

## Cross-linguistic transfer among Iranian learners of English as a foreign language

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Cross-linguistic transfer studies began from linguistic aspects of language learning and moved to non-linguistic aspects. The intriguing question is whether students are aware of the nature of these cross-linguistic interactions in their minds. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview was conducted with four Iranian university students. It was found that students' awareness of cross-linguistic transfer did not cover all aspects of cross-linguistic transfer equally, and students had no or very limited awareness of the non-linguistic aspects of cross-linguistic transfer, the factors causing it, or the way to improve it. It is important to increase cross-linguistic awareness among language learners and help them to overcome the inhibitive influences of the existing languages to facilitate learning. It is recommended that in the Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context learners have a comprehensive view of cross-linguistic transfer in language learning and that teachers teach for transfer.

### Introduction

In language learning it is important for learners to be aware of the aspects of interaction of languages in their minds. To Carter (2003) language awareness is the development and enhancement of consciousness of the forms and functions of language in learners. Language awareness as a pedagogic approach helps learners to gain insights about this consciousness and explore language for themselves. It facilitates in learners the process of noticing or consciousness raising (Kumaradivelu, 2003). Fotos and Ellis (1991) believe the most effective approach to grammar teaching is to focus on awareness raising rather than practice by employing, for example a task-based approach to grammar instruction. This task does not aim at developing immediate ability to use the target structure; rather, it attempts to raise learners' consciousness of grammatical features in communicative input.

In SLA (Second Language Acquisition) studies the concept of transfer was first introduced in *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis* assuming that certain elements in the first language hinder or facilitate second language acquisition. O'Malley and Chamot (1995) defined transfer as "using what is already known about language to assist comprehension or production" (p. 199). Transfer was investigated in all facets, beginning with linguistic aspects and then moving to non-linguistic aspects. In transfer studies the question is how, where, when and to what extent in the process of language learning languages affect each other (Jarvis, 2000). As the interaction of languages in one's mind is a complex phenomenon, transfer has long been a controversial issue in applied linguistics (Ellis, 1994). Though this issue has drawn the attention of researchers to explore the nature of transfer in learning a language or languages in addition to the first language, there is a dearth of research on awareness of second language learners of these concepts in cross-linguistic transfer and how they perceive it. This study is an attempt to fill this gap.

## The concept of transfer

In SLA studies there were different interpretations of the term transfer. Weinreich (1953, in Cook, 2003, p. 1) used the term 'interference' for "instances of language deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language." This definition was later termed as negative transfer which considered L1 influence as an obstacle to the learning of correct L2 forms. Later on, as it was claimed L1 might also have a positive effect in the process of language learning, the term transfer was gradually employed instead of interference (Lado, 1957) which conveyed both negative and positive transfer. Sharwood Smith and Kellerman (1986) had a broader view of the transfer phenomena and found that the term transfer was not appropriate to include the full range of language contact effects. To them the term cross-linguistic influence was more appropriate to refer to other language contact phenomena such as L2 to L1/L3 transfer, language loss, borrowing, or avoidance. Different theories viewed language transfer from different perspectives. What follows gives an account of different trends in transfer studies.

## The behaviourist perspective of language transfer

In the 1950s and 1960s under the influence of behaviourism, interference from L1 was regarded as the main obstacle in L2 learning. From the behaviourist point of view, language learning was regarded as a process of habit-formation and habits were believed to be formed through repeated stimulus-response associations. Based on claims made by *Contrastive Analysis* where two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur, and where two languages were different, negative transfer (or interference) would occur. Contrastive analysis had two theoretical foundations, namely psychological and linguistic. The psychological basis which drew upon behaviourist accounts of learning claimed that interference meant difficulty in learning. The linguistic aspect which drew upon structural linguistics placed a strong emphasis on differences between languages (Lado, 1957). There were different versions of contrastive analysis: the strong version, the weak version, and the moderate version. (Wardhaugh, 1970, p.124) The strong version predicted that most of the L2 errors were because of negative transfer or interference from L1. The weak version merely explained errors after they were made. The moderate version as proposed by Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) explained the hierarchy of difficulty. According to the moderate version, the similar phenomena were harder to acquire than the dissimilar phenomena. Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) compared the spelling errors of foreign students whose first language employed a Roman alphabet, with the spelling errors of foreign students whose first language had little or no relation to Roman alphabet, and found that knowledge of one Roman writing system was an obstacle to acquire another Roman spelling system.

