KEY CONCEPTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS/CONCEPTOS CLAVE DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA

The Use of Previously Known Languages by L2 Learners: A not so Clear-Cut Phenomenon

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As is well known, second language (L2) learners resort to their previously known languages, among other issues, when confronted with communication problems during interaction or for task-related procedures, as illustrated in (1) (use of Spanish) and (2) (use of Catalan):

(1) CHI1: *cómo se dice enfadada*? [how do you say angry?]
CHI2: cross?
(From Martínez-Adrián & Arratibel-Irazusta, 2020)

(2) CHA: *et toca a tu, no?* [it's your turn, isn't it?]
(From Vraciu & Pladevall-Ballester, 2020)

Even though the use of previously known languages by L2 learners during production is so evident, its conception is not so crystal-clear. First of all, its investigation has been approached from a cognitive (i.e. Poulisse, 1993) and a sociocultural perspective (i.e. Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Second, this study

gains in complexity when multilingual learners are the target of these investigations (Cenoz, 2001), as not only the mother tongue/s but any other language known by the learner could be employed during production.

This paper delves into the complexities of the use of previously known languages by L2 learners as regards its conceptualisation, issues related to the methodology employed for its investigation and the analysis of the variables that determine its use. To this end, I will first of all outline the main theoretical approaches to the study of this phenomenon, highlighting the main uses of previously known languages considered within them, the factors examined and the type of designs followed. It goes on to present several methodological issues which might explain the existence of mixed results in the literature. The last part of the paper is devoted to the interaction existing among the variables under investigation which brings to light its not so straightforward relationship.

From a cognitive perspective, it is customary to speak about crosslinguistic influence as a learning strategy and a communication strategy. As for crosslinguistic influence as a learning strategy, learners make use of prior linguistic experience to construct hypotheses in the L2 (Schachter, 1983), which are later on tested by searching confirmatory or disconfirmatory input. In the case of crosslinguistic influence as a communication strategy, learners employ their previously known languages (as well as other devices such as miming, avoidance, appeals for assistance) to compensate for the lack of knowledge during production (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997).

In general terms, the study of communication strategies has been approached from two different perspectives: interactional (i.e. Tarone & Yule, 1987) and psycholinguistic (i.e. Poulisse, 1993). Existing taxonomies in both perspectives include previously known language-based strategies. While Tarone's (1983) taxonomy includes conscious transfer encompassing both language switch (Turkish '*balon*' for 'ballon' (from Tarone, 1983)) and literal translation ('He invites him to drink' for 'They toast one another' (from Tarone, 1983)), Poulisse, Bongaerts, and Kellerman (1990) talk about transfer strategies which are broken down into borrowings (Dutch '*etalage*' for English 'shop-window'), foreignizings ('*cuffer*' from French 'coiffeur') (Poulisse, 1990, p. 60)) and literal translations ('my elders' for English 'parents') (Poulisse, 1990, p. 109)).

The bulk of studies exploring the use of communication strategies by L2 learners have devoted their attention to the classification of communication strategies, effectiveness of communication strategies, factors affecting choice of communication strategies, and teachability of communication strategies. In particular, among the factors examined in these investigations, proficiency in the target language (i.e. Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2018, 2019; Bialystok, 1983; Jourdain, 2000; Gallardo-del-Puerto, Basterrechea, & Martínez-Adrián, 2020; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; Muñoz, 2007; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1990; Tarone, 1977), personality (Haastrup & Philipson, 1983; Luján Ortega & Clark-Carter, 2000); age (Cenoz, 2001; Gost & Celaya, 2005), learning and cognitive style (Luján Ortega & Clark-Carter, 2000; Littlemore, 2001); gender (Basterrechea, Martínez-Adrián, & Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2017;

Jiménez Catalán, 2003; Wang, 2008); task-type and task-related features such as cognitive demands, time constraints and interlocutor's role (Poulisse Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1990; Khanji, 1993; Viladot & Celaya, 2007) and learning programme (CLIL vs. Non-CLIL learning context) (Agustín-Llach, 2009; Celaya, 2008; Celaya & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010; Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2015; Martínez-Adrián & Gutiérrez-Mangado, 2015; Pladevall Vallester & Vraciu, 2017) have been found to affect the frequency and choice of communication strategies.

