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L1 Transfer / L1 Interference in Students' Academic Writing (Practice)

This study aims to analyze errors in academic writing practices by Central Asian, university students enrolled in advanced English for Academic Purposes course focusing on research writing and reading. Research essays written by 40 first-and second-year students were initially analyzed to categorize the typical errors as a result of Russian language interference/transfer. Russian was assumed to be the first language (L1) in the present research due to the fact that it was named as the language most frequently utilized by respondents both individually and in their families. The researchers explored the way that multilingual speakers of languages that share certain similar syntactic structures (e.g., Kazakh and Russian) demonstrate language interference and transfer. Learners demonstrated transfer/interference in areas like grammar structures (construction of sentences, participles and cases), prepositions and collocations to name a few. The theoretical framework underpinning this study was outlined and discussed in a separate article.

Key words: Second language writing, second language acquisition, English language education, English in higher education.

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Қазақ студенттерінің академиялық жазылым жұмыстарында кездесетін орыс тілі интерференциясы

Зерттеу жұмысының мақсаты орталық азиялық жоғары оқу орындарының бірінде студенттердің академиялық оқылым және жазылым курстары бойынша ғылыми жұмыстарды орындау барысында жіберетін қате түрлеріне сараптама жасау. Зерттеу барысында 1 және 2-курстың 40 студентінің жазба жұмыстарына тән типтік қате түрлері анықталды. Олардың қалыптасуы респонденттердің қарым-қатынаста жиі қолданатын орыс тілі интерференциясының нәтижесі екені айқындалды. Зерттеу қорытындысы студенттердің грамматикалық құрылымдармен (есімше, көсемше оралымды сөйлемдер), көмекші сөздердің қолданылуымен байланысты қателерді және пунктуациялық қателерді жиі жіберетінін көрсетіп отыр.

Түйін сөздер: шет тіліндегі жазылым, шет тілін оқу, ағылшын тілін оқу, жоғары оқу орнындағы ағылшын тілі.

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Интерференция русского языка в академическом письме студентов-казахов

Целью данного исследования является анализ ошибок в письменных работах студентов одного из центральноазиатских университетов, сделанных ими во время выполнения заданий курса по

академическому чтению и научному письму. В работах 40 студентов первого и второго курсов были выявлены типичные ошибки, имевшие место в результате интерференции русского языка, который был назван респондентами как наиболее часто применяемый ими язык. Результаты исследования показали, что студенты чаще всего делают ошибки в грамматических структурах (синтаксических, причастных и падежных оборотах), предлогах и словосочетаниях, в пунктуации и т. д.

Ключевые слова: письмо на иностранном языке, изучение иностранного языка, обучение английскому языку, английский язык в высшем образовании.

Introduction

Looking at writing samples produced by 40 multilingual Kazakhstani students enrolled at a private university of their capstone English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course (an advanced English reading and writing for research purposes) over the course of one semester, this paper examines the interaction between students' Russian and English language repertoires as seen in their final papers. Corpus analysis was used to compare drafts of the final papers to see how students interpreted global feedback comments from the instructors and to see if students were able to recognize when they were using 'non-idiomatic English.' By looking at students' writings, this paper examines how the writing process may contribute to students' general English language acquisition. [1]

Project

The corpus that was used in this paper was taken from students' final papers submitted as the final assessment for this course. The papers were the product of a semester-long project in which students had to conduct an original, primary research project. Instructors allowed students to choose their topics within class-specific parameters in the hope that this would generate students' intrinsic motivation to write about their topics. The research project enabled students to produce a 5,000 word research paper by the end of the semester. Throughout the semester, students submitted components of their paper. The course adopted the assumption that process-writing enables students to grow not only as writers but as critical thinkers as develop new knowledge about their topic through experiential learning (i.e., conducting research).

The corpus. There are a range of studies which focuses on errors made in second language writing (L2) writing by learners with different language background [2; 3; 4] and on ways to respond to those errors [5; 6]. The most typical errors produced by L2 learners in their English writing practices in-

clude (but are not limited to) the following: tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure. [4] The production of different marked forms is attributed to the fact that students are able to access at least two languages, i.e., Russian (L1) and English (as a foreign language). The corpus revealed a range of areas where language interference/transfer between Russian and English was evident as seen below.

Results

Sentence structure. In Example 1, the structure of the sentence is not grammatically correct. The subject of the English sentence is missing and this hinders understanding of the sentence meaning. In the Russian translation, the omission of the subject does not cause any difficulty in its comprehension and the sentence structure corresponds to syntactical grammar rules. In Example 2, the sentence is complex consisting of two simple sentences. In the second clause the subject and predicate are implied. Their omission does not conflict with grammatical rules in Russian, whereas in English it breaches the requirements for building up sentences.