However, contrastive analysis had a shelf life for many criticisms. For example, it was found that differences between languages would have a facilitative effect on L2 learning and the correct production of L2 forms (Odlin, 1989). As a result, some areas of error were not predicted by contrastive analysis. As another example, contrastive analysis considered language transfer as the main process in second language learning. Later

studies, however, showed that many errors, called developmental errors, were the result of the learner's hypothesis testing, and not because of L1 interference (Dulay & Burt, 1973). Further, contrastive analysis was primarily interested in the linguistic systems and products of languages, rather than in learners using complex psycholinguistic processes. In fact, language transfer was just one of the five processes central to language learning. The other four processes were known as transfer of training, strategies of second-language learning, strategies of second language communication, and over-generalisation (Selinker, 1972).

*Contrastive rhetoric* was another notion that acknowledged the role of L1 in L2 learning. Kaplan (1966) held that under the influence of L1 cultural mode of thinking, L2 learners would reflect their L1 rhetorical patterns in their L2 writings. Contrastive rhetoric attempted to help L2 learners overcome negative transfer from L1 in L2 writing through referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language (Connor, 2002). Contrastive rhetoric also fell out of favour because it over-emphasised transfer of L1 cultural and linguistic patterns to L2 writing and all differences in L2 writing were claimed to be rooted in interference from L1 writing conventions.

In the 1980s transfer was reconsidered. Andersen (1983, pp. 126-131) proposed the idea of 'transfer to somewhere' by claiming that transfer would occur in second language acquisition if the two languages involved were typologically similar. According to Anderson (1983) typological similarity between languages was regarded as a necessary condition for transfer to occur. However, it failed to account for other aspects of language such as semantics, discourse, and phonology during second language acquisition. Therefore, it over-emphasised syntax and disregarded the same L2 errors that learners of different L1 backgrounds produced.

'Transfer to nowhere' was later proposed by Kellerman (1995) as a complement to Anderson's 'transfer to somewhere'. Transfer to nowhere which was found on psychotypology (i.e., the learner's perception of language typology) addressed the conceptual organisation of L1, rather than addressing the syntactic features of it. If the two languages were perceived as similar with regard to a particular structure, transfer was believed to be more likely to occur. In addition, a perceived dissimilarity would tend to lead to the avoidance of that particular structure. Kellerman (1995) also added that "not everything that looks transferable is transferable" (p. 113); so there were regarded to be constraints inhibiting L1 to L2 transfer between certain congruent structures.

## **The cognitive perspective of language transfer**

According to the theory of *universal grammar*, proposed by Chomsky (1978), there are certain basic structural rules that govern language and all humans know them without having to learn them. Chomsky (1978) himself defined universal grammar as "the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages." To bring evidence for universal grammar, supporters (e.g., Cook, 1988) of this theory pointed to some elements (e.g., structure dependency, the head parameter, the projection principle) common in different languages. Influenced by the Chomskyan framework and cognitive psychology, researchers began to re-examine the role of L1 in L2

learning. *Creative construction* was a theory that held a non-transfer view of L1 on L2. Dulay and Burt (1973) regarded L2 acquisition as a process facilitated by universal grammar principles in which L1 played no role. In this process the learner would continuously formulate hypotheses about the second language system and match them against available input. This idea led researchers (e.g., Corder, 1967) to propose *error analysis* in which errors were regarded as unavoidable, evidence of a learner strategy, and not failure in L2 learning. In error analysis interference (or negative transfer) errors were the result of borrowing from L1 to compensate for L2 insufficiency (Corder, 1992). This view also considered a very small part for transfer in the process of L2 acquisition (Sharwood Smith, 1986). Danesi (1995) regarded both transfer and creative construction as influential factors in the process of learning a second language and argued that the influence of the L1 on the learner's interlanguage should not to be neglected at all.

