

THE INFLUENCE OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE ON LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: HOW TO OVERCOME INTERFERENCE

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Annotation: Language interference—both positive and negative—plays a significant role in foreign language acquisition. This article examines how the native language affects pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and stylistic patterns in a second language. It categorizes different types of interference and explains the underlying cognitive mechanisms that lead to transfer errors. Practical strategies for overcoming negative interference are provided, including contrastive analysis, native speaker interaction, error tracking, and immersion through authentic materials. By developing conscious awareness of interference patterns, learners can reduce habitual mistakes and move toward more natural and accurate language use.

Keywords: language interference, native language transfer, foreign language learning, cross-linguistic influence, grammatical errors, pronunciation problems, contrastive analysis, error correction, second language acquisition, language learning strategies

Introduction

When a person begins to learn a foreign language, they inevitably rely on their native language. This process is natural and helps take the first steps. However, the native language can both help and hinder the acquisition of a new language. This phenomenon is called **language interference**.

Understanding the mechanisms of interference allows for more effective learning, helps avoid typical mistakes, and accelerates progress.

Main part: What Is Language Interference?

Interference is the transfer of features from one language into another.

It can be:

- **Positive (facilitative)** - when the structures of the two languages match or are similar.

- **Negative** - when differences between the languages lead to mistakes.

For example:

- Russian speakers may find it easier to remember English words like information, problem, telephone because they resemble their Russian counterparts.

- But they may struggle with using articles or maintaining word order in English.

Types of Interference

Language interference manifests in various aspects of language learning, as features from the native language unconsciously transfer into the foreign language. This transfer can lead to characteristic errors that affect pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and even cultural communication styles. Understanding the different types of interference helps learners recognize, analyze, and correct these mistakes more effectively.

1. Phonetic Interference (Pronunciation Interference)

Phonetic interference occurs when the pronunciation patterns, sounds, and intonation of the native language influence how a learner produces sounds in the foreign language. Since every language has its own system of phonemes (speech sounds), learners often substitute unfamiliar foreign sounds with the closest equivalents from their native language.

Common examples:

Difficult sounds:

For Russian speakers learning English, certain sounds do not exist in Russian and are therefore challenging to pronounce. For instance, the English [θ] and [ð] sounds (as in "think" and "this") may be replaced with [s], [z], [t], or [d]. This leads to pronunciations like "sink" instead of "think" or "dis" instead of "this".

Stress and intonation patterns:

Russian has a free and movable word stress system, while English often relies on fixed stress patterns. Russian speakers may incorrectly stress syllables in English words, which can result in misunderstandings. For example, pronouncing 'import' as im'port (verb) instead of the correct noun stress 'import'.

Intonation patterns:

Russian intonation tends to be flatter or different from the typical rising and falling intonation patterns in English, which may affect how polite, emotional, or natural speech sounds to native speakers.

2. Grammatical Interference (Syntax and Structure Transfer)

Grammatical interference occurs when a learner applies the grammatical rules of their native language to the foreign language, often resulting in unnatural or incorrect sentence structures.

Common examples:

Word order errors:

Russian allows relatively free word order due to its case system, while English typically follows a fixed Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order.

Russian: "Я его видел вчера."

Incorrect English: "I him saw yesterday."

Correct English: "I saw him yesterday."

Omission of articles:

Grammatical interference can be persistent because learners often feel that their word-for-word translation is logical.

3. Lexical Interference (Vocabulary Transfer and False Friends)

Lexical interference occurs when a learner incorrectly transfers words or expressions directly from the native language, sometimes creating word-for-word translations that sound unnatural or even confusing in the foreign language.

Common examples:

Literal translations:

Russian: "Мне нравится."

Incorrect English: "To me it is pleasing."

Correct English: "I like it."

False friends (words that look similar but have different meanings):

Russian "магазин" (store) vs. English "magazine" (journal, publication).

Russian "симпатичный" (cute, attractive) vs. English "sympathetic" (understanding, compassionate).

Idioms and set expressions:

Russian idioms often cannot be directly translated into English.

Russian: "Душа в пятки ушла"

Incorrect literal translation: "The soul went into the heels."

Correct English equivalent: "I was scared to death."

Lexical interference can make speech sound awkward or result in misunderstandings if idioms or expressions don't carry over between languages.

4. Stylistic Interference (Cultural and Communicative Differences)

Stylistic interference involves transferring cultural norms, politeness strategies, or communication styles from the native language into the foreign language. While grammatical and lexical interference affect sentence structure and word choice, stylistic interference affects how a speaker sounds socially and culturally.

Common examples:

Directness vs. politeness:

Russian tends to be more direct, while English often favors more polite or softened forms.

Russian: "Give me water."

More appropriate English: "Could you give me some water, please?"

Formality levels:

Russian speakers may not always distinguish between formal and informal address in English the same way, potentially sounding too casual or too stiff depending on the context.

Apologies and gratitude:

English uses phrases like "I'm sorry", "Thank you", "Excuse me", more frequently in daily interaction, while Russian uses such phrases more selectively.

Small talk and conversation norms:

Russian speakers may feel uncomfortable engaging in small talk about the weather or other neutral topics that are common in English-speaking cultures.

Stylistic interference often becomes more noticeable at intermediate and advanced stages when the learner tries to communicate not only grammatically correctly but also naturally and appropriately within the cultural context of the target language.

Why Does Interference Occur?

The brain tries to simplify the learning task by relying on familiar structures — a natural protective mechanism.

At the beginner level, interference even helps form initial sentences. Problems arise when these habits solidify and prevent correct usage of the new language.

How to Overcome Negative Interference?

1. Contrastive Analysis

Compare the structures of your native and target languages. Learn not only how to say something correctly but also how it differs from your native patterns.

Example:

- English word order is fixed (SVO): I saw him yesterday.
- Russian allows flexible word order.

2. Become Aware of Common Mistakes

Keep a list of your “habitual traps.” Note recurring mistakes and work on them systematically.

3. Work with Native Speakers

Live communication helps you hear natural constructions, intonation, and speech rhythm. Native speakers can gently correct errors you might not notice yourself.

4. Use Authentic Materials

Reading books, watching films, and listening to podcasts in the target language immerse you in natural language environments.

5. Getting Feedback and Corrections

Regular feedback from teachers or advanced speakers helps quickly identify and eliminate interference.

6. Imitate Speech

Shadowing exercises — repeating simultaneously after native speakers — help develop correct speech patterns.

Practical Exercises to Reduce Interference

- Translate sentences in both ways.
- Practice sentence transformation (changing word order).
- Use shadowing techniques.
- Engage in role-plays and simulated conversations.

Interference as a Natural Stage

It is important to remember interference is not a sign of a “bad learner” but a natural stage for anyone learning a language. With experience, its influence decreases. The key is conscious and systematic practice.

Conclusion

Language interference is a complex but surmountable obstacle in foreign language learning. Through awareness of typical mistakes, regular practice with native speakers, active language use, and ongoing self-monitoring, learners can minimize the influence of their native language and approach natural-sounding speech.

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