Some of these studies have examined production data (oral and written) (i.e. Agustín Llach, 2009; Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2018, 2019; Caballero & Celaya, 2019; Cenoz, 2001, 2003; Gost & Celaya, 2005; Muñoz, 2007; Poulisse & Bongaerts, 1994), while others have examined learners' self-reported use of communication strategies (i.e. Kaivanpanach et al., 2012; Martínez-Adrián, Gallardo-del-Puerto, & Basterrechea, 2019; Ollo Jiménez & Martínez-Adrián, 2019; Purdie & Oliver, 1999). The target of these investigations has been primarily adult and adolescent learners (i.e. Barea Neira, 2018; Fernández Dobao, 2001; Ghout-Khenoune, 2012; Martínez-Adrián & Gutiérrez-Mangado, 2015, Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1990; Rosas Maldonado, 2016) but primary-school learners are receiving increasing attention in recent years (Agustín Llach, 2009, 2016; Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2015; Gallardo-del-Puerto, Basterrechea & Martínez-Adrián, 2020; Pladevall-Ballester & Vraciu, 2017)

From a sociocultural perspective, the use of previously known languages is considered an essential tool that assists learners during collaborative tasks and mediates their own mental activity through private speech (Alegría De La Colina & García Mayo, 2009;

Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). L2 learners use their previously known languages for functions such as task management (i.e. to plan, organize and monitor the activity), grammar and vocabulary deliberations, off-task talk (i.e. casual talk) and phatics (i.e. the use of expressions such as *ok*, *well*, and *so* in the learners' previously known languages to facilitate the flow of speech). Factors such as proficiency level in the target language (DiCamilla & Antón, 2012; Martínez-Adrián, 2020a; Storch & Aldosari, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Vraciu & Pladevall-Ballester, 2020), gender (Azkarai, 2015; Azkarai & Imaz Agirre, 2017; Ross-Feldman, 2005), type of learning programme (CLIL vs. Non-CLIL) (García Mayo & Hidalgo Gordo, 2017; García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015; Martínez-Adrián, 2020b), task-type (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2017; Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009; Rayati, Yaqubi, & Harsejsani, 2012; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) and task-modality (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2015; Martínez-Adrián & Arratibel-Irazusta, 2020; Payant & Kim, 2019) have been found to affect the use of previously known languages during task-based interaction. This line of research has been particularly evident in the case of adult learners, but in the last five years, researchers are especially committed to the study of young learners so as to offer this population the best learning conditions (García Mayo, 2018).

In addition to the existence of different theoretical approaches for this phenomenon, when it comes to the methodology employed in investigations framed within cognitive or sociocultural theories, its study is not without limitations and intricacies, which may explain the existence of mixed results in the literature. First of all, in a good number of studies it is typical to observe how several

strategies or categories are merged under a higher-order category. For example, the use of borrowings, foreignizings and calques are typically included within the category 'transfer'. Even if this categorization is correct and in line with the taxonomy devised in the Nijmegen project[1] (Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1990), more robust conclusions can be drawn if the three strategies within 'transfer' are treated individually as they have been found not to follow the same path in different studies (see Agustín Llach, 2016; Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2018; Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2015; Gallardo del Puerto, Basterrechea, & Martínez-Adrián, 2020). Likewise, the existence of different categorizations and tags both in cognitive and sociocultural perspectives adds further complexity. For instance, while certain studies talk about 'conscious transfer', other investigations talk about 'borrowings' within the cognitive strand. Similarly, while some studies within the sociocultural strand consider the use of previously known languages for metacognitive purposes (i.e. task-related procedures), other investigations speak about the use of these languages for metacomments instead. Apart from the problematicity as regards the existence of different tags, it is also important to tackle not only amount/frequency of use of learners' previously known languages but also a more detailed analysis of the different functions and the most common manifestations of these languages, alongside the study of the use of the target language. This type of analysis will widen the scope of the study and will provide a fairer picture of the use of the learner's

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[1] This project on the use of communication strategies by first language (L1) Dutch learners of L2 English was pioneer in devising a more comprehensive taxonomy and in providing a more exhaustive study of proficiency and task effects.

language repertoire in the multilingual class. The use of a wide array of tasks is another issue that may lead to mixed results. Studies on the effect of proficiency on the use of previously known languages have attested different findings when examining foreignizings (Agustín Llach, 2009; Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2018; Celaya, 2008; Gallardo-del-Puerto, 2015; Martínez-Adrián, Gallardo-del-Puerto, & Basterrechea, 2019). While in oral production and in self-report questionnaires, less proficient learners have been found to favor the use of this strategy, studies examining written production have proved the opposite. Mixed results may also be explained by the small gap in proficiency existing between the groups tested. The review of different investigations that have examined learners with small differences in terms of proficiency levels (Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2018, 2019; Gallardo-del-Puerto, Basterrechea, & Martínez-Adrián, 2020) suggests the inclusion of a wider gap between groups that could potentially yield larger differences, all of which could lead to a more thorough view of strategy development.