In line with the cognitive view of language transfer and supporting the positive effects of L1 in L2 development, Cummins (1984) proposed the *common underlying proficiency* (or *interdependence*) hypothesis by claiming an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency common across languages. He proposed two types of language proficiency, namely *basic interpersonal communication skills* and *cognitive/academic language proficiency*. Basic interpersonal communication skills considered verbal and/or non-verbal contextual supports for language delivery and face-to-face, context embedded situations (e.g., actions with eyes and hands, instant feedback, cues and clues) were considered to provide nonverbal support to secure understanding. Cognitive/academic language proficiency or academic language described the use of language in de-contextualised academic situations. According to Cummins, cognitive/academic language proficiency (e.g., skills such as phonological awareness, reading strategies, and vocabulary) developed in the first language would transfer to the second language and support acquisition of literacy skills in the second language. However, the interdependence hypothesis was regarded as too general as it failed to take account of individual differences in cognitive ability (Geva & Ryan, 1993). Therefore, the *separate underlying proficiency* model (Cummins, 2001) was proposed to illustrate an alternative proposal to the interdependence hypothesis. In the separate underlying proficiency model it was regarded that proficiency in L1 would be separate from proficiency in L2 and that language representations would be stored separately in an individual's cognitive operating system. The separate underlying proficiency hypothesis claimed that L1 would impede learning in L2 or delay its development and that content learned in L1 would not transfer to L2. However, empirical evidence was found against the separate underlying proficiency model showing significant transfer of conceptual knowledge and skills across languages. (e.g., Chen, et. al. 2004; Dickinson, et. al. 2004).

## **New trends in language transfer studies**

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000) defines linguistics as, "The study of the nature, structure, and variation of language, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics." Pragmatics is concerned with the use of language in social contexts. The revival of interest in transfer studies made researchers moves their attention away from the linguistic to the non-linguistic aspects of transfer as a result of which new terms were coined such as, 'interlanguage pragmatics'

and 'pragmatic transfer' (Siegal, 1996, p. 357). Jarvis and Pavlenko's (2008) introduced a taxonomy of different kinds of cross-linguistic influence. They classified transfer into two categories, including linguistic transfer and conceptual transfer. Linguistic transfer included phonological transfer, orthographic transfer, lexical transfer, semantic transfer, morphological transfer, syntactic transfer, discursive transfer, pragmatic transfer, and socio-linguistic transfer. The second category had only one subcategory which was again called conceptual transfer.

Takahashi and Beebe (1992) considered two levels for transfer: cross-linguistic transfer and cross-cultural transfer. Cultural transfer again fell into two categories, namely pragmatic transfer and conceptual transfer. (Arranz, 2005) Language use, discourse and speech acts began to be studied in pragmatic transfer. Pragmatic transfer was defined as the effect of L1 pragmatic knowledge of language and culture on the comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information (Kasper, 1992). Pragmatic transfer was regarded as one type of transfer among the five types of transfer depending on the socio-linguistic situation (Cummins, 2005). The other four types of transfer included, (a) transfer of phonological awareness, (b) transfer of specific linguistic elements (such as knowledge of the meaning of photo in photosynthesis), (c) transfer of conceptual elements (e.g. understanding concepts such as photosynthesis), and (d) transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g. strategies of visualising, use of graphic organisers, mnemonic devices, vocabulary acquisition strategies, etc.). Kasper (1992) categorised areas of pragmatic transfer into pragmalinguistics (our linguistic knowledge of language use) and socio-pragmatics (how our interaction is influenced by our sociological knowledge). As Mitchell et. al. (2013, p. 210) stated, "one of the challenges of L2 pragmatics research is determining how far learners can transfer their existing L1 pragmatic competence (for example, their knowledge of how to be polite) to the new language". Najeeb et. al. (2012) in their study of politeness in emails of Arab students in Malaysia, found that the challenges that the Arab students encountered when writing in English were related to their lack of fluency in English and the ignorance of cultural norms.

