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Tertiary EFL learners' perceptions on mother tongue interference (MTI) in academic oral performances

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Abstract: The current study aims at finding out the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' perceptions towards mother tongue (Bangla language) interferences in academic oral performances (viva-voce, presentation, interview) at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. As theoretical framework, Larry Selinker's "Interlanguage" (1972) and Stephen Pit Corder's "Interlanguage with Error Analysis" (1981) theories have been adopted to establish the aim of this study. A mixed-method approach has been applied to conduct the current study. A questionnaire survey and the interview tools have been used for collecting the primary data. The researchers have collected data from 200 respondents from two public and two private universities in Khulna City. The primary findings of this study indicate that in this age of internationalization, EFL learners believe that their mother tongue interference has a negative impact on their oral performances and it stands as a barrier to learning the target language. However, mother tongue interferences are natural and irresistible but the study has focused on the EFL learners' perceptions of the influence of L1. Finally, the study concludes with a positive hope for the EFL learners to have a balance between L1 and L2.

Keywords: EFL learners, mother tongue interference (MTI), academic oral performance

Introduction

Every human being first learns his mother tongue or first language (L1) when he develops his speaking skill. The mother tongue of an individual is their native language, which is taught to them as children and carried down the generations. He speaks it as his first or native language (L1). First language, dominant language, home language, native tongue, or native language are various terms for the mother tongue. According to Gass and Selinker (2008), the first language a child learns is referred to as their native language. Generally, mother tongue interference (henceforth, MTI) means when the mother language or first language (L1) interrupts in case of producing the target language or second (L2) or foreign language. As Corder (1982) defines, the learner is carrying over the habits of the mother tongue into the second language which is called "interference" and the implication of this term can only be that his mother tongue habits prevent him in some way from acquiring the habits of the second language.

The term 'interference' suggests the reorganization of patterns brought about by the introduction of foreign elements in the more highly structured domains of language, such as the vast majority of the phonemic system, a significant portion of morphology and syntax, and some areas of vocabulary, borrowing, or more additions to an inventory (Hanane, 2016). That means when the comprehension of one language makes the comprehension of another language more difficult, there can happen a

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negative transfer. As an alternative, there may be positive transfer, when learning a first language helps a person to acquire a second language. However, the primary objective of this study was to investigate EFL learners' perceptions towards mother tongue's influences while speaking and to find out the possible reasons behind MTI which the learners encounter. The specific objectives of this study were to find out EFL learners' attitudes towards MTI in academic oral performances and to seek the ways for the learners to overcome the quandaries in their oral performances.

MTI in Oral Performances

Due to the existence of mother-tongue interferences, many students may feel anxious or inadequate about their ability to speak English clearly and effectively. According to Ellis (2008), among a few types of interference errors that occur due to L1 and L2 differences, one particular type of error is seen only when there is an absence of any element of the first language in the target language (p.101).

Syntactical Interference

The ability to change words from one language to another language, to make them seem more natural, is made possible by interference at the lexical level which is a part of syntactical interference. Kasap and Emamvirdi (2020) state that some students have gathered L2 structures, but they struggle to put this information into useful, cohesive structures. For instance: the basic sentence structure in the English language is: Subject+verb+object (SVO), for instance, 'I eat rice', this sentence in the Bengali language structure is: Subject+Object+Verb (SOV), for example, "আমি ভাত খাই".

Prepositional Inference

EFL learners think in Bangla first and then deliver it into English as Maniam and Kesevan (2016) have found in their study that 83.3% of the learners have positively responded to the matter that they think in Tamil and then write in English. The learners form some erroneous syntactical patterns while translating and using appropriate prepositions like in the sentence- "ঈশ্বর এর উপর আমার বিশ্বাস আছে", the learners with mother tongue influence generally translate as "I have faith on God" when the correct translation will be "I have faith in God". The learners have used "on" because the sentence in Bangla has "উপর" which means "on". Dola (2015) believed that prepositions are subject to some extremely tight constraints as well, which causes English learners to use their L1 (Bangla) while speaking in English as their L2. As in her study, she found that some of the participants in her study have been observed to make some mistakes by saying, "Talk with my" the use of prepositions is wrong over here it should be "Talk to me" (p.22).

