model, which gives a graphical view of the arrangement of the mental lexicon.

The mode of instruction in the Ghanaian educational system in early childhood education has been unsettled since 1957, with the language of instruction being either the native language of the child or the English language. For example, in 1967, the medium of instruction was solely English from kindergarten, and then in 2002, the medium of instruction changed to the native language from kindergarten to primary three (with the English language as just a subject), and then English from primary four (with the native language as a subject). This policy meant the translation of all textbooks into the native language by the teacher before teaching. This policy, which doubles as the current policy, is barely adhered to due to the language problems faced by teachers in the upper primary classes (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2015). Notwithstanding, employing L1 in L2 teaching has, therefore, been a major problem, as L1 has been known to have a negative impact on L2 learning ((Rahim & Ahmadi, 2021). Furthermore, it validates the contrastive analysis hypothesis, which states that the use of L1 in language teaching can be a hindrance to mastering a second language, for which reason it is highly discouraged in second language learning (Saputra, 2020)

The problem of the current study in language learning is what Ellis, (1997) calls a transfer, which is the influence the learner's first language exerts over the acquisition of a second language. Lott, (1983) refers to this influence as an "interference of the mother tongue," as it causes the language learner to make errors in the second language. Mixing L1 and English is a phenomenon found among all native languages in Ghana. Not only is it common among the uneducated, but it is also common among children or second language learners (e.g., Dansieh, 2018; Essien et al., 2022), and the Ghanaian language instruction policy, in light of this, does not help in the eradication of this problem. Therefore, Ghanaian teachers in rural areas have had to battle this interference over the years as pupils tend to still mix up their first and second languages in upper primary or prefer to communicate in the first language, which affects their academic performance (Dansieh, 2018).

Previous studies on language learning in Ghanaian students have focused on aspects of L2 teaching, such as L2 as a medium of teaching and its problems (e.g., Dansieh, 2018; Osei-Boateng, 2022; Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2015). Others have also looked at factors influencing classroom communication gaps (e.g., Essien et al., 2022). While these studies have done well to add to the academic literature on the general overview of language adherence in Ghana (e.g., (Owu-Ewie, 2006), studies on the factors contributing to L1 interference (Fante) in second language acquisition (English) in Ghana are scarce. Therefore, as a contribution to the existing literature on language learning among Ghanaian students, this study seeks to uncover whether this interference only brings trouble to the Ghanaian teacher or uncovers a hidden clue to the language or lexical development of the language learner by answering the following research questions:

1. Is L1 interference a sign of lexical development?
2. Does L1 interference negatively affect L2 learning?
3. Does L1 interference positively affect L2 learning?

The main aim of this study is to identify the impacts of L1 (Fante) interference on second language acquisition (English) and its implications for the language learner. It also contributes to the body of research on L1 interference in Ghana, which is barely represented in both this area and second language acquisition (SLA).

The findings of this research revealed that confidence, lexical knowledge, and translation (L1 interference) are some factors that impact second language learning among Fante students in Ghana. Hence, this study offers empirical studies on L1 language interference by providing a fresh perspective from Ghana.

The remaining part of this study digs into a thorough literature assessment, followed by a methodology in Section 3. The findings and discussion in Section 4 and Section 5 feature the conclusion, implications, and future research suggestions of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In language learning, every word encountered experiences translation from or into the first language (Altarriba, 1992; B de Groot, 1992; Chen & Ng, 1989). This translation in second language acquisition is sometimes regarded as interference. Apart from it being believed to be an interaction between both languages for a smooth language learning process, another school of thought holds that it has a negative impact on second language learning, hence the term "interference" (Kakar & Sarwari, 2022; Köpke & Genevska-Hanke, 2018).

Distributed Feature Model

This model, developed in 1998 by De Groot and her colleagues, adapts the spreading activation model but

concerns translation. In this model, B de Groot, (1992) establishes that words in the mental lexicon of the bilingual undergo or experience translation on the first encounter. In other words, a bilingual is always or most of the time able to translate a word from one language to another in a functionally acceptable manner (e.g., (Altarriba, 1992; Chen & Ng, 1989; Meyer et al., 1974), which helps them retain the meaning of the word.

For this reason, words in the second language sometimes carry elements of the first language semantically due to the primary translation (Jiang, 2000). Conversely, the model focuses on the cross-linguistic differences between languages (Pavlenko, 2009). It also highlights the findings that bilinguals translate concrete words faster and easier than abstract words (e.g., B de Groot, 1992; Kroll J & Stewart, 1994). This is because a concrete word mostly shares a common meaning and link between the first and second languages compared to an abstract word. Therefore, abstract words in between languages could be more ambiguous than concrete words, while equivalents to concrete words are more easily found among languages than abstract words (W., Duyck & Brysbaert, 2004; W. Duyck, 2004; Sunderman & Kroll, 2006). Figure 1 below is an illustration of the distributed feature model adopted from B de Groot (1992) with the word "father" and its Fante equivalent, "egya.".

