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Mother Tongue Interference in Written Compositions of Students and Instructors' Perceptions towards it: Lexical Transfers from Amharic to English

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Abstract

The research aimed at exploring lexical interference of Amharic in the written compositions of university students. Accordingly, the study attempted to see the types and predictability of lexical interference in the compositions of students, and teachers' perceptions towards it. To achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers collected and analyzed 25 compositions of students and data from open-ended questions filled out by 25 university instructors who had ever offered Basic Writing Skills course. As the study focused on Amharic interference, it involved only Amharic natives as subjects at Jimma University; hence, the sampling technique employed was purposive sampling to handpick appropriate participants. The data were analyzed qualitatively. The study showed that students committed errors related to Amharic interference, and more than half of the instructors involved in the study were found to give less emphasis to mother tongue interference when they correct compositions of their students. All the interference errors are two types: semantic interference and collocation interference. It was also seen that instructors were not specific enough in indicating interference errors on the compositions of students; therefore, it is the case that students are not in a position to know about the error that they continue to commit. It is, therefore, recommended for the instructors to make interference errors explicit enough for the students, so that they will have information and may strive for improvement, and, people responsible for the preparation of English language curriculum need to reconsider errors related to mother tongue interference.

Keywords: / Lexical Transfers/Mother Tongue interference/Perceptions/

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

English language in Ethiopia serves as a foreign language, as its usage is limited to classroom and barely used outside. Besides, in the classroom, there is a rumor that teachers and students tend to use mother tongues more often. In addition, there are complaints that English language proficiency levels of students are deteriorating from time to time. In this regard, Stoddart (1986) cited in Berhanu Bogale (2009) puts that many Ethiopian students do have the inability to understand clearly the English language of their teachers that they remain slow or inadequate to improve their skills at all levels. Such a comment on the status of English language in Ethiopia has become common nowadays.

From experience, it can be witnessed that students joining universities have limitations in the macro and micro skills of English language. As instructors at Jimma university, the writers of this project have observed that most students at undergraduate level for that matter seem to face difficulties to use the language effectively; it becomes even worse when observing their English compositions. Meanwhile, it seems obvious that teachers tend not to focus on mother tongue interference as one of the common errors for the students to learn from. Universities in Ethiopia offer harmonized English language common courses, namely Communicative English Skills and Basic Writing Skills; and mother tongue interference is not considered at all in the syllabi of the aforementioned courses offered in Universities in which Jimma University is the one. In fact, course syllabus for Basic Writing course offered at Ethiopian universities is harmonized to include contents that focus on mechanics and grammars merely, regardless of other related issues, like mother tongue interference.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Read and Chappel (2001) indicate that knowledge of lexis or vocabulary is an indispensible and most important component, among other things, in language learning; and lack of knowledge of lexis and other important language features may trigger the use of native languages to fill knowledge gaps and hence may result in errors because of negative transfers.

In Ethiopian context some studies have been done so far on mother tongue interference. For example, Tesfaye Abera (2009, p.2) did research on 'the effects of mother tongue and other related factors on English language learning…' One of his major findings reads, "vowel length and consonant germination in the written form of Afan Oromo confuse to a certain extent the English learner…Hence phonological variations between the two languages could be the main factor that affect English performance of students." However, he did not come with much data of the phonological differences of the two languages and was much concerned with other influencing factors like, access to academic materials and teachers' efficiency.

Similarly, Britten (1978) cited in Getachew Zicke (n.d) who was once instructor at College of Commerce, Addis Ababa University, has drawn attention to Amharic interference. Britten (1978) cited in Getachew Zicke (_n.d_) indicated in his unpublished document entitled 'Amharic First language Interference' that most of the written works he was given to edit had the problem of mother tongue interference, among other things. Britten's (1978) work which is not a full-fledge research has inspired the researchers of this project to study on Lexical transfers from Amharic to English.

Having reviewed the literatures, the researchers noticed that no local studies had been done (that they knew of, at least) in relation to lexical transfers from Amharic that the researchers were interested to do extensive research. Hence, this study aimed at exploring Amharic lexical interference in the English language compositions of students at university level and hence attempted to answer the following research questions.