Phonological Interferences

The primary cause of the Bengali-speaking EFL learner's difficulties in pronouncing and understanding English diphthongs is interference from his or her mother tongue like: 'late'/leɪt/ is pronounced like 'let' /let/ (Maniruzzaman, 2006). It can be inferred that there will be a learning issue when such conceptual gaps between the native language and the foreign language are discovered. Maniruzzaman (2006) establishes that Bengali vowels are somewhat extended to emphasize a point or convey diverse emotional effects. However, Bengali vowel length is phonetic rather than phonological. Furthermore, Bengali EFL learners find it difficult to pronounce schwa / ʃ / sound, since this phoneme is not present in Bengali as their native language, Bengali speakers are unable to pronounce 'schwa' with ease and authenticity. Bengali-speaking EFL learners have difficulties in pronouncing English monophthongs and diphthongs which influence his or her auditory and perception skills and therefore, lessen his or her capacity for listening.

According to Maniruzzaman (2006), the Bengali language possesses eighteen regular diphthongs which are characteristically different and shorter than the English ones whereas, the English language has eight diphthongs /ɪə eə əʊ eɪ aɪ ɔɪ aʊ əʊ/ and as a result, a diphthong is made to sound exactly like a monophthong by simply pronouncing the initial component of it. Hasan (2000) states that

> They generally just speak the first component of the sound and pay no attention to the second, which results in the majority of English diphthongs being pronounced improperly by them, thus the English diphthongs cease to be gliding sounds in their pronunciation, e.g., for English /eɪ / and /əʊ/, they generally use the Bangla pure vowels /e/ and /o/ respectively.

This kind of phoneme substitution in the English language impairs the EFL learners' hearing and perceptual abilities and undoubtedly leads to a lot of confusion. In English, stress is typically placed on the second syllable of the verbs and the first syllable of the nouns (Varshney, 1985), but in his or her native language or Bangla language, stress is almost always placed on the first syllable of every word (Maniruzzaman, 2006). English stress placement differs according to grammatical categories and the Bengali-speaking EFL student encounters significant difficulties while putting stress on English words. Examples of these verbs include (Varshney, 1985), "abstract, conduct, contract, contrast, import, incline, insult, perfect, present, produce, and rebel" (p.107).

MTI for Code-Switching and Intra Sentential Code-switching

Individuals who are bilingual or multilingual frequently experience code-switching which can happen for several linguistic, social, and cultural reasons. Khan (2019) states that Bengali is a concoction of many languages. So, EFL learners often habitually perform some mistakes by repeating the same code twice in both foreign and their native language speech. For instance: "suppose ধরুন…" The mistake here is an interference error, which happens when a learner's first language (L1) interferes with their second language's (L2) production or understanding. In this particular instance, the learner substitutes the Bengali term "ধরুন", which is equivalent to the English word 'suppose,'. This mistake most likely happens because the student translates the Bengali word's meaning and form into English.

EFL learners are most likely to use the term intra-sentential code-switching which expedites their MTI in oral performances. As stated by Zirker (2007), 'Intra-sentential switching' refers to a change in language that is made in the middle of a phrase, often without pausing, pausing, or pausing again. An example of this is seen in the title of Poplack's (1980) study "Sometimes I'll start a sentence in English *y termino en español*" (italics added), ('sometimes I'll start a sentence in English and finish in Spanish')" (p.11). Similarly, the EFL learners shift the language into Bangla like: "আমার friends-রা সত্যিই ভালো", here in this sentence, learners use English 'friends' alongside to Bengali prefix plural 'রা' in the sentence which indicates the intra-sentential code-switching of the EFL learners and this is a subtle example of interference of mother tongue. Intra-sentential code-switching can happen when a word boundary, like a morpheme border, is present like: "picture গুলো" = picture (root word) + Bengali bound morpheme. Hawlader (2020) has mentioned in his study that, "there are different kinds of intra-sentential code-switching for instance: English root word and Bengali suffix: /idea-টা/ (article), /support-টাই/ (emphatic), /relationship-এর/ (possessive), /reception-এ/ (preposition), /cup-গুলো/ (plural). Here Bengali inflections have been used with English words" (p.43).