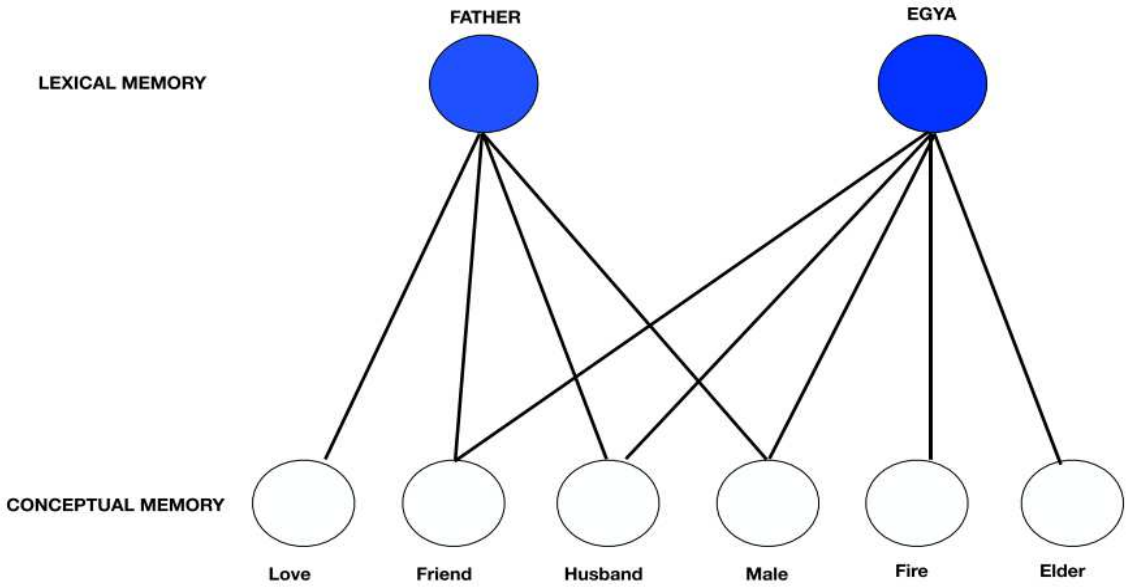

Fig 1: The Distributed Feature model (adapted from B. De Groot, 1992, 1993)

The Distributed Feature model above (Fig. 1) can be seen as an improvement on the Word Association model by Potter, So, von Eckardt, and Feldman (1984), which presupposes that a word (an L2 word) is connected by its conceptual characterization (Menenti & Donders, 2006); for the sake of this model, it is connected by its conceptual representation in the conceptual memory. In other words, when an L2 speaker is presented with a word, they first activate its L1 form in the lexical memory from where the meaning of the word is accessed. The understanding of the word can therefore be found in conceptual memory, where the learner attributes the word to other concepts to help him or her remember the meaning of the word.

The Neurolinguistic Approach to Bilingualism, as a result, looks at ascertaining how two or more languages are stored in the brain and how they are processed (Meuter, 1994). Thus, evidence from this approach and the current model (the distributed feature model) shows that there is often a conceptual overlap in language learning and processing (e.g., De Groot, 2000; Francis, 2005). That is, subjects are found to use the same conceptual representations, which results in similar semantic cross-linguistic priming effects (e.g., Chen & Ng, 1989). Also, from the figure above (Fig. 1), the interconnection or overlap in conceptual meaning can be assumed to contribute to the meaning of the word and an expansion in the understanding of the word as well as the vocabulary of the second language learner.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on qualitative research in which the researcher applied a word association task developed to examine the organisation of semantic memory, the representation of meanings and concepts over the years, and especially how native (L1) speakers or second language (L2) learners at different levels of proficiency organise their lexical knowledge (Kohlmann, 2014). The word association task was a single continuous test, where the participant was allowed to give as many responses as he could give

within a stipulated time when shown a word. It was conducted in a basic school in the Central Region of Ghana, on first and second-year junior high school students.

Participants

The participants of this study were 20 first- and second-year students of a junior high school in the Central Region of Ghana, aged between 13 and 15. They had Fante as their L1 and English as their L2. The average number of years of English language study experience and studies in English (L2) was 8 years. The participants were divided into three proficiency groups, namely, advanced (10), intermediate (5), and native L1 speakers (5).

