'I Go Yesterday or I Went Yesterday?'- Problems Faced by Pakistani Learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Foreign language learners are already disadvantaged when they embark on learning another language; this is due to the firmly implanted mother tongue framework in their minds, developing right from the early childhood. This framework may be a great help in certain situations where there is some linguistic proximity found between the two languages. On the contrary, the same framework becomes one of the biggest barriers for the learner where a specific linguistic feature present in the foreign language (FL) is not available in his mother tongue (MT). This is where the phenomenon of mother tongue (MT) comes into play. The current research reports the grammatical mistakes committed by the Pakistani learners of Chinese as a foreign language (FL). The data was garnered through an essay written in Chinese by the study participants (n: 25) who were enrolled

in a 6- month Diploma in Chinese after having successfully completed the Certificate Level which also lasted 6 months. The study focused on the mistakes committed by the study participants with regard to the Chinese particle "了 Le". Selinker's 'Interlanguage' (IL) was used as the theoretical lens for the present study. What was found after the careful analysis of the data suggests that Pakistani learners, like any foreign language learner, fall prey to L1 interference and overgeneralization while learning the Chinese language.

Keywords: L1 interference, overgeneralization, grammar, particle, Chinese

1. Introduction

Languages fall under different families due to their different inherent linguistic features. These features shared by languages, in general, are of all types: phonological, morphological, syntactic and so on. This means, languages which belong to the same family have at least some of these linguistic commonalities. This could be due to the diachronic development of these languages in each other's company which naturally leads to linguistic give-and-take. For instance, we will find many commonalities in Romance languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Romanian) in terms of their sound systems, lexical patterns, meanings as well as syntax. For example, the English word 'art' is 'art' in French too, 'arte' in Spanish, 'arte' in Italian and 'arte' in Portuguese as well (Encyclopedia.com,2021).

As a matter of fact, such similarities can be traced at all levels in these languages due to the fact they all sprung out of Latin as their ancestor. On the contrary, languages which are quite different from one another fall under different families and each one of them may have a number of idiosyncratic and unique features not found in other languages of distant language families. This is mainly because of the geographic distance which sets such languages apart from one another. This clearly implies that speakers whose languages have close linguistic propinquity by virtue of their genealogy find learning those/any of languages easier as compared with the ones which share no such pedigree.

Though there are plenty of differences among the languages hailing from the same language family, the number of such differences is far larger among the languages which are alien to each other. As a result, a learner who is trapped between the linguistic intricacies of two languages which share no kinship whatsoever has to struggle a lot throughout his linguistic journey. This happens because some of the features found in the language which he is learning are not found in his mother tongue and, naturally, as a result problems start surfacing. This is what we call mother tongue interference or negative transfer (Spada & Yasuyo, 2010; Al-khresheh, 2015). In other words, each

language develops certain rules and regulations for its users through time which could be observed at all tiers of that language (O'Grady, Dobrovolsky & Katamba 1996; Trask, 1999, Blaho, Bye& Kramer2007; Yule, 1999). Where these rules and regulations help the native speakers of a language, they also pose a great deal of hindrance for the foreign learners of the language since these learners don't find the regulatory patterns of this nature in their own language which results in mother tongue interference.

Mother tongue influence is a rather ubiquitous phenomenon when it comes to learning a foreign language. It can be observed in all areas of foreign language learning: phonemic, morphemic, syntactic and so on. Since the brain of a foreign language learner has already had a rich experience in the form of learning his mother tongue, he naturally commits varying shades of errors in the target language due to L1 interference or the negative transfer of linguistic data due to L1 habits. What it means is that when the process of learning starts, naturally, the L1 influence pops up as a barrier. Nevertheless, the nature of barrier depends on the linguistic proximity between the mother tongue of a learner and his target language; this barrier may not be a big challenge for him in case of the closeness between his mother tongue and the said foreign language but it may prove insurmountable for him in case his mother tongue and the foreign language he is learning are distinct. When a person starts learning a foreign or another language, according to Kelly (2000, P. 8)*, "he will face a great deal of interference from his mother tongue in the areas where there is no match between the two languages".*

Since L1 interference while learning a foreign language appears to be a universal phenomenon which makes learners commit host of errors in the target language, this has intrigued many researchers from time to time. In order to capture the true nature of this phenomenon, various researchers from different parts of the world have tried to look at it from different angles and perspectives; from basic sounds to complex grammatical structures (Ellis 1985; Dulay & Burt, 1973; Tran, 1975; Jarvis, 2015; Jarvis & Crossley, 2012; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2007; Ngoc, 2016; Ahmed, Amin & Qureshi, 2016).