1. What types of lexical interference are prevalent in the compositions of students?
2. What are the patterns and predictability of the interference in the compositions of students?
3. What are the perceptions of instructors of Basic Writing Skills course towards mother tongue interference?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

In the late 1950s behaviorist learning theory appeared with a claim that language learning is habit formation and explains why second or foreign language learners make errors. According to the theory, old habits (habits of first language) hinder or facilitate the formation of new habits (habits of second or foreign language); learners face difficulties in acquiring second or foreign language due to the interference of their old habits or habits of their first language. Because of this assumption, errors were seen as unwanted behaviors. Built up on behaviorism and structuralism, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis focused on interference from first language (L1) on to second language (L2) (Brown, 2000).

Therefore, languages that are structurally different put learners under difficulties, and may result in interference from learners' mother tongues. This is said to be the origin of the term transfer, which can be ~~of~~ positive or negative. If the transfer is positive, learning becomes easier, but it can be difficult and may take longer time if the transfer is negative, due to the newness of the second or foreign language structure. In the early 1970s, however, contrastive analysis (CA) was criticized from three perspectives: empirical, theoretical, and practical considerations. When researchers examine language in general and language learning in particular, they doubt the ability of CA to predict errors. Besides, there were criticisms about the feasibility of comparing languages and the methodology. Because of these and other criticisms and new developments in the second language learning, the interest in CA declined and keenness to error analysis increased.

Unlike contrastive analysis, Error analysis sees errors as sign of learning and considers native language negative transfer or inter language error as one type of error and other errors like interalingual errors/developmental errors are caused by the target language (Corder, 1981). According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), there are four types of developmental errors, like overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rule, and false concepts hypothesized.

2.2 Language Interference

According to Thorovský (2009), interference is manifestation of forms or words 'unusual' or even 'non-existent' in the target language whose importation into the target text is obviously caused by the source-text formulations. Thorovský (2009) classifies errors caused by mother tongue interference into surface lexical interference, semantic interference, idiomatic interference, collocation interference, and cultural interference.

Surface lexical interference occurs when the lexical unit in the source language orthographically (visually) resembles a certain lexical unit in the target language, which may not be common between Amharic and English. Semantic interference "is caused by an overlap of meanings between the source lexical unit and the

target lexical units, which are only partial equivalents" (Thorovský 2009, p.86). It means the communicator relies on the dictionary meaning or the first meaning he/she knows and does not consider the context it appears. While the idiomatic interference occurs when the person misinterprets or literally translates, interference in collocation partially resembles semantic interference but does not occur on individual words. Collocation interference happens when the user of the target language does not carefully identify which word goes with which other word to be meaningful according to the rule of the target language; whereas, semantic interference happens at single word level and the users assume the meaning they know without considering word meanings in context. Lastly, cultural interference "occurs in those cases where the translator is unable to deal with the cultural difference between the source language culture and the target language culture. In most cases there is no direct equivalent in the target language" (Thorovský 2009, p.86). Accordingly, this study has employed Thorovský's (2009) classifications of errors to categorize mother tongue interference errors in the compositions of students.

2.3 Perceptions of Errors

Language teachers' perceptions or understanding of errors impacts how they see and how they give feedback on errors. Sheorey (1986) did a comparative study on the perceptions of native and non-native ESL teachers in America and India towards student errors, and found out that native teachers were more tolerant than non-native teachers, but both prioritize subject-verb error types. Similarly, Hyland and Anan (2006) found out that teachers perceive errors differently and their concerns with them vary accordingly; Japanese teachers are found to focus more on structural errors than stylistic variations. Looking at the English language syllabus and instructors' professional experiences at higher institutions, where the researchers teach at, we experience perceptions in conformity with the above findings. Nevertheless, this claim needs further studies, and this research aspires to fulfill the need.

2.4 Corder's Error Analysis Model Adapted and Merged with Thorovský's (2009)

Corder's (1981) model is more inclusive than Keshavarz (1994) model in that it puts forward different options from which learners' errors can be seen. In fact, the model is fit to investigate the research problem under focus in this paper. According to Corder's model, it is possible to literally translate sentences, which plausible interpretation cannot be put on in context, into L1 (Amharic) and see if plausible interpretation in context is possible. If so, it is also possible to translate L1 (Amharic) sentence back into the target language to provide reconstructed sentences.

Hence, the researchers have adapted Corder's (1981) model in a way to help explain the issue under investigation. First, besides the sentence level description of learners' errors, the researchers have added 'word and phrase' to make the study complete. This is because Britten (1978) in Getachew Zicke (__) , who comments on Amharic interference, mentions that there is a transfer of lexis from Amharic into English. Second, Corder's (1981) model asks whether or not learner's mother tongue is known to move on to the other step to find out mother tongue interference. For this particular study, however, because Amharic as mother tongue is considered, the step is simply presupposed.