Example 1 – Sentence structure

In this <u>chapter</u> <u>will</u> be explained the Methodology of Research that was <u>made</u> for investigating
В этой главе будет объяснена методология исследования, которое было проведено для изучения
opinions of people about Kazakhstan's proposal to initiate commercial imports of radioactive wastes.
мнения людей о предложении Казахстана инициировать коммерческий импорт радиоактивных отходов.

English has a fixed word order, which means that every written declarative sentence must have a subject and a finite verb. In Russian, sentence

structure is looser and more flexible, i.e., sentence structure may change depending on its meaning or in order to place emphasis to a definite object in the sentence. Sentences may be bi-composite (i.e., having a subject and a predicate) and mono-composite (i.e., having only one main member, either a subject or a predicate). And because of its morphosyntax, sentences in Russian can consist of one undivided word ('нечленимые'). Thus, Examples 1 and 2 illustrate how language interference might be seen at the sentence level.

Example 2 – Sentence structure

More complex questions were posed at the beginning of the survey, <u>more easier</u> – to end.
Более сложные вопросы были помещены в начале опроса, более легкие – в конце.

Lexico-grammatical units. Russian is a syntactically synthetic language while English is an analytical language. Russian has six noun cases, three grammatical genders, and identifies perfective and imperfective aspects in verbs. On the other hand, English only has case in relation to pronouns and verbs are distinguished along simple and progressive aspects.

Case. As aforementioned, Russian has six cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, and prepositional. In English, personal pronouns have three morphological cases: nominative case (who? what?), objective/oblique case (whom? what?), and possessive/genitive case (whose?). But the absence of case in English is then compensated by the use of prepositions, e.g., in English 'to be friends with Kate' is translated into Russian as 'дружить с Катей'. But sometimes a preposition is not required in Russian. Instead, a single noun could function as a substitute in the definite case, e.g., 'to write with a pen' is translated into Russian as 'писать ручкой' (instrumental case). These types of discrepancies are visible in writing, e.g., 'верить кому-либо/чему-либо' ('to believe **to** somebody/something' instead of 'to believe somebody/something'); 'другими словами' ('by other words'); 'сказать кому-либо' ('to say to somebody').

In Example 3, the student has added the preposition 'of' to convey the idea of something being 'against something' even though in both languages no preposition is required. Students are confused by the issues of usage or non-usage of prepositions, and cases related to this discrepancy provoke them to make errors.

Example 3 – Case

Kazakhstan has already dealt up with the radioactive problem that
Казахстан уже имел дело с радиоактивной проблемой, которая
happened in Semipalatinsk polygon, and mostly because of that our population is <u>against of this proposal</u> .
имела место на Семипалатинском полигоне, и в основном поэтому наше население против этого предложения.

Prepositions. To continued the discussion then, the more general use of prepositions in English and Russian differ, e.g., 'нуждаться в помощи' ('to need in help' instead of 'to need help'); 'спросить у кого-либо' (to ask from somebody instead of 'to ask somebody'). In Example 4, the verb 'влиять' ('influence') requires a preposition 'на кого-либо/что-' ('to where or to what') whereas in English the preposition is missing 'to influence somebody/something'.

Example 4 – Prepositions

Since people's internal conditions are very important,
Поскольку внутренние условия людей очень важны,
communication skills of psychiatrists greatly <u>influence on</u> people.
коммуникативные умения психиатров очень влияют на людей.

Students typically made errors in cases where there was no required preposition in English but where Russian required a preposition, e.g., 'to face with somebody/something'; 'to join to somebody/something'; or 'to interrupt somebody from something.'

There were also cases when the English and Russian equivalent verbs required different prepositions but learners transferred Russian prepositions to English words, e.g., 'to look on'; 'to react on'; 'to contribute in'; 'an/to answer on'; 'on the street/on the picture/on the workplace/on the lesson/on the chart/on the diagram'; 'distributed between people'; 'be oriented on something'; 'to mention about'; or 'to share with something.'

Punctuation. English and Russian punctuation is based on different principles. Whereas Russian punctuation is regulated by strict syntactic rules, English punctuation is more bound by communica-

tive rules (although not entirely). In Example 5, the relative clause was separated by commas on both sides. In this case, Russian grammar rules require the presence of these commas, whereas in English, the presence of the comma is conditional on whether the relative clause is restrictive or non-restrictive. In this example, the comma was not needed since the clause was not restrictive, i.e., the information conveyed by the relative clause was not essential.

Example 5 – Punctuation

The <u>research, which</u> has been done by me, shows that some adopted children easily adapt to the new parents,
Исследование, которое было проведено мною, показывает, что некоторые усыновленные дети легко адаптируются к новым родителям,
to the new country and culture and easily get over the psychological and language barriers.
к новой стране и культуре и легко преодолевают психологические и языковые барьеры.