Materials

Twenty-five words were selected from the textbook used for teaching and learning in the school. Fifteen (15) of these were English (L2) words (Appendix 1) and ten (10) Fante (L1) words (Appendix 2). Participants provided their sheets of paper for the spelling test, and a laptop with a PowerPoint presentation was used for the display of the words during the word association task, with each word set to remain on the screen for a maximum of 10 seconds.

Data Collection

Spelling

The first task was a spelling test. Participants underwent an oral-written spelling test, which was used to group them into the three proficiency levels stated above. The first was the English spelling test, where participants were to write the words mentioned by the researcher. This was followed promptly by the Fante spelling test. Participants were to write on their papers their names and classes before submitting.

Word Association Task

The main tool for this study is the word association task. The words used in the spelling test were used for this task. Each word was displayed on a screen for ten seconds with the use of a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, and each participant was allowed to give as many words as they could for each word displayed. The words were supposed to be in the respective languages; therefore, where an English word was displayed, an English cue word was expected, and where a Fante word was displayed, a Fante cue word was expected.

For further meticulous analysis, the oral exercise was recorded. In addition, the researcher wrote on the respective test sheets the cue word responses of each participant, comments from the participants about language learning, and comments by the researcher concerning their difficulties during the word association task.

Data analysis

The recorded word association test data gained from this research was transcribed, coded, and analysed using thematic analysis. The recurring themes are translation (L1 interference), confidence, and lexical knowledge. The word association and spelling test findings were tabulated, and each participant's comments and the researcher's observations were added to the table.

4. Findings and Discussion

At the end of the exercise, 261 responses were produced in the English (L2) word association task. 146 were produced by the advanced learner group, 63 by the intermediate group, and 52 by the native group. To fulfil the study's aim of identifying the impact of L1 on L1 learning, only the English word association task was analysed.

The comments were categorised into three main themes: translation (L1 interference), confidence, and lexical knowledge, which will be presented and discussed in detail below.

Translation (L1 interference)

The first language interference was in the form of translations. Wei et al., (2020) describe the first language as a tool for language learning, which could be helpful or detrimental to second language learning. Furthermore, Kroll J & Stewart, (1994) explain this as the second language being connected to the first language translation rather than to concepts in the early stages, and this explains the high L1 interference among native and intermediate participants during the word association task.

Although the mode of instruction during the word association task was English and Fante, participants were still caught under the influence of their first language. It was observed that 13 participants initially responded in Fante to the English stimulus words before switching quickly to English after prompting or upon remembering the instructions for the WAT. Some, due to this, required a constant reminder to respond in English since they tended to switch to Fante responses in the middle of the exercise, an event that led to participants mixing languages during the English word association task. This was seen more among intermediate speakers.

Some of the participants, mostly native speakers, asked for the translation of their cue words into English after responding in their L1 to a stimulus word. Others mouthed the L1 cue word as a trigger for its L2 translation before finally responding.

For example;

1. ***Born*** – i. "*da a wɔdze woo wo"*
   ii "Date of birth"
2. ***Restaurant*** – i. "*wodidzi"*
   ii "to eat"

"Born" was the fourth stimulus word, while "***restaurant"*** was the seventh stimulus word in the word list. After being prompted to use English during the English WAT, an intermediate participant still responded with an L1 word for an English stimulus word. This factor led to some participants moving from the advanced speaker category to the intermediate category. The participants performed well in the spelling test but mixed the first and second languages in the WAT.

On the impacts of L1 interference on students, translation helped participants in this study build on their lexical knowledge. This was a result of them learning new words to build their lexical knowledge when they were corrected or furnished with translated words during the word association task. Also, previous studies reveal that learners make fewer mistakes when the language structures between languages are similar (e.g., Masood et al., 2020), and this supports the argument that L1 structures are relied on during L2 learning or acquisition (e.g., Ali Fatemi et al., 2012; Galasso, 2002; Masood et al., 2020). Since Fante and English have similar language structures and borrowed words, it was relatively easy for participants to infer from L1 some of the L2 words.

Lexical knowledge

Another prevalent observation was the lexical knowledge of the participants. According to Touchie (1986), L1 interference affects important aspects of language such as phonology, syntax, morphology, and lexicon, with errors being seen in all of these areas (Masood et al., 2020). Thus, the most common errors found in this study were lexical and phonological, where participants mixed the first and second languages during the word association task.

While some spoke about their problems with language learning in a grammatically accurate manner, others did so in broken English. On the other hand, the cue words produced suggested problems with phonological links. For example, for the stimulus word "Chores," the participant responded "food." This suggests that the participant had in mind "choice," which has a different meaning from the stimulus word.

Also, the lexical knowledge of the stimulus words was reflected in how participants pronounced stimulus words unaided and clearly while giving more responses and in the type of cue word they responded with. Although the participants were only supposed to give cue words, most participants chose to first mention the stimulus word before giving a cue word. Constant reminders from the researcher about the lack of need to mention the word before responding proved futile.