Generally, learner errors in this research are described and analyzed looking at their word, phrase, and sentential utterances against the reconstructed target-language utterances, according to Corder's (1981) error analysis model. Besides, the researchers used Thorovský's (2009) interference classifications to make a comprehensive analysis. Thorovský (2009) classifies lexical interference into surface lexical

interference, semantic interference, idiomatic interference, interference in collocation, and cultural interference. These classifications are used to categorize and analyze thematically lexical interferences identified in the students' compositions.

3   Methods

3.1 Setting and Design of the Study

The study was conducted at Jimma University which is located in south-west of Ethiopia. Jimma University was founded in 1983 with one college and one institute, namely Jimma Agriculture College and Jimma Institute of Health; the university was established in 1992 and is one of the leading universities in Ethiopia now. The university is known with community engagement and development activities and is uniquely identified with "we are in the community" motto.

This study analyzed corpus of written compositions of students along with perceptions of instructors as cases; hence, the nature of the design is descriptive case study. Besides, the nature of the data is predominantly qualitative, for it involves detailed explanation of errors, and it is quantitative to some extent, for it counts data related to background information of respondents. It has the following constituents that fit into the design.

3.1 Sampling and Participants

Compositions of University students enrolled in 2009 E.C. at Jimma University were subjects. Jimma University was chosen, for it was the funding university, and doing research in the University saves time and finance expenses as the researchers worked at the University by then. In fact, site of the research did not affect as far as Amharic natives were contacted. The total number of compositions collected for selection and organization are about eighty (80) from three departments, namely Amharic Department, Agricultural Business Department, and Agricultural Economics Department. The researchers picked the departments after learning that Amharic native students existed with large numbers. In fact, the probability of getting Amharic natives in the department of Amharic was obvious. Amharic, regardless of other Ethiopian languages, as language of interference was focused after learning from some documents and Amharic native instructors that Amharic interference is raging.

Of the 80 compositions collected, 25 were selected from first year university students whose mother tongue is Amharic and who were not speakers of other Ethiopian languages. One of the techniques used to identify Amharic natives was by providing some compulsory details to consider when they wrote their compositions as indicated in the data collection procedures section. The sampling technique is, hence, purposive sampling and 30 % was the cut off for the sample size. First year university students were chosen because it was in the first year that university students took 'Basic Writing Skills' course. Considering only speakers of Amharic, the researchers were able to relate confidently the transfer errors (lexical interference errors) to their mother tongue, Amharic.

Besides, 25 instructors in the department of English Language and Literature were also participants. Because all instructors in the department offer common courses like Basic writing Skills, which is the focus of this study, the researchers selected them randomly with lottery method, and the number of participants was limited in line with the number of compositions considered.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

All students including those whose native languages may not be Amharic were asked to write autobiographies with some compulsory details, like where they are from; the number of languages they speak. All students were included, and later Amharic natives were identified by using the compulsory details as references. Through the course instructor, students were given 40 minutes to write their compositions within the classroom. To help them revise their draft for any mistakes or slips, they were also told to take more than 40 minutes outside classroom. Despite additional time bestowed up on them, all the students were able to finish and submit their compositions within 40 minutes, and the compositions submitted on time were enough for corpus analysis.

All of the compositions, i.e. 80 of them were screened against criteria such as readability and legibility of handwriting, and compositions by only Amharic natives. In fact, reading the beginning of the compositions, the researchers were able to identify where they are from and what school they attended, among other things.

Then, overall 25 compositions were selected and arranged for analysis. Then, 25 subject instructors were given the 25 compositions to give feedback on before they filled out open-ended questionnaires about their perceptions towards mother tongue interference.

3.2.1   Collection of Corpus of Compositions of Students

During writing practices, right after the course instructor(s) had finished giving feedbacks on the papers, student compositions were arranged for analysis. Considering compositions already marked by instructors helps to see the focus and the criteria of instructors concerned in correcting students' compositions.

3.2.2   Open-ended Questionnaire

After corpus of compositions were carefully identified and organized, 25 instructors who participated in correcting compositions filled out open-ended questionnaires which ask them to reflect their overall understandings of language errors. All the instructors were able to fill out all the questionnaires and give back that there was no missing questionnaire on record. The responses were organized and analyzed thematically in line with the research questions of the study.

