

Research on Language Transfer: A Context-Mediated Cognitive Process

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Abstract: This paper presents a new perspective on language transfer in second language acquisition, shifting the focus from traditional reliance on interlingual similarities to a cognitive process shaped by contextual mediation. On the basis of distributed cognition, we examine how contextual factors, ranging from immediate social situations to broader cultural frameworks, play a crucial role in language transfer. The study suggests that effective language teaching should focus not only on correcting errors but also on developing learners' awareness of contextual cues and their ability to adapt language use appropriately. This context-based approach provides fresh insights for addressing transfer-related challenges in foreign language learning.

Keywords: Language transfer; Context; Foreign language teaching; Second language acquisition; Translanguaging

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1. Introduction

Language transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired^[1]. It is a prominent feature of second language acquisition and a long-standing topic in the field of second language acquisition research. It has been continually reinterpreted and endowed with new meanings as linguistic theories evolve. In the current era of cognitive linguistics, the role of contextual experience in language comprehension, acquisition, and use has risen to new heights, offering new insights for language transfer research. This paper attempts to analyze the relationship between language transfer and context, demonstrating a core argument: language transfer is a context-mediated cognitive process in cross-language use^[3]. By conducting so, it aims to provide a new perspective for deepening language transfer research and offer some insights into how to address language transfer issues in foreign language teaching.

2. An Overview of Language Cognition: The Shift to a Distributed Framework

The understanding of cognition within cognitive science has undergone a significant paradigm shift. Early

research predominantly focused on internal, brain-bound processes. However, it is now widely recognized that cognitive activities are shaped by a complex array of variables distributed beyond the individual's brain, encompassing interpersonal interactions, social environments, cultural tools, and media^[2].

This shift reflects a movement in cognitive science from the traditional “isolated mind” model towards the broader “4E” framework—embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted cognition^[4]. This perspective reconceptualizes cognition not as a solitary computation within the mind, but as the product of dynamic interactions between the brain, the body, and the environment. Human knowledge is constructed through active engagement within socio-cultural and material contexts. In this process, all participants, along with their cognitive states, are transformed. This aligns with the “extended mind” thesis, which posits that cognitive processes are not confined to the skull but are fundamentally embedded in and extended across the social and physical world^[5].

3. The Role of Context in Second Language Acquisition

3.1. Context as a Constitutive Force

Context plays a crucial role in language acquisition, which determines the appropriateness of such use. Context plays a constitutive role in language acquisition. Research on first language acquisition has firmly established that the developmental context is crucial for a child's early linguistic growth. Inspired by this, SLA scholars have begun to explore context—conceptualized as a phenomenon that is “socially constructed, interactively sustained, and temporally constrained” (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992)—from multiple dimensions^[6]. The objective is to analyze the mechanisms through which context influences SLA and to find effective, context-aware solutions to the challenges posed by language transfer.

Language use is inherently situated within specific contexts and is intricately intertwined with them. These contexts may be immediate and physical, or they may be cognitively accessed through associations with past experiences or imagined scenarios. Consequently, to fully understand language acquisition, one must investigate not only the linguistic forms but also the content, participants, and the full spectrum of contextual factors that shape language use and drive the learner's interlanguage development^[7].

3.2. Context Overrides Structural Similarity

While distributed cognition rightly emphasizes social and contextual elements, the human brain remains the central processor of linguistic information—the ultimate locus where all contextual variables converge and exert their influence. Language use is, at its core, a cognitive activity^[8]. An exclusive pedagogical focus on the automated practice of linguistic structures is insufficient to guarantee accurate and appropriate language use, as it overlooks the decisive role of context in determining appropriateness.

Critically, even when the target and native languages are structurally divergent, beginners commonly experience L1 transfer^[9]. This suggests that observed structural similarity is merely a surface manifestation, not the root cause. The deeper catalyst for transfer lies in the learner's perception and interpretation of context. Since language use is meaning-driven and meaning is context-dependent, the perception of context logically precedes and informs the perception of any potential structural similarity. Transfer occurs during the act of language use and is intrinsically linked to the contextual demands of that moment^[10]. Therefore, the strength of the mental association between a target language form and its appropriate context of use directly influences

whether the form is deployed accurately and appropriately, thereby governing the occurrence of transfer.

3.3. The Macro-Context: Culture, Beliefs, and Values

Beliefs, culture, politics, and values constitute the macro-context of language learning and use. These elements are interconnected and form a dynamic network that evolves with a learner's increasing interactive experiences. Essentially, our first language is acquired and functions within such a complex eco-environment, leaving a deep sociocultural imprint that inevitably influences the learning and use of a second language^[11].

Understanding this macro-contextual dimension is crucial for developing effective pedagogical approaches. Rather than treating language transfer as mere interference, educators should recognize it as a natural byproduct of learners navigating between different sociocultural ecosystems. The goal should be developing students' metacognitive awareness of how macro-contextual factors shape language use across different communicative environments.

4. Translanguaging and Language Transfer

Translanguaging practices, which involve transcending the boundaries between two or more languages, are intricately linked to the phenomenon of language transfer^[12]. Translanguaging emphasizes the commonalities across languages and the abstract integration of variables influencing language use. However, to learn a new language, the focus should be on mastering the specific differences between L1 and L2 and their contextual application. Commonalities need not be learned; the fewer the commonalities, the more there is to learn.

Thus, according to the logic of translanguaging, negative transfer should not be viewed as a persistent deficiency to be eliminated in foreign language teaching, but rather as a natural manifestation of translanguaging practice that can facilitate language learning. However, empirical evidence suggests that Chinglish remains one of the most persistent challenges for Chinese learners of English. While certain Chinglish expressions have gained limited acceptance among native speakers, these cases represent merely a marginal phenomenon within the broader English language system. Therefore, it would be premature to conclude that all Chinglish expressions constitute effective or appropriate communication in English.

Consequently, what is traditionally labelled 'language transfer' is reinterpreted not as an interference or error, but as a strategic and natural deployment of one's full semiotic resources^[13]. When a feature from Language A appears in a Language B context, it is often a conscious or intuitive act of meaning-making, leveraging all available resources to communicate effectively. This reframes 'negative transfer' not as a linguistic deficit, but potentially as a communicative strategy or a stage in the dynamic development of the multilingual system^[14]. Therefore, translanguaging provides a more positive and holistic lens for understanding how learners navigate and merge their linguistic knowledge, transcending the boundaries of named languages^[15].

5. Conclusion

This paper re-conceptualizes language transfer as a dynamic and strategic cognitive process, fundamentally mediated by context (Wang, 2016). We view language transfer not as simple interference, but as a flexible mental process that depends heavily on context. A learner's native language acts as an available resource, and its use is influenced by three main factors: the learner's established thinking patterns from their first language, their immediate cognitive load and focus, and the social situation of the conversation. This perspective better explains

why transfer varies so much, and portrays learners as active decision-makers (Ortega, 2009; Ellis, 2008). For teaching, this means moving beyond just correcting errors, and instead helping students develop language awareness and the ability to adapt their communication to different settings (Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015). This context-driven approach offers a more complete and practical understanding of how people learn a second language.

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