Transfer of attitudes in the affective domain of language learning is an interesting exploration in transfer studies. According to Day and Bamford (1998) one source of attitude toward second language reading is attitude toward first language reading. In bilingual reading research, Yamashita (2004) examined the relationship between reading attitudes in L1 and L2, and learners' performance in L2 extensive reading. In his study, four reading attitude variables were considered both in L1 and L2, including comfort, anxiety, value, and self-perception. He found that the affective domain of reading (attitudes) transferred from L1 to L2 and that L2 proficiency did not affect this transfer, as it did in the cognitive domain.

Transfer in multilingual research is another new area in transfer studies. Second or third language learners have some advantages over their monolingual peers. They have a sharper view of language (Bialystok, 2001), and learn to read more quickly in their first language (Yelland, et al, 1993). Studies also show that bilinguals seem to be better at inhibiting irrelevant information, paying selective attention, and switching between

alternative solutions to a problem (Bialystok, et. al., 2009). However, multilingualism has disadvantages. For example, multilinguals often have a smaller vocabulary size in their L1 than their monolingual peers (Barac & Bialystok 2011).

Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) classified transfer into three categories as forward transfer (L1-L2), reverse transfer (L2-L1), and lateral transfer (L2-L3) showing that languages in mind have effects on each other simultaneously. In an investigation into the effect of L2 on L1, Talebi (2012) found that reading strategies instruction in L2 (English) had significant effects on raising reading strategies awareness and use and reading ability of Iranian EFL learners in L2 (English) and L1 (Persian) as a result of transfer of reading strategies from L2 to L1. In an attempt to find out bidirectional pragmatic influence, Su (2012) conducted a study in which pragmatic cross-linguistic influence regarding apology behaviours was under investigation. Analysis of data showed both forward and reverse transfer occurred, though forward transfer was stronger than reverse transfer in learners.

L1 and interlanguage are very common terms in language studies (Selinker, 1972). Interlanguage is the language of the L2 learner as an approximation to an L1 system in native speakers. However, Cook (2003, p.1) used the term 'multicompetence' to re-evaluates these concepts. Multi-competence means the knowledge of two or more languages in one mind. It encompasses the concept of interlanguage and the L1 component and treats the mind of the L2 user as a whole rather than as having separate L1 and interlanguage components. An intriguing question in trilingual research is whether L3 learning draws upon L2 or L1 learning experience, or even both. From a psycholinguistic perspective, it is important to differentiate between second and third language learners (Ortega, 2008). Third language learners already have experiences related to second language learning, as well as knowledge of the structure of languages (Thomas, 1992). According to Pinto (2013) learners who have already acquired at least one L2 will attempt to make up for the lack of knowledge in the learning of the L3, or any further languages, using not only their L1 but also their L2. Third language acquisition is a complex phenomenon as there are a number of factors that can influence the nature of interactions between languages in the learners' mind, including typological distance, L2 status, currency, context, proficiency, age and grade, order of acquisition of the languages and constraints on verbal memory, the acquisition of additional languages (L4, L5), and the effect of the L3 on the L2 and L1 (Ortega, 2008). Regarding the influence of typology on third language learning, it was found the L3 learner had more preference to borrow a form from the language that is typologically (Odlin & Jarvis, 2004) or psychotypologically (Ortega, 2008) closer to the L3. According to Fienemann and Rehbein (2004), in the acquisition of an L3 previous pragmatic knowledge would transfer to L3 and affect the acquisition of it. Keshavarz and Astaneh (2004) found that native speakers of Turkish and Armenian who spoke Persian as their second language performed better in the English vocabulary test than the Persian monolingual learners of English. Talebi (2013) reported results of studies conducted on the effects of L1 on L2, L2 on L1, and L2 on L3. The common finding in all these studies was that if instruction of reading strategies begins in a given language, there would be improvements in the awareness of reading strategies in that language and other languages as a result of transfer of reading strategies across languages.

