

## **HE USE A SQUARE SHIRT: FIRST LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN THE WRITING OF HISPANIC ESL LEARNERS**

*C. William Schweers*

### **Introduction**

Learners of a second language are bound to find themselves in situations in which they don't have adequate vocabulary for their communicative needs. This is particularly true of beginners, although learners at all levels encounter such problems. What do learners do when faced with the need to communicate but lack the lexical resources to communicate their intended meaning? What usually happens, if they don't abandon the attempt all together, is that they use one of a number of communication strategies. A common strategy used is based on first language transfer. Such a strategy is defined by Zhang (1990) as

a strategy that consciously or subconsciously draws on the learners's previous linguistic knowledge, which includes not only the knowledge of his/her native language but also the existing knowledge of other languages, whatever little knowledge he/she has acquired of the target language (be it accurate or inaccurate), and his/her expectations about the target language. (3-4)

Thus learners often muster all their previous linguistic resources to try to solve communication problems. Additionally, they may make appeals for assistance or resort to non-linguistic means such as the use of mime.

The study reported on here focuses on incidences of lexical transfer as a communicative/learning strategy in the written English of beginning Hispanic ESL learners. Reiterating Zhang, transfer has been defined by Faerch and Kasper (1987) as “an IL [interlanguage] plan containing a L1 [first language] subplan” (115). That is to say that it is a plan for communication using interlanguage information which includes an element or elements inspired by L1 knowledge. Adjémian (1983) defines transfer as “the use of past experience in the acquisition of a new task” (251). Thus transfer can be understood not only as a communication strategy, but also as a learning strategy. As Zhang (1990) has stated, “language transfer is ultimately motivated by the learner’s need, sometimes very urgent need indeed, to learn and to communicate” (9).

We might note that the term “transfer” evokes the idea of movement. Yet as Coleman (1988) points out, nothing goes anywhere during activation of L1 knowledge, nothing is physically transferred between L1 and IL knowledge systems. All that happens is that a knowledge source other than that of the L2 (second or target language) is accessed and activated to solve a communication problem. That knowledge source may be the L1 or other languages the learner may know.

Many other attempts have been made to categorize types of first language transfer. Some of these (Faerch and Kasper 1983; Bialystok 1984, 1990) have focused on the transfer product, while others (Poulisse 1993) have focused on the transfer process in communication strategy use. Later in this paper Poulisse’s (1993) paradigm for categorizing communication strategies will be explained in detail. As we will see, two of the three types of communication strategies she defines are based largely on transfer

### **The Study**

Thirty-two ESL learners from the Educational Services Basic English program (i.e., educationally and socially disadvantaged first year students) at the Bayamón University Technological College

### **He use a square shirt: First language transfer...**

in Puerto Rico were asked to write detailed descriptions of a simple ink drawing of a restaurant kitchen. This picture was one of a pair of pictures in which the second picture has eight points of difference from the first. This is a game which is often found in newspapers. Participants were asked to describe the picture in sufficient detail so that someone looking at the second picture alone could recognize the differences. They were given 30 minutes to complete the task. These descriptions then became the corpus which was analyzed for incidences of communication strategy use through transfer. Learners were also asked to underline lexical items which they had had problems in producing. They were also requested to list in Spanish words they needed in their descriptions but for which they could not think of an English equivalent. Learners' retrospections about the problems they had had with the underlined words and the cases of transfer which were recognized in their production were tape recorded and analyzed. They were evaluated on a scale from 0 to 12 and thus a measure of interlingual awareness was obtained. Also, the descriptions were reviewed and cases were counted where inappropriate forms that seemed to have been inspired by L1 knowledge were used. In this way data were gathered which permitted the researcher to analyze transfer use and study the relationship between interlingual awareness and unsuccessful first language transfer.