3.3 Method of Analysis

Analysis of data involved steps like identifying, describing and explaining lexical interference. This study used Corder's 1981 model of analysis and Thorovský's (2009) interference classifications. According to Corder (1981), the steps used to analyze errors are selection of corpus (students' composition in the case of this study), identification of errors, classification, and evaluation. In fact, classification of errors was made by using Thorovský's (2009) interference classification model.

First, errors were distinguished from mistakes. This was done in two ways. The first is by looking at repetitions of errors across compositions and within a composition. There was a tendency for the students sampled to repeat errors. Another is by giving the learners time to correct faults. Students were made to begin writing autobiographies in class, and when they had finished their drafts, they were ordered to take time to revise for mistakes/errors. Fortunately, all students were able to finish their compositions and submit in class. These techniques were helpful to see if students were able to revise 'mistakes'; otherwise, all faults would be

labeled as errors, of which lexical transfers from their mother tongue could be one. Twenty five selected compositions were analyzed and discussed to investigate classifications of lexical interference.

Generally, the compositions were analyzed with Corder's model of analysis and discussed in terms of Thorovský's (2009) classifications of lexical interference. Thorovský (2009) classifies lexical errors into surface lexical interference, semantic interference, idiomatic interference, interference in collocation, and cultural interference.

3.4 Transferability and Dependability

The validity and reliability of a qualitative research is mainly achieved by clearly indicating the procedures of data collection and data analysis. Because this research is predominantly a qualitative one, the procedures are shown clearly to achieve the validity and reliability of the research. Besides, in an attempt to satisfy face-validity of the questionnaire tool, collogues that were not participated in the research, were given the questionnaire along with the research questions to comment, and their comments were incorporated later on.

4   Results and Discussion

4.1 Result from the Compositions of Students

Since the research is predominantly text analysis, 25 compositions were collected and analyzed, and of the 25 compositions, 4 compositions, which are representatives of all in terms of issue under study, are presented in this section. In the sample compositions (figure 1, figure 2, figure 3, and figure 4) below, expressions with Amharic interferences are indicated with red pen and labeled with Arabic numbers.
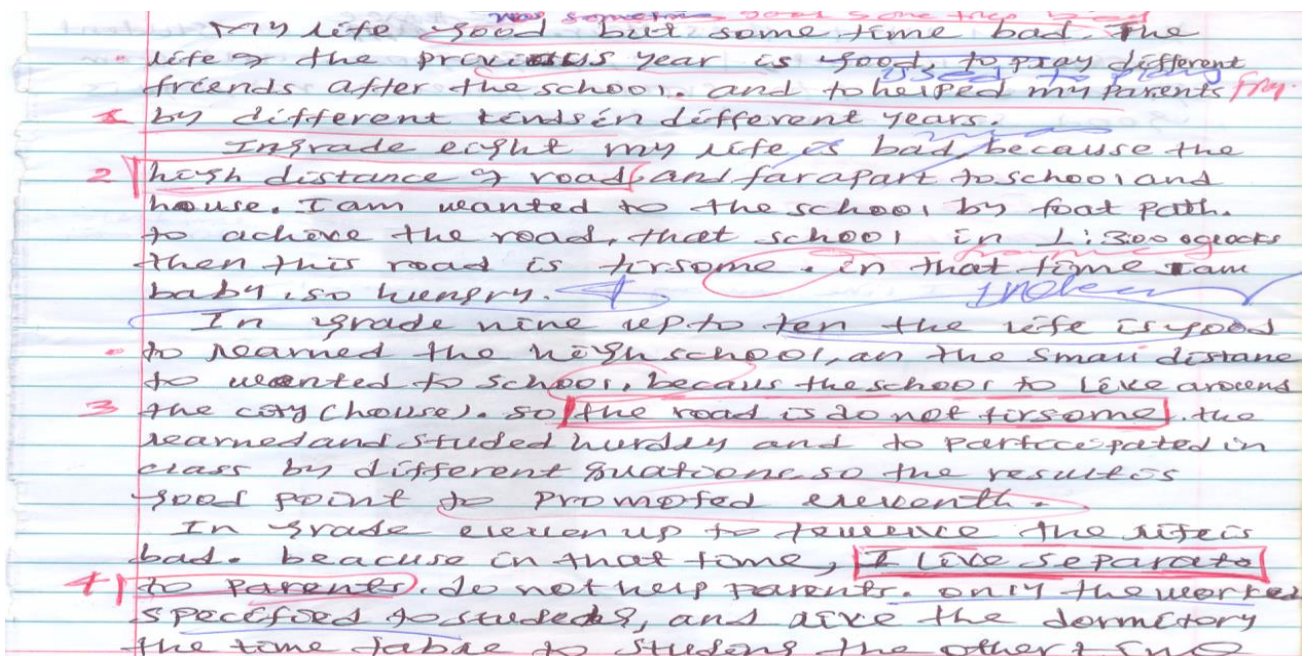