Chinese and Urdu languages fall under Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European language families respectively (Britannica, 2021). Due to this remoteness, they are markedly different from each other in terms of various linguistic features. For example, Chinese is heavily loaded with tone whereas Urdu is completely devoid of it. Similarly, Urdu has both open and closed syllables whereas Chinese mainly relies on the open syllables. Likewise, gemination is an alien notion in Chinese language but it is a very common feature of Urdu (Mahmood, 2005). As a result, the speakers of one language find it very difficult to grapple with the linguistic features of the other language. This paper aims at finding out the problems which Pakistani learners of Chinese come across while dealing with the particle"了Le" in Chinese.

The particle "了Le" in Chinese is very difficult for the students of Chinese as a foreign language. "了Le" as an aspect particle and "Le" as a modal particle are actually two different grammatical usages and they, rather logically, demand different treatment of them by their users. Looking at these different notions, we will find that "了Le" as an aspect particle expresses a sense of completion, while "了Le" as a modal particle expresses a change that has taken place. In other words, "了Le" as a modal particle reflects modality in the form of change. Unlike English or Urdu, the form of a Chinese verb never changes regardless of whether it is present, past or future tense. For example, in English a very common irregular verb 'eat' will become 'ate' to show an action in the past because the verb in English is mainly responsible for indicating time, whereas in Chinese the verb 吃 (chī) stays the same in present, past or future tense. This very clearly suggests that the Chinese verb is not time carrier in Chinese syntax unlike English and that the idea of time is reflected with the help of other words. This also suggests that the verb as a time carrier is not the universal linguistic phenomenon nor is it a rule to be followed by all world languages.

As a matter of fact, the word "了Le" is used as: (a) an aspect particle (时态助词 shítài zhùcí), and (b) a modal particle (语气助词 yǔqì zhùcí). The former is a word which is immediately suffixed to a verb to mark the tense of the verb; and the latter is used at the end of a sentence to express an attitude towards what is said in the sentence. By implication, "了Le" as an aspect particle and "了Le" as a modal particle are actually two different usages. The fact that they look identical and sound identical is due to their historical development. Non-native speakers find this distinction too subtle to be noticeable. As a result, they often attempt it wrongly.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Most Pakistani learners of Chinese face a range of problems while learning Chinese. Particles are one such area where these learners seem to struggle even at relatively advanced stages of their learning. This is because of the fact that they are dealing with a language which is poles apart from their mother tongue. The purpose of this study is to find out what sort of mistakes these learners commit when faced with the particle "了Le".

1.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What sort of mistakes do Pakistani learners of Chinese commit while using the particle "了 Le"?

2. What are the possible reasons for these mistakes?

2. Methodology

This is a qualitative study whose focus was to analyze the syntactic mistakes committed by the Pakistani learners of Chinese language with regard to the particle "了 Le". In order to collect the relevant data, 25 study participants registered in a 6- month's diploma course in Chinese Department of the National University of Modern Languages were asked to write an essay within the given teaching slot which lasted 45 minutes. Once the data had been collected, it was marked and analyzed in the light of Selinker's Interlanguage.

2.1 Sample Size

These were 25 students doing Diploma in Chinese. Most of them had already obtained Bachelor's degree but their academic qualification didn't affect the study at all because they had almost similar linguistic proficiency in Chinese due to their certification in Chinese before joining this level. As already stated, they had already completed their 6-months Certificate in Chinese and they could communicate in Chinese easily. The study participants were all adult Pakistanis who aged 20-26. They were both male and female but gender was not taken as a variable for the present study since the researchers opted for the convenience sampling keeping in mind the number of students available for the study.