Seventy-two percent of the sample were women. Twenty-nine out of the 32 subjects (90.6%) attended a public high school, the rest attended private schools. In this case, we have over representation as only about 54.5% of the first year class had gone to public school. This is an indicator of the relatively disadvantaged academic background of these Educational Services students. Another indicator is the College Board score in English that they submitted when they applied for admission to the university system. The average for the 32 participants was 452 while the average for the first year class in general was approximately 521. Thus, this primarily female sample of public school graduates was weak in English when it initiated its first year English program. This study was conducted at the end of their first year of university English studies.

These subjects were just completing the Educational Services Basic English program. This theme-based program has a strong communicative focus, engaging students from the start in meaningful and authentic language use. A great deal of emphasis

is given to writing. Students do frequent free writing, write a letter to their teacher, do a four part sequenced writing project, and produce a written final report. Thus these students were ready to write, perhaps more so than students from the conventional Basic English sections, in spite of the deficit with which Educational Students began their first year of English. Most, by the end of the year, are able to produce writing which communicates clearly although numerous grammatical and lexical anomalies are present in their written production.

### **Communication Strategies and Transfer**

In defining her process-based paradigm of communication strategies, Poulisse relies heavily on Levelt's (1989) model of language production. This model, originally postulated to explain L1 production, can be adapted to also explain L2 production. According to Levelt, language production consists of four steps: message generation, grammatical encoding, phonological encoding, and articulation. Levelt further defines these mental processing components: the *conceptualizer*, the *formulator*, and the *speech-comprehension system*. Each component involves a number of procedures. These make up the learner's procedural knowledge, which in turn allows him or her to operate on the declarative knowledge that emerges during the encoding process.

The conceptualizer is where the content and form of the preverbal message are generated. The preverbal message is formulated in lexical chunks which may, for example, specify [+human], [+male], [+child], [+noun] and [+English (the language of encoding)]. Such a specification would activate the lexical concept BOY (from a store of conceptual declarative knowledge) plus related items such as MAN, GIRL, CHILD, and their translation equivalents. Since BOY is the only item which exactly matches the specification, it receives the highest degree of activation (Poulisse 1993). If, however, the word BOY were not available to the language user for access, he may substitute another related and known term which was activated and which shares a number of the specifications.

The formulator is responsible for grammatical and phonological encoding. To achieve this, it must have access to a

### He use a square shirt: First language transfer...

mental lexicon, a second source of linguistic declarative knowledge. The semantic and syntactic information found in the lexicon are referred to as the *lemma*. The morphological and phonological information define the form of a lexical item to be used (BOY vs. BOYS). When lexical information (the lemma) is activated, a surface grammatical structure is generated which is further processed by the phonological encoder (the form). The speech-comprehension system reviews both internal and overt speech for comprehensibility. The outcome of this review is fed into the monitoring device of the conceptualizer, thus giving the language user another opportunity to evaluate and repair the message.

This model helps explain why L1 and L1-influenced lexical items can and do appear in L2 production. L1 and its equivalent L2 items share all the same specifications in the preverbal message chunk except the language of encoding. Thus highly frequent lexical items may be activated in the L1 before they are activated in the L2, giving us examples of code switching. This occurs quite frequently with function words (Poulisse and Bongaerts 1994). As Poulisse (1993) states, "frequent L1 lexical items occasionally reach the activation level required for lexical access before the corresponding new and therefore infrequent L2 lexical item" (177). Rather than use the L1 form, the user may choose to modify or foreignize it to be more L2-like. In the case of low frequency items, no L2 equivalent may be available in the learner's lexicon, thus the learner has only three recourses available: message abandonment, invention based on the form of the L1 item, or some kind of L2 substitution or paraphrasing. L2 substitution would occur using items which share many but not all of the specified traits or items which are derived through analogy. Perceptions of L1 formal and/or semantic relatedness are relied upon.

Poulisse (1993) has defined three distinct communication strategies. These are (1) *substitution* strategies, (2) *substitution-plus* strategies, and (3) *reconceptualization* strategies. When a learner uses a substitution strategy, the intended lexical item is substituted by another word, either from the L2 or the L1. In many cases the learner knows an L2 word which can somehow or other be related to the target concept which can be used to replace the more appropriate target item. In this case, the substitution word is used instead of the more suitable or correct L2 word or phrase.