## **Purpose of the study**

As Jessner (2008) maintained, to help the learning process teachers should create opportunities for cross-linguistic comparisons, to help learners to make the most out of cross-linguistic interaction. The aim of this study is to show how much Iranian EFL learners are aware of cross-linguistic transfer in a comprehensive sense of the word.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were four first-year Iranian students studying basic sciences at the University of Mazandaran. They were male, aged 19, 20, 22 and 20 years. They had passed the English courses at junior and senior high school levels before coming to this level of education. These students were selected through convenience sampling from a group of 33 students who studied the general English course with the author. Some of these 33 students perceived their general English proficiency to be at the intermediate level and some at advanced level. Two students from each level agreed to participate in the interview. They also mentioned they used to go to private English institutes for learning English. Therefore, besides the formal English courses at the educational system the three students had extra-curricular experiences in learning English, for 2, 3, 4, and 3.5 years respectively.

### **Semi-structured interview**

A one-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant on four different occasions. Each interview was recorded after receiving permission from each interviewee. In the first part of the interview, questions focused on students' age, experience in language learning and perceived proficiency in general English. Prior to the interviews the interview guide was piloted with 2 students not participating in the main study. They were similar to the ultimate participants of the study and were asked to make comments while and after responding to the interview items. Finally, the instrument was shown to two colleagues who were familiar with the nature of the study. The interviews were short, about 15 minutes. (See Appendix)

### **Method of analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, tabulated and categorised. The researcher read through the transcripts several times and made notes of interesting features with the aim of finding patterns in the data set.

### **Interview results**

This section will discuss findings in the qualitative analysis of interview transcriptions from four participants. The summary and highlights of the interview with the four participants are discussed below. (Henceforth, students who are at intermediate level of

proficiency are called student 1 and student 2, and students who are at advanced level of proficiency are called student 3 and student 4.)

### **Question 1**

Regarding the first research question asking students to rate themselves from 1 to 5 (1: Not at all aware; 2: Slightly aware; 3: Somewhat aware; 4: Moderately aware; 5: Extremely aware) about how much they are aware of the concept of language transfer, Students 1, 2, 3, and 4 have rated themselves 2, 1, 2, and 3 respectively.

### **Question 2**

The second research question asks about the effects of existing languages on each other. To this question there are different answers. Student 1 stated that L1 impacts L2. The reason for this answer is his L2 has been affected by his L1 in terms of a Persian accent in his English speech. He believed he thinks Persian when he is speaking in English. Most importantly, he mentioned when he reads content familiar texts he tries to compensate his comprehension failure by activating his background knowledge.

Student 2 believed L1 impacts L2. He had the same reasons as student 1 mentioned but added that L1 can have both positive and negative effects on L2. He said as his knowledge of L1 structure is good it helps him to learn L2 grammar better and faster. He mentioned he sometimes does not know some expressions and has a word by word translation of it from Persian to English which is usually wrong.

Student 3 also thought that L1 affects L2 and also that L2 affects L1. To him the effects of L1 and L2 on each other can be seen in different aspects such as surface structure, accent, and world knowledge. He thought the effects of L2 on L1 can be on better learning of L1 structure, learning strategies, and world knowledge. Of course, he believed that all languages affect each other and L3 is no exception as it can affect and be affected by L1 and L2.