Statement of the Problem

At the tertiary level, most institutions have English as their medium of instruction (MOI), where the students have to speak and perform in the English language in an academic setting. While performing oral activities in English, they face numerous problems, and among all the problems, the mother language intervening is the most noticeable one. According to Corder (1982), it was anticipated that mistakes would be caused by the retention of old mother tongue tendencies in the new language. The learners lack in following the grammatical rules and suprasegmental elements of the English language, which includes correct pronunciation and stress due to L1 interference.

Similarly, Sriprhaba (2015) found in his study that, because of the differences between the mother tongue's sound system and that of English, pronunciation errors occur during L2 learning. Students sometimes use L1 vocabulary in between their English oral performances, like while giving presentations, viva voce, speaking tests and other academic oral assessments.

Rationale of the Study

English is spoken as a foreign language in Bangladesh. According to Kachru's (1991) three concentric circles model of world Englishes (WEs), Bangladesh falls into the outer circle where the use of English is minimal and only used for additional purposes (p.179). Therefore, communication in English is seemingly poor among the EFL leaners. The purpose of the study is to ascertain the degree to which Bangladeshi EFL students believe that interference from their mother tongues prevents them from learning English as a second language or foreign language. This research is important because it can reveal the elements that affect Bangladeshi EFL learners' capacity to learn English as a second language, particularly in terms of their views regarding MTI.

Literature Review

Related Studies

MTI is a natural phenomenon and the term is used to describe how a person's first language or mother tongue affects the way they learn or use a second or foreign language. The EFL learners generally lack in maintaining the phonetic and phonological features of English speaking in oral performances and which is considered as error. As Corder (1982) says, "Every utterance of a learner, whether well-formed or not, is potentially erroneous" (p.44). EFL learners' encounters with mother tongue are very frequent due to their uninterrupted switching to Bangla in the classroom. As Obaidullah (2016) mentions that, code switching is developed as a common phenomenon and an essential part of second language acquisition (SLA), particularly in EFL settings (p.926). In some recent studies, it has been found that only a small percentage of errors are thought to be caused by mother language interference, even in adult learners whose mother tongue system is well-entrenched and transfer errors are at their highest levels.

As Goswami (2020) in her study on Bengali Sylheti speakers believes, the interference of the mother tongue rule in learning the second language can be linked to the mistakes made by Sylheti speakers when speaking in English. Learners trying to communicate in target language, most frequently tend to commit errors due to mother or native language. Most of the learners are habituated with using mother tongue in classroom activities and they feel hesitant if the teacher uses English in the classroom. As Obaidullah (2016) says, anyone feels uneasy, anxious, and disoriented when his or her mother tongue is kept out of the learning environment, especially learning in a classroom setting. It becomes challenging for pupils of various levels to follow the instruction constantly in English.

EFL learners' MTI has been found severe mostly in forming phonetic and phonological pattern. Mamo (2016) in his study at Batu Secondary School shows that the students' MTI has been revealed as a serious trouble with learning EFL orthography and pronunciation after conducting a descriptive, narrative analysis of a qualitative data set. The learners in grades nine and ten mostly reported that they had goals for studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). So, it is comprehensible that EFL learners face difficulties at different age level since this mentioned study has done on the students of higher secondary level.

After analyzing and reviewing the existing literature on the topic of MTI in EFL learners' English oral performances, there is hardly any study found that shows the obstacles faced by the learners due to MTI in their oral performances in Bangladesh context, which can be considered as the literature gap. Therefore, the study's point of departure is to analyze the learners' attitude to mother tongue intervening in their academic oral performances.