Fig 1: Sample Composition of Student 1

Underlined and identified with Arabic numbers (1 to 4) above are expressions that exhibit mother tongue interference. The first expression identified as number 1 says "…by different kinds…" which is equivalent to the Amharic version, BETELEYAYE AYENET, which can be translated as 'in different ways.' Similarly, the composition has the expression "…the high distance of road…" which seems to be translated from KEFETEGNA EREZIMET YALEW MENGED which can be translated to English as 'long distance.' The student writes "…the road is tiresome" for MENGEDU ADEKAMI NEBER which can be translated to English as '…going long distance was tiresome.' Last but not least, the student writes "…I live separate to parents" meaning: KEBETESEBE TELEYECHE ENOR NEBER which can be translated 'I lived away from my family.'
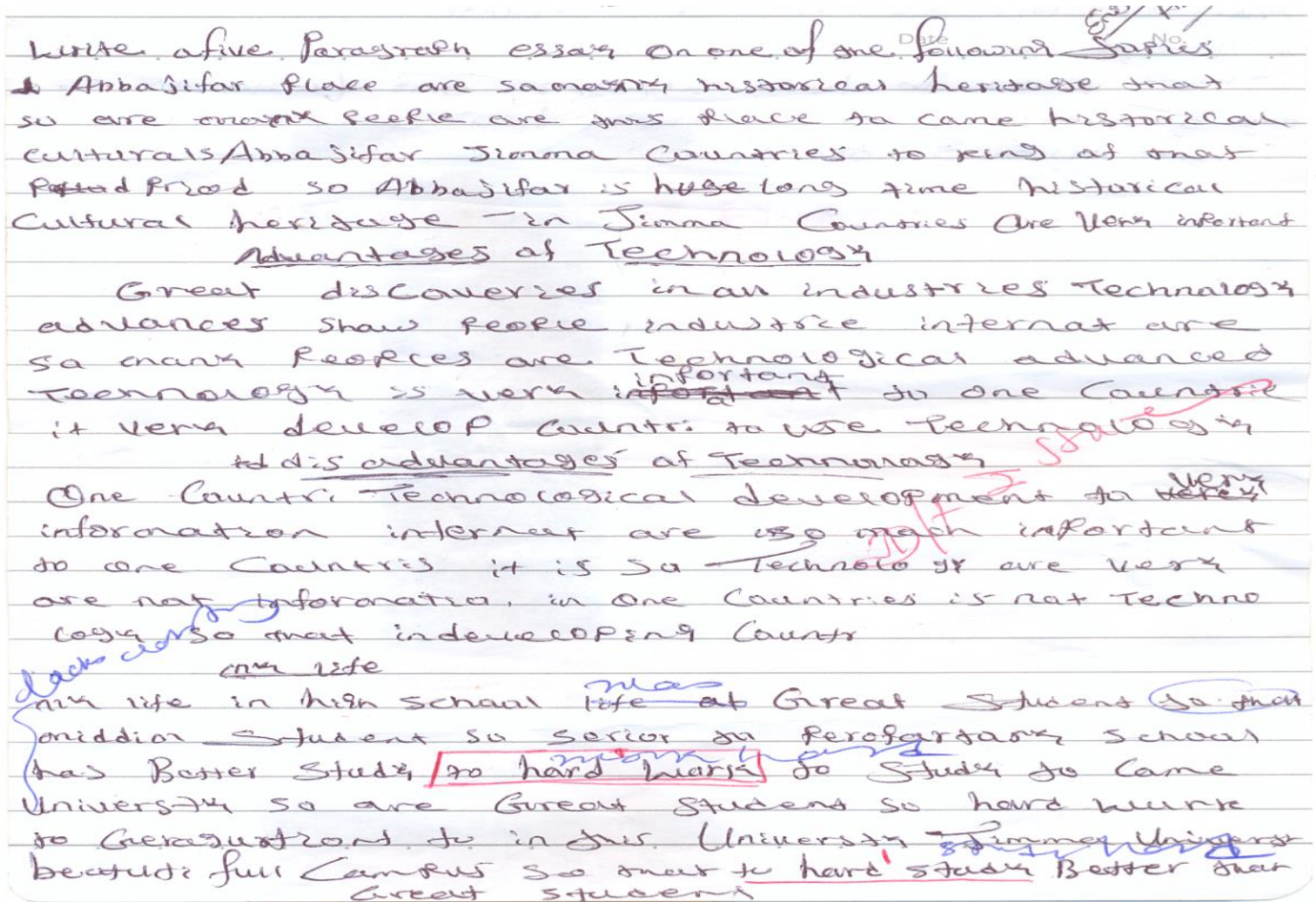
Fig 2: Sample Composition of Student 2