Apart from these methodological issues, we cannot dismiss the interaction existing among the variables under investigation, which has been attested in studies carried out within the cognitive and sociocultural strand. Studies on communication strategies that have looked into the variable 'proficiency in the target language' have revealed how proficiency is sometimes overruled by the nature of the task in adult learners. In this case, in highly-demanding tasks, advanced learners have been found to employ previously known language-based strategies (Fernández Dobao, 2002; Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1990). Similarly, several investigations examining child and adolescent learners immersed in a CLIL

programme have concluded that proficiency may be overruled by participation in this type of educational programme, as beginner learners participating in these bilingual programmes have been observed to employ L2-based strategies more typical of advanced learners (i.e. the use of paraphrasing in the target language) (Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2019; Martínez-Adrián, 2020a; Martínez-Adrián, Gallardo-del-Puerto, & Basterrechea, 2019). Likewise, proficiency has been found to interact with the variable 'age' in younger learners and adolescents, as older participants have been found to use their previously known languages to a higher extent, especially for less cooperative and more external-to-the task categories such as metacomments (i.e. metacognitive talk), discourse markers (i.e. phatics) and private speech (Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2018; García Mayo & Hidalgo Gordo, 2017; García Mayo & Imaz Agirre, 2017; García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015; Martínez-Adrián, 2020a).

These results are also in line with other studies conducted with young learners that have explored proficiency-pairings and time effects (Vraciu & Pladevall Ballester, 2020), according to which older children make more use of their previously known languages at age 11-12, when learners display more analytic abilities in language learning and a higher level of metalinguistic awareness. In a similar vein, investigations within the sociocultural strand that have analysed the impact of the variable 'task-modality' in child learners (Martínez-Adrián & Arratibel-Irazusta, 2020) indicate that it has a limited impact on the functions of previously known languages. Unlike adults, young learners employ them for discussing vocabulary issues in both speaking tasks as well as in speaking+writing tasks, while grammar talk among these learners

is uncommon in this population. These young learners are in the need of vocabulary to move the task forward and they rely on their previously known languages to avoid communication breakdowns. However, their still developing metalanguage skills might explain their lower reliance on their previously known languages for grammar discussions.

This clearly reinforces not only the need for research with young learners given their uniqueness in their engagement in the language learning process (Mackey & Gass, 2005 as cited in Oliver & Azkarai, 2017) but also the examination of age effects within this population. In this respect, other investigations with children which have focused on different issues from the use of previously known languages such as vocabulary acquisition have revealed that age and its associated cognitive processes may have an impact on the performance of communicative tasks in young learners. Iglesias Diéguez (2020) has shown how 6th year primary school learners seem to be more resourceful and to communicate more successfully than 4th year students when performing a storytelling task. Similarly, tasks with a written output appear to be more beneficial for 6th year learners than for their younger counterparts, as they focus on accuracy to a higher extent, showing a similar pattern to adult learners in this case (Niu, 2009; Payant & Kim, 2019).

Thus, the mediating effect of variables such as the nature of the task (see Fernández Dobao, 2002; Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1990), the learning context (Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2019; Martínez-Adrián, 2020a; Martínez-Adrián, Gallardo-del-Puerto, & Basterrechea, 2019) and age (Arratibel-Irazusta & Martínez-Adrián, 2018; García Mayo & Hidalgo Gordo, 2017; García Mayo & Imaz Agirre, 2017; García Mayo & Lázaro

Ibarrola, 2015; Martínez-Adrián, 2020a) should not be overlooked when conducting research on the effect of other variables (i.e. proficiency, task-modality, pairing method) on the use of previously known languages.

In conclusion, what I have shown in this article regarding the use of previously known languages during L2 production has clear implications both for research and for the multilingual class. Researchers should not dismiss the existence of different theoretical underpinnings explaining this phenomenon and the language repertoire in multilinguals which adds further complexity to the categorization of the data. In addition, methodological issues observed in the literature to the present date should be taken into account by researchers when designing their investigations as well as when discussing and interpreting their data: (i) the existence of different tags for the categorization of previously known language use, (ii) the combination of two or more strategies under a higher-order category, (iii) the analysis of both frequency and most common manifestations of both previously known language and target language use, (iv) the examination of a wide range of tasks, and (v) the comparison between groups with narrow gaps in age/proficiency. This will help researchers achieve greater validity and reliability in their investigations. Likewise, what has been reported here regarding the interaction among variables needs to be particularly stressed if we want to make the most of previously known languages in the multilingual class and maximize learning opportunities.

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