Theoretical Framework

EFL learners encounter interferences from their mother tongue when language transfers negatively into a foreign language as Gass and Selinker (2008) have defined interference as when the outcome of the second language form is erroneous, the first language or any additional languages that are known is used in the context of the second language (p.518). And to interpret the interferences of mother tongue in EFL learners' oral performances, Larry Selinker's "Interlanguage" (1972) and

Stephen Pit Corder's "Interlanguage with Error Analysis" (1981) theories have been adopted to conduct the study.

Selinker (1972) exclaims that one would be entirely right in speculating the existence of a different language system and given that we can see that these two sets of utterances are not interchangeable. We shall refer to this linguistic structure as interlanguage (IL). In interlanguage, there is a term "fossilization" which has been used by Selinker (1972). Selinker (1972) defines the term 'fossilizable linguistic phenomena' refers to linguistic objects, rules, and subsystems that speakers of a certain native language (NL) will typically keep in their interlanguage (IL) compared to a particular target language (TL), independent of the learner's age or the quantity of explanation and instruction he receives in the target language. Corder (1982) defined, the phrases 'interlanguage' and 'interlingua' imply that a learner's language will exhibit systematic aspects of both the target language and of other languages he may be familiar with and that is most clearly his mother tongue. Corder (1967) suggested that errors are significant in learning a language and they are significant in three ways:

> "First, they give the researcher an insight into how the learner is using the language or techniques to acquire knowledge. Second, they provide evidence of how this knowledge is acquired, and thirdly, they are essential to the learners' self-assessment." (p.167).

EFL learners' language-acquiring function includes MTI that can impact on their oral English performances. In this study, the learners' views on these interferences have been evaluated and their attitudes have been analyzed on the interlanguage and the errors they make in producing oral performances in English.

Methodology

In this study, a mixed-method has been applied to collect primary data. To collect quantitative data, a survey method has been conducted under which a questionnaire has been used as a tool. And to collect qualitative data, the interview method has been used. The questionnaire form contains a total of 11 questions including 10 close-ended and one open-ended. The contents of the questionnaire are aligned with the interest of the topic of this study. The answers given by the participants in the questionnaire have been measured by a 5-point Likert scale where it contains Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree respectively. Students have been explained the purpose of this study before providing the questionnaire forms. Another survey has been conducted to collect qualitative data through an interview and some participants have been face-to-face asked some semi-structured questions to share their opinions and views on the very topic of this study. The interview session has been recorded with the permission of the participants through a recording device. Then the recording has been transcribed and analyzed into written form.

A total of 200 students from two public universities: Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET) and Khulna University (KU) and two private universities: Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna (NUBTK) and North Western University (NWU) have been chosen to collect primary data for this study. 50 participants from each university have participated from different semesters through simple random sampling along with convenient sampling. The participants are all Bangladeshi and Bangla is their native language. They speak English as a second or foreign language for academic purposes.

Findings & Presentation of Data

The study has found that the EFL learners have negative attitudes towards MTI in oral performances. Among the participants, majority of the students believe that their mother tongue, which is Bangla, creates barrier in their learning of English language especially in case of oral performances. In the survey, it has been unearthed that learners have given their opinions on different questions which show their unpleasant experience in MTI in their English-speaking proficiency. In this study, the participants have given their opinions on eleven questions where there are ten close-

ended questions and one open-ended question. The responses of ten close-ended questions have been demonstrated below in table 1.