Although the meaning in each sentence-like expression of the above composition, figure 2, is tough to comprehend, he/she says "…to hard work…" in the middle section of the last paragraph which in the context is translated from BETAM/TENKERO LEMESERAT, which should be rewritten as 'to work hard.'

Fig 3: Sample Composition of Student 3

A student in the above composition, figure 3, writes, "I pass got to in Jimma university" to which the equivalent Amharic expression is ALEFE WEDE Jimma University GEBAHU, yet the intention of the student can be rewritten as 'I joined Jimma University.' This student also says, "…Jimma is a best country" which is Jimma MIRIT HAGER NEW in Amharic, but it communicates better with 'Jimma is the best town'.

Fig 4: Sample Composition of Student 4

In the composition, figure 4, above, the student begins with a title, "History of my Life" or TARIKE/ YEHIWOTE TARIK in its Amharic equivalence which should be rewritten as 'Autobiography.' Besides, at the very beginning of the composition, she writes, "I was born…from my father… and from my mother…" Introductions of her father and mother are directly translated from KEABATE…KEENATE…TEWOLEDKU. However, the student would avoid confusions if she wrote, 'my father's name/my father is called…my mother's name is/my mother is called…' She goes on with another interference with "1-8 I learned Tigrabado primary school" which means …Tigrabado YEMEJEMERIA TIMHERT BET TEMERIALEHU. In this expression 'at' is missing because it is not important when one, as the student does, translates directly from Amharic. Hence, the expression can be rewritten as 'I learned at Tigrabado primary school, or I attended primary school at Tigrabado.' Finally, towards the end of the composition, the student writes "…9-12 learn place Debarek preparatory and secondary school which means in her mother tongue, …YETEMARKUBET BOTA…., but it can be rewritten as 'I learned at…, or I attended preparatory and secondary school at...'

As a whole, expressions that seem to have errors in relation to mother tongue interference are shown with four randomly selected compositions above. The following table shows examples of collocation and semantic interferences which has been commonly occurred in the compositions.

Table: Collocation Interference and Semantic Interference

S.N	Faulty Expression (with L1 Interference)	Working Expression (with no L1 Interference)	Type of Lexical Interference
1	I **Passed to** Jimma University	I joined Jimma University	Collocation Interference
2	Study to hard work /hard study	...work hard/study hard	
3	…the high distance of road…	Long distance	
4	"…the road is tiresome	going long distance was tiresome	
5	I live separate to parents	'I lived away from my family	
6	I learned Tigrabado primary school	I learned at...	
7	Jimma is best country	Jimma is the best town	Semantic Interference
8	History of my life	Autobiography	

4.2 Result from open-ended questionnaire for teachers

Twenty-five instructors in the Department of English Language and Literature at Jimma University filled in open-ended questionnaires about their perceptions of L1 interference in the students' compositions. The questionnaire has two sections: background information and open-ended questions about the case in focus. Hence, in this section, teachers' background information and results about the issue under study are made thematically.

Thematic Presentations of Responses made by Teacher Respondents. The second section of the questionnaire contains seven open-ended questions and two yes/no questions. All the open-ended questions along with the yes/no questions are discussed in subsequent pages.

Contributions or Advantages of Basic Writing Skills course for students.It begins with a question that asks teacher respondents to explain the advantages or contributions of Basic Writing Skills course. The responses of all respondents are presented in themes below.

The advantages or contributions of Basic Writing course offers for students include the following major points.