Students frequently applied commas to a variety of restrictive clauses, especially ones that are separated by ‘который/-ая/-ое/-ые’ which are equivalent to the English ‘who, whom, that, which’, e.g., ‘He just included opinions, quotations from people, who are against or for importing nuclear wastes.’

Word units. Evidence of language transfer or interference was also observed at the word level.

Pronouns. There is a confusion between ‘that’ and ‘what’. For example, the equivalent for both words in Russian is ‘что’, which can cause some confusion for emergent writers in English. For example, ‘Every human’s brain consists of two parts, while the first part is responsible for logical thinking; the second is responsible for imagination what is fundamental to art.’ This is true for ‘it’ and ‘there’ as well because the equivalent word in Russian is ‘это’. For example, ‘But having done the research paper, there was concluded that the issue is much more complicated than it was expected in the beginning.’

Example 6 – Pronouns

Both specialists think that while there are orphans in the country,
Оба специалиста считают, что, пока есть сироты в стране,
<u>it is no need</u> to look for children outside the country.
нет необходимости искать детей вне ее.

As seen in Example 6, ‘it’ was incorrectly applied instead of ‘there’. In the Russian translation, this sentence transforms into an impersonal one where the subject is omitted.

Vocabulary and word choice. Perhaps the most obvious and rich area for observing language transfer/interference was looking at students’ word choices. Often when trying to select an appropriate word to express a particular meaning, they made errors reflecting semantic differences in lexically equivalent words. Table 1 is a list of Russian words that were frequently observed to confuse students. For example, in English, one can ‘stay at home’ and one can ‘sit at the table’ whereas in Russian, the same word ‘сидеть’ is used to convey both meanings.

Table 1 – Russian words with their English equivalents

Russian	English
Вопрос(ы)	<u>Question(s)/issue(s)</u>
Земля	<u>Earth/world/soil/land/ground</u>
Взять интервью	<u>To take/to get</u> interview
Длиться	<u>To last/to</u> spread
Открывать, обнаружить	<u>To open/to</u> discover, to find out
Делать	<u>To make/to</u> do
Позволять	<u>To afford/to</u> allow, to let
Отказываться	<u>To refuse/to</u> reject
Знать, узнать что-либо	<u>To know/to</u> learn
Поднимать вопрос	<u>To rise/to</u> raise
Дать образование	<u>To give/to</u> provide
Сидеть дома	<u>To stay at home/to</u> sit at home
Другой, разный	<u>Different/other,</u> another
Другой	<u>Other/another</u>
Обычные люди	<u>Usual/common,</u> ordinary

While the marked forms that students produced were not limited to the ones presented in this paper, most of the typical ones were presented here in order to give some general notion of the difficulties students come across in their writing practices in Academic English.

Pedagogical implications

This paper assumes the posture that if teachers could develop the skill(s) can help students identify

their language needs, they can help their students become more proficient in developing writing skills. [7; 8] But practically speaking, this can be challenging. Two things that are related to this are: (1) academic readings tend to be difficult to read and often poorly written (in academic English) and (2) the vocabulary in these articles tend to be difficult to understand. Coxhead and Byrd point out how academic writing differs from a typical language textbook which often focuses on the verb. In contrast, academic language tends to be noun heavy. [9] They list the following grammatical features including:

Long complicated noun phrases with nouns more often followed by prepositional phrases than by relative clauses;

Long nouns, big words, and a tendency to use words of Latin or Greek origin rather than the simpler Anglo-Saxon word base of everyday conversation;

Many different words (density of texts);

The use of the simple present tense;

Limited range of verbs with be, and have which are frequently repeated;

Frequent use of the passive voice; and

The use of adverbial phrases to indicate location in the text. [2]

As they note, in ESL/EFL learning, vocabulary building is the responsibility of the reading teacher (or assumed) rather than having it built into the course so that students could develop proficiency

using academic language in their writing. Teachers can therefore help students build vocabulary bases also by accessing the range of linguistic resources available to students. [8] Other things that teachers can do in the classroom include things like:

Being more intentional in terms of text selection;

Reading and highlighting the lexicogrammatical units that are present and then discussing what words are repeated or used together;

Planning activities using words that frequently appear in readings.

Another practical suggestion from Friedlander [7] is regarding the choice of writing topics. He found that when writers planned on Chinese-related topics in their dominant language (Chinese) and English-related topics in English, that the overall output was much better than when if they planned in English for both. His conclusion was that 'planning and preliminary considerations of a topic can be enhanced if ESL writers understand that using the language of the topic-area knowledge can have a positive effect on their planning and writing.' [7] While there are drawbacks to this approach as well (namely, the mass use of tools like Google Translate to do the translation work for the student), Friedlander's broader point about being more conscious about using and encouraging students to think about their linguistic repertoires from a resource perspective as opposed to a deficit one is well made.

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