Student 4 thought it is true that languages can affect each other but the effects are more for elementary and intermediate level students rather than advanced level students. About the concept of transfer he had the structural transfer in mind. He did not believe in separation of languages in mind. He maintained he uses L1 or L2 words when speaking in L2 and L1, respectively. However, student 4 drew himself away from the narrow scope of transfer from L1 to L2 to a wider perspective of transfer from L1 to L2 and the reverse, L2 to L3, and any other possible directions of transfer in a multicompetent mind. However, his scope was limited in that his perception of transfer is more about linguistic transfer rather than the wider perspective containing both linguistic and non-linguistic transfer in a multicompetent mind.

### **Question three**

When asked if the participants believe that keeping language learners' two or more languages in isolation from one another is possible and desirable in the process of learning



another language, student 1 maintained it is impossible to keep languages separate in mind. He said he uses his L1 knowledge in L2 speech. It is best if L1 is used in L2 teaching when conveying a message that fails in L2, especially when the teacher is teaching about grammar. To him, some students and teachers regard L1 in L2 classrooms as undesirable and to him this has bad consequences on learning. As an example, if we do not get explanations in L1 when our teachers want to teach about the article, then it is not easy to learn it.

Student 2, though a little bit slow answer to this question, mentioned his teachers usually recommend them not to think in Persian and regarded it as not good. However, he said what happens in his mind is that he has to use his L1 to learn L2. To him, sometimes this is a help and some other times it has negative effects. He said, "I think those who say L1 use should be abandoned are both right and wrong. It depends on when it is being used. For example, it should be used when explanations in L2 fail."

Student 3 maintained it is not possible to keep L1 away when we enter classrooms. To him it is true that English should be learnt through English but his experience shows if teachers use L1 when it is needed students will have a better learning experience and feel more relaxed as they are learning something effectively.

Student 4 had good ideas. He stated that learning a new language is an experience needing a foothold in somewhere and the best foothold is other languages existing in mind. Therefore, one should not think this is something to be avoided. He believed teachers and learners should be aware of the possible positive and negative effects of languages existing in mind and gain benefits from the positive effects. He thought that students' views of transfer will impact their views of learning, and therefore the view that languages should be kept separate in mind is absolutely unacceptable.

#### **Question four**

Regarding the fourth research question asking the participants to name factors that converge to cause cross-linguistic influence in a mind with two or more languages in constant contact, students 1 and 2 and 3 did not give any answers and were unaware of factors causing cross-linguistic influence in mind. However, student 4 maintained that at the early stages of language learning he has been more dependent on his L1.

#### **Question five**

When asked about what second or third language learners should do to promote language transfer, actually all participants were nearly silent. However, they unanimously maintained that L1 use should not be abandoned in L2 classrooms when students have learning problems.

#### **Question six**

Regarding the sixth research question about the relationship between language transfer and motivation to learn another language, student 1 mentioned there are cases he does not

know whether to think in L1 when he is speaking in L2. He said he does not know when this effect (i.e., L1 use in L2) is negative or positive. That is why he feels uncomfortable with the learning process. Student 2 stated learning a new language is quite a new experience and if it is successful it will have good effects on the learners. He held it is important to know about the interaction of the languages in mind to better learn a new language. He said if students are aware of the transfer phenomena they can better cope with the learning process as it might improve motivation to learn foreign languages. Student 3 believed awareness of the nature of interaction between languages in mind makes learning any further languages an exciting experience. Student 4 also claimed he has suffered a lot when he did not know how to deal with the phenomena of the interaction of languages in mind and this has caused the early stages of language learning to be a bad experience. He believed there is a positive relationship between language transfer and motivation to learn a further language.

## Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find out how much awareness of cross-linguistic transfer Iranian learners of English at two intermediate and advanced proficiency levels have. In sum, the two elementary level students rated themselves as slightly aware and not at all aware of cross-linguistic transfer respectively, whilst the two advanced students perceived themselves to be slightly aware and somewhat aware of cross-linguistic transfer, respectively. Students 1 and 2 believed in the effect of L1 on L2 but from a very limited view, that is from a linguistic view. However, student 2 believed L1 can have both positive and negative effects on L2.

In contrast to Students 1 and 2, Student 3 thought L1 and L2 have effects on each other. But he again had a narrow linguistic scope for transfer. He also believed L3 can be affected by and affect L2 and L1. Student 4 believed in structural transfer which is more frequent at elementary level rather than at advanced level when L1, L2, and L3 are in interaction.

All students thought it is impossible to keep languages separate in mind. However, Student 2 believed sometimes L1 is a help and some other times it has negative effects. Student 3 maintained students feel more relaxed as a result of L1 use in L2 learning. Students 1, 2 and 3 were unaware of factors causing cross-linguistic influence in mind. However, Student 4 maintained at elementary stages of learning there is more dependence on L1. However, he viewed this dependence from the linguistic perspective. None of the participants knows what to do to promote language transfer for L2 learning. Student 1 maintained there are cases he does not know whether to think in L1, that is why he feels un-relaxed with the learning process. Student 2 stated if students are aware of the transfer phenomena they can better cope with the learning process, as it might improve motivation to learn foreign languages. Student 3 believed awareness of cross-linguistic transfer makes learning any further languages an exciting experience. Student 4 also thought not knowing how to deal with the phenomena of the interaction of languages making language learning a bad experience at the early stages of L2 learning. He believed there is a positive relationship between language transfer and motivation to learn a further language.

What was mentioned above can be represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes about awareness of students of cross-linguistic transfer

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
Awareness of the concept of transfer	Slightly aware	Not at all aware	Slightly aware	Somewhat aware
Effects of one language on other languages	Narrow scope (linguistic); L1 to L2 only	Narrow scope (linguistic); L1 to L2 only	Wider in scope (linguistic, learning strategies or cognitive); L1, L2 and L3 affect each other	Narrow scope (linguistic); L1, L2 and L3 affect each other
Possibility and desirability of separating languages in the mind	Impossible; undesirable	Impossible; both desirable and undesirable depending on the nature of transfer happening	Impossible; undesirable	Impossible; undesirable
Awareness of factors causing cross-linguistic influences in mind	Unaware	Unaware	Unaware	Language proficiency
Knowing how to promote cross-linguistic transfer	No idea	No idea	No idea	No idea
Relationship between language transfer and motivation to learn a further foreign language	Not knowing about the nature of transfer makes him feel un-relaxed with the learning process	Awareness of cross-linguistic transfer improves motivation and attitude to learn foreign languages	Awareness of cross-linguistic transfer makes learning any further languages an exciting experience	There is a positive relationship between language transfer and motivation

Findings of the study show the degree of awareness of cross-linguistic transfer among Iranian learners of English is narrow in scope, covering mostly linguistic and rarely the cognitive and affective domains. As was mentioned in the review of literature, transfer studies cover both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects, and awareness of both should be raised in learners. According to Jessner (2008), teachers need to promote multilingual skills to identify points where languages interact and it is likely that cross-linguistic influence is at play. Teachers should help students go beyond the narrow scope of cross-linguistic transfer which regards language learning as a linguistic phenomenon in which it is only L1 that affects L2, and explore ways to help students understand that the cognitive and affective domains of cross-linguistic transfer are also very critical in language learning.