1. Enables students to be good writers
2. Offers them the opportunity to develop their fluency in writing
3. Enhances students' writing skills
4. Helps them recognize sentence errors and write paragraphs and essays free from errors
5. Helps them to develop information organized in coherent and logical ways
6. Helps them acquire the knowledge and skills to write effective sentences, paragraphs, and essays
7. Helps them use appropriate punctuation marks

Errors Students make during writing Practice. Teacher respondents have also written out the errors they usually experience when they help their students by giving feedbacks on students' compositions. The common errors teacher respondents mentioned include: punctuation errors, capitalization error, grammatical errors, spelling errors, lack of neatness of scripts, and choice of diction. All of these and other types of errors recalled by the teacher respondents are errors that are considered by almost all writing skill instructors.

Setting criteria to correct compositions of students. All of the teacher respondents said that they set criteria of evaluation or correction to give feedback on the compositions of students, and these criteria are listed below.

1. Giving valuable comments *[It was listed by some instructors as one of the criteria (comment is made by the researchers)]*
2. Using transitional words
3. Grammatical (sentence error types) and Mechanical (spelling) correctness
4. Using appropriate punctuation and conjunction
5. Spelling
6. Unity, coherence, completeness, and consciences
7. Clarity and Neatness
8. Word choice (diction)

It is important to note here that the above question was posed to clear out whether or not the teachers consider interference in any sort when they correct compositions of students. As it is shown above, none of them talked about interference in any form.

Instances of L1 (mother tongue) interference. Teacher respondents were also asked if students have ever exhibited errors caused by the interference of their mother tongues. All instructors agreed through their responses that they have experienced such errors from the compositions of students, but almost all of these teacher respondents are unable to give some examples of the errors.

Few of the respondents give examples of errors that they assume interference while the errors are actually generalizations of rules of the target language. For example, the following expressions are assumed as wrong expressions caused by the interference from the students' mother tongues.

1. "words like know, now, etc because of their sound seems to the word they know in Amharic"

However, some other respondents (four of them) have given examples of expressions that are typical of interference from L1. These instances include:

2. "…to say she *looks like* her mother, "she *does not go* she *does not come*, she *cut* her mother" which is equivalent to the Amharic version, [ATHED ATMETA KURIT ``ENATUAN]

3. "…to say I *joined* this department, they say I *entered* this department" which is equivalent to EZIH DEPARTMENT GEBAHU

4. "For welcome or for *thank you*, *well stay*" which is equivalent to ENKUAN DEHINA KOYUGN/KOYEHEGN

5. " I *worked/made my homework* instead of I *did my homework*" which is equivalent to YEBETSIRAYEN SERECHALEHU

6. *" let my father die* during swearing" which is equivalent to ABATE YEMUT

7. "*Keep me* to say *wait for me*" which is equivalent to TEBEKEGN

The rest of the respondents, majority of them, have intentionally left blank spaces; some others wrote students commit errors related to mother tongue interference but were unable to give specific examples.

Giving feedback on the students' compositions about L1 interference. Lastly, teacher respondents were also asked to confirm if they are conscious of errors caused by mother tongue interference and indicate the errors in the compositions of the students, and all of the respondents have confirmed they do. Then, the next point was to state why they give feedback on the same, and their responses are indicated below.

1. For improving students' writing skills
2. For clarity of sentences
3. Students do not have good background of English; therefore, indicating students of these errors help them a lot.
4. Because they should be aware of the difference in structure between their mother tongue and English language
5. To help them write error free paragraphs and essays
6. Because the errors impede communication

Looking at instructors' understanding of lexical transfers in general and their responses to reasons for giving feedback in particular, one can see that they are serving their missions well and are up to expectations. However, it is important to cross check if the assumptions are practically seen in the compositions of students; hence, more meanings related to instructors' perceptions towards lexical transfers are made in the discussion section of the paper.

5. Discussion

In the previous section of the paper, results from two sources, i.e. compositions of students and teacher respondents are presented thematically. It is shown that compositions of students sampled contain errors that are triggered by the interference of Amharic. Similarly, all teacher respondents included in this study witnessed that students to whom they offer Basic Writing skills course make errors related to the interference of their

mother tongues. In this section of the paper, specific implications of the main findings emanated from the two sources of data are discussed with the relevant literatures.

As indicated in the result section, 25 compositions of 25 students were sampled for the study, and all of them have errors of Amharic interference. Although the compositions were illegible and were difficult to comprehend, significant number of expressions were identified and presented with detailed analysis.

The errors identified in the result can be seen in the eyes of the five types of lexical interferences, as classified by Thorovský (2009). The interference types are surface lexical interference, semantic interference, idiomatic interference, collocation interference, and cultural interference. Of these types of errors, only semantic interference and collocation interference are found to exist. It is usually the case that classifications of errors may vary for different reasons that requires further studies. In line with this, Yuniswati (2017) who has looked into the kinds of lexical and grammatical interference caused by L1, for example, found out that the category of errors did not exist within Kwary and Sugiri's classifications adopted as a framework.