Table 1. Participants' responses from the questionnaire survey

SL	Question	Strongly Agree(f/p)	Agree (f/p)	Neutral (f/p)	Disagree (f/p)	Strongly Agree (f/p)
1	Usually, students think of an idea in Bangla and then translate it into English in the EFL classroom.	46/23%	118/59%	15/7.5	20/10%	1/0.5%
2	Due to the differences between the Bangla article system and the English article system, many Bengali EFL learners encounter difficulties while learning the correct use of articles in English language.	20/10%	98/49%	30/15%	45/22.5%	7/3.5%
3	The Mother tongue often interferes with the use of English tenses, countable and uncountable nouns, and prepositions.	25/12.5%	92/46%	33/16.5%	40/20%	10/5%
4	MTI in academic oral performances, is positively accepted by EFL learners.	12/6%	44/22%	44/22%	97/48.5%	3/1.5%
5	The use of mother tongue affects students' pronunciation in English.	15/7.5%	75/37.5%	32/16%	52/26%	26/13%
6	MTI affect the English spelling patterns of EFL learners.	20/10%	78/39%	35/17.5%	60/30%	7/3.5%
7	Syntactic differences between L1 and L2 hinder the acquisition of English language skills, and thus EFL learners' academic oral performances in English is inappropriate.	20/10%	78/39%	32/16%	65/32.5	5/2.5%
8	MTI have impacts on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.	25/12.5%	65/32.5%	35/17.5	62/31%	13/6.5
9	EFL learners have a poor accent in English words due to mother tongue influence.	20/10%	75/37.5%	33/16.5%	56/28%	16/8%
10	MTI can decrease learners' fluency and accuracy of English speech.	25/12.5%	85/42.5%	26/13%	51/25.5%	13/6.5%

Discussion

The study highlights the influence of mother tongue on EFL learners' oral speech, particularly when communicating in a foreign language. EFL learners believe their mother tongue significantly affects their English accent, suggesting attending an English medium school. However, some forget to learn Bangla while studying in an English medium institution. Fries (in the foreword of Lado, 1957) comments, the fundamental issues are mostly brought about by the unique 'set' that the first language habits have formed, not by any fundamental difficulty with the characteristics of the new language itself.

Although there may be advantages to using translation in EFL classes, it is important to be aware that there are some restrictions. For instance, it could not be a useful method for promoting fluency or getting learners to think in the target language Additionally, it may result in the development of interlanguage, a hybrid language that combines components of the native and target languages. This can make it challenging for learners to speak the target language successfully and might cause confusion or misunderstandings. For instance, Saville-Troike (2012) mentioned Larsen-Freeman's (2014) thoughts to improve language learning abilities, learners must engage in meaningful conversation in the target language. Teachers should concentrate on supplying input in the target language and encouraging communicative activities that demand the use of the target language.

Although the use of the native tongue and translation can be beneficial to in some situations, overusing these techniques can hinder language learning. To promote meaningful communication in the target language and offer language education in the native tongue, teachers must strike a balance.

It has been observed through the interview survey that the phonological system of the L1 or first language may have a strong influence on the pronunciation of L2 or second language sounds and may cause difficulties in acquiring the phonemic system of the L2. Individual differences in language learning ability, desire, and exposure to English may also play a role in creating an EFL learner's accent. Language interference or transfer is the term for this phenomenon, in which the learner's first language interferes with their acquisition of a second language. Lightbown and Spada (2013) claim that interference from the learner's first language is a common cause of errors in second-language learning. It has been observed that adult EFL learners struggle to maintain both accuracy and fluency at the beginning as they are new to the language. To increase their fluency and accuracy in the target language, language learners must actively monitor and rectify any language interference.

Conclusion

At present, the English language is not only a subject to learn, but it has also become the priority of young learners to learn the English language to communicate with other nations and establish themselves as confident and strong representatives. Since the findings of this study have revealed that students have a pessimistic attitude towards MTI in English oral performances, the first necessary task is to remove the barriers to learning English and boost all the necessary skills to acquire the English language successfully.

The study explores Bangladeshi EFL students' opinions on MTI in academic oral performance, finding positive opinions based on factors like educational background, exposure, and language skills. The study has found that those who received instruction in Bangla before switching to English-medium instruction later in their academic careers had a more mixed attitude toward MTI. In contrast, those who had received English-medium instruction since their early years tended to be more confident in their English proficiency and less tolerant of MTI.

On the contrary, many Bangladeshi EFL learners frequently consider the impact of their mother tongue as a barrier to their conversational proficiency in English. The study also finds that learners blamed their unfavorable sentiments regarding MTI on their perceived inability to use English successfully and their desire to sound like native English speakers. This assertion emphasizes the complicated link between language ability and identity and the difficulties non-native speakers encounter while becoming communicatively competent in a foreign language. However, to create successful language teaching practices that encourage language learning, further study is required to examine the function of translation and the usage of the native language in various EFL scenarios.

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