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The effects of language interference in learning English by Spanish native speakers: the case of Mexico

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Learning a new language is always a challenge. One of the main issues that learners face is language interference. What does it mean? “L1 transfer refers to the influence that the learner’s L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2” [1]. It can be both a positive and a negative transfer. The negative one is the interference, a situation where the language you know becomes a source of errors in the language you are learning.

Considering Mexico, where Spanish is the native language of millions of people, it’s vital to understand what causes the interference of Spanish into English among Mexicans. There was a study conducted [2], the results of which show the two main reasons for this. First, it is the syntactic differences between the two languages. For example, “In Spanish, the noun is first used and then the adjective (e.g., la manzana roja).” However, in English, the adjective is placed before the noun (e.g., the red apple). So, Mexicans tend to say “apple red”. Second, during conversations Mexicans are often translating sentences from Spanish to English, which leads to the grammatical mistakes. They don’t think in English while talking. Not only doesn’t it let learners to immerse themselves in the language culture, structure and to understand how the language works, but it also contributes to the mind overload. There are too many processes in the brain: creating the sentence in one language, translating it into another and only then saying the words to the interlocutor.

Let’s look into these two reasons in more detail. In the research by the English Immersion Program by MESCYT (The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology of the Dominican Republic) 11 sample student works were examined. The most common kind of interference was “the use of Spanish Structures in the writing of their sentences in English” [5]. This result only reinforces the point made earlier that thinking in your native language leads to errors in a different language. It becomes natural to apply the same structure to the sentences. It concerns various aspects of language acquisition: writing, speaking, listening and reading.

This brings us to the second reason - the problem of translating everything to the native language, which was mentioned in the same article. It was stated that within the framework of the English Immersion Program teachers are trying to make students avoid using Spanish while learning English. However, students “defy the teachers, translate and relate everything with Spanish inside the classroom, in their minds and outside the classroom; consequently, the learning results are considerably affected” [5]. The tendency of students to simplify the studying process and try to understand everything is clearly visible here. Students want to fully be able to connect the new knowledge to the phenomena they already know and to things that feel safe. They are scared of finding themselves in a 100%-different language conditions, where they will not be able to understand every word, sentence, task, etc. However, it is important to ‘burn the bridges’ between the new acquired information and the Spanish version of it. The results show that the translating issue is global and it has to be addressed.

Interestingly, the reverse effect is also observed. While students use English in the USA every day, the level of their Spanish skills drops. This was researched in another study [4], where the results have shown that such interference makes learners translate the idioms and collocations from English to Spanish, mix the order of words and incorporate the English syntactic constructions into the Spanish grammar. This shows that a new language one is learning affects the native language as well. It creates a cycle of both languages mixing.

How can these problems be solved? Some effective ways (both from teachers and students) were identified during a study on Mexican Americans students learning English. They include visual teaching methods, creating full sentences, surrounding yourself with the English-speaking friends and using third-party applications, such as YouTube [3]. These can help learners to constantly stay in the English-surrounded context.

To conclude, the interference of Spanish into English for the Mexican learners is a current problem, mostly coming from the translation-based learning strategy and resulting in structure errors. The methods of teaching and learning must continue to develop. Ultimately, students should be immersed in English and deliberately allocate time and make every effort to create a whole new world in their heads specifically designed for learning the English language.

Источники и литература

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