Second language acquisition researchers went through several swings of the pendulum (Gass, 1996) in transfer studies. The present study made an attempt to draw language learners' attention to the concept of language transfer with an emphasis on the fact that

keeping language learners' two or more languages in isolation from one another is an impossible and undesirable outcome in learning another language. In material development and actual teaching practice, awareness of transfer can have impacts on views of teaching and learning. Language learners should be given awareness of factors that affect cross-linguistic influence. Some of these factors are age of acquisition, typological similarity between languages, speaker's level of proficiency, degree of markedness, degree of morpheme boundedness of individual lexical items, recency of acquisition (or the so-called foreign language effect), the last language effect, cognitive mode, motivation, proficiency, frequency of use of previous foreign language, language mode, linguistic awareness, literacy, and socioeconomic status, educational background, and context. (Murphy, 2003)

It is recommended that materials be designed so that teachers teach explicitly for transfer. Whereas positive and negative transfer has been shown to occur at linguistic and non-linguistic levels, studies should aim at finding more about conditions under which learners are likely to transfer or not to transfer. Fotos and Ellis (1991) believe the most effective approach to grammar teaching is to focus on awareness raising rather than practice by employing, for example, a task-based approach to grammar instruction. This task does not aim at developing immediate ability to use the target structure; rather, it attempts to raise learners' consciousness of grammatical features in communicative input. To promote transfer, material developers should set clear course goals and objectives, orient language teachers and learners to the course objectives, use activities that engage both linguistic and non-linguistic elements of different languages in different contexts, provide opportunities for reflection on tasks, evaluate learners' awareness of linguistic and non-linguistic elements, help learners develop checklists showing records of language transfer effects, provide feedback to language learners about the influence of language transfer on their language production or comprehension, and motivate learners to apply their previous learning strategies to new learning situations.

Since the newly-learnt language system can be affected by and also affect the already existing languages in mind linguistically and non-linguistically, a lot of research is needed to find out the learning processes in a multilingual mind and the interaction between a myriad of factors in this process. As Munyangeyo (2010) states, "while researchers recognise that the comprehensive theory of transfer must include other non-native languages when it comes to examine the effects of multilingualism on third language acquisition, it is nevertheless important to understand how, when, and why one language is chosen over another." Therefore, it is a good area for researchers to see when, how, where and to what extent cross-linguistic awareness can result in greater language learning.

### **Limitations and future research**

It is important to mention that this is a small scale qualitative study on the awareness of Iranian EFL university students about cross-linguistic transfer. In other words, one limitation of the current study is the relatively small number of participants which would decrease the validity of this study. To gain insights into this phenomena data should be

elicited using both qualitative and quantitative enquiries from more participants. Thus, in future research a more in-depth study is needed in which students are given tasks provoking language transfer so that data can be collected introspectively and/or retrospectively about the influences of languages on each other. It would also be insightful to map students' self-perceived general English proficiency level against their actual proficiency level based on standard proficiency tests in English as in this way it is more objective and tangible to assign a number to the proficiency level of the subjects. It would be better to have more subjects from different proficiency levels who are learning multiple foreign languages as L3, L4, etc.

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## Appendix: Interview guide

This study attempts to find out your awareness of cross-linguistic transfer in learning English or any other foreign languages. The responses will be treated confidentially and anonymously.

**Question 1:** Rate 1 to 5 (1: not at all aware; 2: Slightly aware; 3: Somewhat aware; 4: Moderately aware; 5: Extremely aware)  
How much you are aware of the concept of language transfer?

**Question 2:** Which choice/s applies to you most about the effects of one language on other languages?

- A: I think that L1 impacts L2.
- B: I think that L2 impacts L1.
- C: I think that L1 and L2 impact L3.
- D: I think that L3 impacts L2 and L1.
- E: I think languages do not have effects on each other.

**Question 3:** Do you think that keeping language learners' two or more languages in isolation from one another is possible and desirable in the process of learning another language? (If Yes, how; if Not, how?)

**Question 4:** Do you think that there are factors that converge to cause cross-linguistic influence in a mind with two or more languages in constant contact? If yes, name some of them.

**Question 5:** What do you do to promote language transfer?

**Question 6:** Is there any relationship between language transfer and motivation to learn or attitude toward learning a further language?

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