In this study, the surface lexical interference does not exist because the origins of the two languages, Amharic and English are different; hence, there are no words orthographically similar to deceive students when they write their compositions. Similarly, although there could be possibilities, in some other cases, for the students to commit errors related to idiomatic and cultural interferences, there is no any kind identified in the compositions of the students.

When compositions of students are analyzed, some expressions with L1 interferences appear repeatedly. These expressions are ranked 1 to 3 below.

1. I was born…*from my father/mother*…
2. I *learn* primary school/secondary school/ Jimma university
3. I *entered to* school/Jimma University

It seems, therefore, that these repetitions may imply that students sampled for the study are more or less in similar mindsets cultivated with similar culture. Of course, this happens partly because the students were ordered to write autobiographies, and all have more or less similar experiences, like helping families and going to school, and they are engaged in direct translations. This fact is consistent with studies about the same issue. For example, Bennui (2008) found out that Thai students were engaged in translation to Englsih which they learn it as a foreign language. As McCarthy (2001) explains, learning a foreign language involves translations; students may inevitably be involved in translations when they learn skills and knowledge of the language, but they should do it thoughtfully and responsibly. Teaching students strategies, skills, knowledge of the language is partly the responsibility of foreign language teachers. In fact, the methodology and areas of teaching of university instructors should be different from the way high school teachers do.

As it is indicated in the results of teacher respondents section of the paper, all of the instructors who were involved in teaching Basic Writing Skills course stated that their focus areas when correcting compositions of their students are the common ones: spelling errors, grammar errors, and other common types of sentence errors. No one mentioned mother tongue interference, which is seen prevalent in the compositions analyzed in this study. In fact, very few of them were able to give specific examples of mother tongue interference they have ever encountered while they were correcting compositions. This implies that there is lack of attention, if not awareness, to mother tongue interference as errors students commonly commit.

6.   Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

When one discusses interference of L1 in foreign language, he/ she has to take into account the fact that translation is inevitable, and translation works out differently between mother tongue and a foreign language. According to McCarthy (2001), when one translates a foreign language to his/her native language, he/she makes analysis in its different forms; nevertheless, when one translates from his/her native to a foreign language, he/she synthesizes. The implication is the latter is tough, for it involves reconstruction and the process of production. This study is about the interference of mother tongue in the compositions students write, which involves partly translations from their native languages. Hence, based on the results and major findings of the study, the following conclusions are made.

It is seen in the analysis of compositions sampled for the study that students make errors related to mother tongue interference; these errors can be summarized in two types: semantic interference and collocation interference.

In relation to teachers' perceptions towards mother tongue interference, it is shown that almost none of them has included interference on the list of criteria of evaluation of compositions, and very few of them were able to give specific examples of interference in any forms. Hence, it seems that teachers, at least those included in this study, do not give significant attention to interference as one of the major errors students commit. Besides, it seems that the cause of the interferences of the expressions identified is due to limited word power or lack of knowledge of word collocation. To sum up, although this study has focused on only Amharic interference, it initiates other researchers to investigate the issue further, for example, by focusing on other Ethiopian languages in academia.

6.2 Recommendations

It is obvious that interference occurs in a situation when someone does not have a native-level command of a language, and students understudy at this level can be expected to experience interference. As a result, taking the findings of the study and the reality into account the following recommendations are made.

1. Unless students are made aware of mother tongue interference as one of the errors, they may not really consider it as error and may continue to make errors for life. There for instructors concerned need to draw the attentions of students to the issue of interference by giving some practical examples of the errors.

2. It seems that teachers, at least those included in this study, do not give much attention to mother tongue interference in any form. For the students to improve their writings, it is vital to give them feedback on the papers in appropriate ways. For example, they should indicate any interference with its equivalent word/expression in the language it transferred from in the papers they correct.

3. Although the design of the study is a case study one and hence is not to be generalized, the study implies that there is a need to include the issue of interference on the higher intuition English language common course syllabus, like Basic Writing course syllabus, as students have been found to experience the error in a large extent.

Authors' contributions

[1]Aschalew Adera has written the introduction part, the review of related literature, methods, procedures, the findings and discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

[2.]Daniel Taye has edited and reviewed the manuscript of this article.

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