This highlighted that mentioning the stimulus word, loudly or silently, served as a trigger for the language learner to access its meaning and category in his or her mental lexicon. It also helped the participants to be reminded that they are supposed to respond in English (L2) and not Fante (L1) or Fante (L1) and not English (L2). Furthermore, some of the participants, at the end of their word association task, stated whether they understood the words or not. For example, during the word association task, a participant, instead of giving a cue word, shakes his or her head and says, "Please, I do not understand this word" or "I do not know the word," while others, mostly native speakers, responded in broken English ('Fanglish') that they understood the stimulus word but have trouble producing it in L2.

Notwithstanding, it is common to come across an L1 word being used during an L2 conversation when the speaker cannot seem to find the L2 word. Since the language learner has no idea of the word in the L2, he may at some point seek the L2 word or have the chance to be corrected and furnished with the right word in the L2. This will further help the learner build on his lexical knowledge.

Confidence

Language learner anxiety is a common phenomenon in second language learning. It is known to have adverse effects on the performance (mostly oral performance) of second-language learners of English (Woodrow, 2006). Confidence played a significant role in the study. Participants, especially from the first-year classes, were mostly tense and shy, not wanting to show up for the study out of fear of showing they could not speak English. This highlighted the problem of emotion from L1 to L2, where the language learner is moved by their emotions instead of their knowledge, and for which reason they choose or do not feel the need to be involved in the language learning process (Akbari & Pishghadam, 2022; Kakar & Sarwari, 2022; Pishghadam et al., 2019).

As proficiency increased, less L1 interference was recorded. This is because participants with increased proficiency were confident enough to communicate in the L2 to show the degree of their lexical knowledge; this aspect was observed as participants preferred to speak the L2 (English) during the L1 (Fante) word

association task, contrary to the expectations of the participant during a Fante word association task.

On the other hand, some participants had to be urged to speak up, while at other times, the researcher had to pause the task and engage the participants to help them ease up for the word association task.

This was a contributing factor to most of the first-year participants being in the intermediate and native groups (7 in total). This finding describes some affective factors such as motivation, interest, and anxiety that have been known to influence second language acquisition (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; taysi, 2015). On the other hand, the second-year participants produced words confidently. Some of them took advantage of the task to talk about their struggles in learning languages, especially reading and writing their first language, Fante.

5. Implications

In second language learning, the language learner is sometimes expected to let go of old language habits (mostly L1) to accommodate new language learning habits (Mitchell et al., 2019). Therefore, in the case of students in parts of Ghana (rural areas) who have their lessons translated from L2 to L1 in the early years of education, from kindergarten to primary 3, it will take more time to be able to fully learn an L2 as there has to be a series of translations before a topic can be completed. This implies that L1 interference will call for a series of translations and corrections, which can be time-consuming and affect learning periods.

The reactions and responses of the participants showed that it is very important that language teachers help their students build upon their reading and communication skills through encouragement, class activities, and many more. The government, on the other hand, should ensure the existence of well-equipped libraries in all public basic schools to help learners easily access materials that will help improve their English language, oral, cognitive, and writing skills.

These findings hereby contribute to the current body of L1 research, particularly in the Ghanaian context. The data collection gave teachers at the school a chance to hear their students talk about language learning and their difficulties. This act served as a wake-up call to teachers to adopt new teaching strategies and methodologies that will promote a smooth English language learning process. Since the Ghanaian perspective is underrepresented in this field, further research can be conducted in this area to provide a varying view of language learning.

5.1. Limitations and Conclusion

The current study studied the impact of L1 interference on Fante second-language learners of English. It revealed that words are arranged in the same fashion in the mental lexicon of the learner, and for that reason, the Fante learner relied on these first language structures to learn the second language.

L1 interference has been argued to have negative effects on language learning due to factors such as limited lexical knowledge, a lack of L2 proficiency, and other related contextual factors (Montle, 2022). Contrarily, this study revealed that lexical knowledge, confidence, and L1 interference impacted second-language learning in diverse ways and aided or impeded a smooth second-language process. Therefore, to answer the research questions, it can be concluded that the absence of L1 interference is a sign of lexical development. It can also be regarded as a strategy for the second language learner to learn new words and new L2 language structures in the target language. Also, it can be concluded that, while L1 interference was a sign of lexical development, it had a greater negative effect on second language learners than a positive effect.

The confidence level of participants served as a limitation of the study. Most of the participants were shy at the beginning of the exercise. In the middle of the exercise, the participants grew more tense as they were shy and scared of making mistakes. Also, the sample size was too small, and future research should consider a larger sample size to better reflect the impacts of first-language interference on second-language acquisition.

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