2.2 Data Collection Tools

The data for the current study was collected with the help of an essay writing activity. All study participants were asked to jot down an essay on *my pleasant day*. Time allocated for the activity was 45 minutes and the participants were instructed to write at least 300 words to complete the essay which they did since they were at a relatively higher level of proficiency. The rationale behind giving them an essay to write was to give them liberty to express themselves freely since this is how they could reflect themselves freely and this is where they would leave the traces of their errors and mistakes in the target language.

2.3 Research Cite

This study was carried out in the Chinese department of the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. The department offers different programs in the Chinese language ranging from short courses to MPhil. The medium of instruction for the beginners is a mixture of Urdu, English and Chinese during the first couple of weeks which shifts to Chinese as soon as the learners are slightly proficient in the target language. At the Diploma level wherein the study sample was picked, the medium of instructions is mainly Chinese.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Larry Selinker's interlanguage was selected as the theoretical framework for this study. *Interlanguage* (IL) is the linguistic system of learner language employed by foreign learners of a language while attempting an act of meaningful communication. The notion of interlanguage was put forward by Larry Selinker in 1972 which resulted in a large number of researches in the area of second language acquisition (SLA) (Oxford, 2017; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Han and Tarone 2014). According to Selinker, the language produced by the adult learner while learning a foreign language is not unsystematic; it is systematic phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, semantically as well as pragmatically. Since the learner is constantly moving along the continuum, where there is his native language (NL) on the one end and the target language (TL) on the other, he is all the time mediating between the two systems and picks and chooses the linguistic features which suit his understanding.

3. Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed under three aspects: *L1 interference, overgeneralization* and *contextual suitability*. Where the first two were analyzed through the lens provided by Selinker, the third was analyzed without this lens as it was out of this theoretical foundation. Although the third aspect could have been discussed under *L1 interference,* yet it was decided by the researchers to discuss it separately for the sake of further clarity during the analysis. After the given tests had been collected and marked by our Chinese co-researcher, the mistakes committed by the study participants were analyzed in a neater and finer detail in the light of the theoretical framework by Selinker in order to dig out the real nature of the mistakes and the possible reasons behind them. Since the mistakes committed by the study participants fall under three distinct categories as mentioned above, they have been presented in three separate tables for lucidity and better intelligibility. All three tables carrying the above-mentioned themes have been provided below.

Table 1: Aspect 1: L1 interference

	Equivalent English Sentence	Incorrect Chinese Sentence	Correct Chinese Sentence
1	I met my girlfriend.	-我认识我的女朋友。Wo renshi wode nv pengyou.	我认识了我的女朋友Wo renshi Le wode nv pengyou.
3	I saw a new motorcycle at my home.	在家里,我看一个新摩托车。Zaijia wo kan yige xin motuoche	在家里,我看见了一辆新的摩托车。Zaijiali wo kanjian Le yiliang xinde muotuoche
5	Last month, I went to Lahore with my friend.	上个月我跟我的朋友去拉合尔。Shanggeyue wo gen wode pengyou qv Lahore	上个月我跟我的朋友去了拉合尔。Shanggeyue wo gen wode pengyou qv Le Lahore

In Chinese, when ″了Le″ comes after an action verb, it indicates the completion of an action, such as renshi (Verb) + ″了Le″, qu (to go) + ″了Le″. Nearly fifty percent of participants missed the aspect particle ″了Le″in their sentences. The reason behind such mistakes is that whenever foreign learners make sentences in Chinese, they follow the linguistic pattern/s already existing in their minds which Selinker calls L1 interference. The analysis of the data shows that the study participants fell prey to the syntactic pattern of their mother tongue which made them twist the Chinese syntax according to their mother tongue syntax where the action word or the verb changes its shape to indicate change in time. For example 'wo jata heh' (he goes) is different from 'wo gaya' (he went) and 'wo jayei ga' (he will go). As shown by the given examples, the three verbs 'jata', 'gaya' and 'jayei ga' all change their forms according to the demand of the tense and this change is mandatory to express the temporal change in order for the sentence to be syntactically legal. The same can be seen in English. For example, verbs in English change their forms depending on the tense (meet, met), (go, went, gone), and each shape of the verb stands for something different temporally and this is how the English syntax operates. However, the case of Chinese verb is very different where there is no change to it in any context. For instance, in Chinese only one verb/the same form "renshi" is used both for 'meet' and 'met'. Similarly, "qu" is used for "go, went, gone". In order to fill this temporal hollowness with regard to its verb,

Chinese employs the aspect article "了Le. This aspect article is used to indicate the past tense or completion of an action and it is placed after the verb.

In the three sentences given above, "了Le" is missing after the verbs. The reason for the study participants to commit this mistake is the influence of Urdu and English though this is very difficult to judge which of the two language frameworks already deeply rooted in the minds of the study participants had deeper and stronger influence. Here the analysis will go slightly beyond the lens provided by Selinker (though the spirit is the same) who thought L1 influence to be critical in such situations. Urdu and English are both inflectional languages. The verb undergoes morphological change of the grammatical category of the tense. Since Pakistani students are not used to using the aspect particle "了Le" to express the completion of the action, they fall victim to this aspect of Chinese.

Table 2: Aspect 2: Overgeneralization

	Equivalent English Sentence	**Incorrect Chinese Sentence**	**Correct Chinese Sentence**
1	I was happy	我很高兴了。 Wo hen gaoxing le	我很高兴。 Wo hen gaoxing.
2	He is eating meal	他正在吃饭了。 Ta zhengzai chifan le	他正在吃饭。 Ta zhengzai chifan le
3	Mother is cooking meal	妈妈正在做饭了。 Mama zhengzai zuofan le	妈妈正在做饭。 Mama zhengzai zuofan.
4	They liked my birthday cake	他们都喜欢了我的生日蛋糕。 Tamen dou xihuan le wode shengri dangao.	他们都喜欢我的生日蛋糕。Tamen dou xihuan wode shengri dangao.

The sentence-end "了le" in Chinese indicates that a new situation has emerged or a change has taken place. "Wo gaoxing le" means 'I was not happy before, but now I am happy'. But "Wo hen gaoxing le." is an incorrect sentence. The analysis of the data provided by the study participants shows that most of the participants wanted to express the sense of pleasure by using "了Le" but it was done wrongly. This is what Selinker refers to as overgeneralization. This happens because foreign language learners often follow rules too religiously and thus commit such mistakes.

In the Chinese language, when "了le" is used at the end of a sentence, it indicates the change of situation. For instance, "下雨了 xia yu le" means it is raining. The aspect particle "了le" at the end of this sentence shows a very unique feature of Chinese, i.e., it was not raining before but now the rain has started, thus the change of situation.

The sentences written by most of the study participants show that they have overgeneralized the use of "了le" because, such grammatical pattern does not exist in Urdu or/and English language. In other words, the nature of mistake committed by most of the study participants suggests that this was not due to the mother tongue framework which hoodwinked them into producing such a structure. In this case, they were misguided by the target language per se. As a result, most of them were confused between using it after the verb for completion of an action or at the end of the sentence for the change of situation.

It seems that under the influence of overgeneralization, they used it at the end of the sentence and committed the above mistakes. In other words, the notion of overgeneralization in their minds guided them to apply an already learnt grammatical rule of the target language in question to a situation where it was not applicable at all. As a result, they, instead of using "我很高兴wo hen gaoxing", used "我很高兴了wo hen gaoxing le" for expressing that 'I am very happy'. For using "了le" at the end of the sentence, they forgot the other grammatical rules of Chinese in this case, where the adverb "很 hen" is already added before adjective "高兴 gaoxing" and in such a situation "了le" usage at the end of sentence is inappropriate and incorrect as per the rules of Chinese grammar.

Similarly, when an action is in progress, ″正在zhengzai" is added before an action verb that refers to an action which is ongoing. In such a situation, the addition of "了le" at the end of the sentence by the participants strongly suggests that the students normally ignore grammatical rules already learnt by them perhaps under the influence of overgeneralization. Therefore, almost all the study participants wrote "他正在吃饭了Ta zhengzai chifan le" instead of "他正在吃饭 ta zhengzai chi fan" to express "He is eating meal". The analysis of the data also suggests the remoteness between Urdu (L1 or the reference language of the study participants) and Chinese (the target language of the study participants).

The analysis of the data shows that many foreign language learners are trapped by overgeneralization which apparently seems to help learners and they accept it without much deliberation. The influence of overgeneralization is so strong that it often traps young native speakers of a language who may use a verb or noun wrongly. For example,

it has been reported by some studies that English children tend to say 'mans' instead of 'men' and 'goed' instead of 'went' under the influence of overgeneralization.

Table 3: Aspect 3: Contextual Suitability

	Equivalent English Sentence	Incorrect Chinese Sentence	Correct Chinese Sentence
1	I saw a nice girl here	在这里，我看过了一个很漂亮的姑娘。 zaizheli，wo kanguole yige hen piaoliang de guliang.	在这里，我看见了一个很漂亮的姑娘。 zaizheli，wo kanjianle yige hen piaoliang de guliang.
2	One day, I went to a famous palace: The Great Wall	一天，我和我的同学去过一个很有名的地方，叫长城。 yitian, wo he wode tongxue qvguo yige henyou ming de defang, jiao Chang cheng.	一天，我和我的同学去了一个很有名的地方，叫长城。yitian，wo he wode tongxue qvle yige henyou ming de defang, jiao Chang cheng.

"过Guo" is the aspect particle which always comes immediately after the verb that indicates that the action has been done or experienced in the past, i.e., "subject + verb + 过Guo", whereas the aspect particle ″了le″ also shows the completion of an action when it comes after the verb. The analysis of the data shows that most of the study participants were confused between these two particles' use as they made the same mistake while writing the sentence "*I saw a nice girl here" and "One day, I went to a famous place: The Great Wall*" in the above examples.

In order to explain the concept of completion in an easily understandable manner, the English "have" and Urdu 'chuka' can be brought to focus for the sake of showing their equivalence to "过Guo" in the Chinese language. In some situations, both "过Guo" and "了le" are interchangeable when it refers to the completion of an action in the past like "我吃了饭才出发的wo chi le fan cai chufa de 我吃过才出发的 wo chi guo fan cai chu fa de", meaning 'after I have eaten, I set off'. What complicates the matter is the fact that both particles also appear in a single sentence. This happens when the action is completed in the near past. For instance "I have just taken food 我吃过饭了wo chi guo fan le". This is what we see in Urdu and English as well where the present

perfect tense is used to refer to an action which has just been completed though the analysis of the given data suggests that the study participants were basically deceived by the context of the sentence instead of mother tongue interference. Despite having said that, the researchers don't rule out the possibility of the mother tongue interference.

These examples show that the exceptional usage of "过Guo" and "了le"is complicated for Pakistani learners of Chinese and they naively commit errors when they don't know which of the given options is suitable according to the given situation or when they are not sure if using both the items in the same sentence would be syntactically legal and appropriate or not.

4. Conclusion

Both language teachers and linguists agree on the point that one's native language (NL) or mother tongue (MT) is a big help as well as a great hurdle when it comes to foreign language learning. It is a big help and becomes one of the prime causes of what linguists and researchers refer to as positive interference or transfer when its linguistic mood matches the mood of the target language of the learner. On the contrary, it becomes a big hurdle, a reason for the negative transfer, when it brings along various idiosyncrasies and eccentricities which are not found in the target language of the learner. Apart from the mother tongue interference, there is the notion of overgeneralization put forward by Selinker according to whom language learners tend to commit mistakes by applying a rule of the grammar of the language at hand to the situation where it doesn't fit or apply and they do so by following a readily available pattern which they might find suitable according to the given situation.

The current study supports the studies mentioned above for a great deal of L1 interference and overgeneralization have been found in the data provided by the study participants. The study engaged itself with the following research questions in order to analyze the collected data to find an objective solution to the problem:

1. What sort of mistakes do Pakistani learners of Chinese commit while using the particle "了Le"?

2. What are the possible reasons for these mistakes?

In response to the first research question, it is claimed that the study participants committed the mistakes which are attributable to mother tongue influence as suggested by Selinker and also validated by many other researchers. The reason for such a claim is that the study participants had only one variable which could interfere while they were learning Chinese and it was their mother tongue. In other words, there was no other

intervening variable which could be held responsible to affect the participants' performance. As for the second research question, it could be suggested that mother tongue influence was the main factor though there might be other factors like lack of attention on the part of the learner, ineffective teaching methodology or technique/ poor pedagogy and so on. However, all these factors, except for mother tongue influence, need to be systematically analyzed and explored by researchers and it must be stated here that they did not fall under the scope of this study.

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