First Language and Second Language in the Multilingual Context

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Abstract. Studies in English continues to gain ground in different countries and from different perspectives to the extent that some concepts need to be rethought. For this reason, the first language (L1) and second language (L2) in a multilingual setting were examined. This study was motivated by the fact that despite the extensive research into language teaching and language learning, little was clear about L1 and L2 in the context where many indigenous languages coexist with European languages and others. As example, Chad which is a multilingual country has French and Arabic as official languages, and English is given the status of a foreign language. Many studies in English in non-native English speaking environment considered the students' mother tongue as L1, but the current research aimed to show that the first language could refer to the second language and rethink what are called first language and second language in research on English language learning by contextualising the situation. Qualitative method was used. The data collection was based on literature readings: books, articles, and opinions. The findings showed that many studies in English referred to the first language not as the speaker's mother tongue, but the second language. This meant that L1 in terms of the students' native languages (indigenous languages) should not be included in studies that involve the influence of L1 on English, unless the L1 that refers to the native language is made clear in the study.

Keywords: *first language, foreign language, learning, multilingual setting*

INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to note that studies in English in non-native speaking settings continue to draw the attention of researchers all over the world since English is not limited to any countries, nowadays. It is interesting to note that Chad which was colonised by France has more than 180 ethnic languages and dialects. This highlights the multi-ethnic and multicultural characteristics of the country. Therefore, obstacles abound the learning context since Chadian learners of English are from various linguistic background, having different mother tongues as their first languages whereas Indonesia has more languages than Chad. In addition to the official language which is Bahasa, there are 726 languages spoken in Indonesia. They are called Bahasa Nusantara (Riza, 2008). This indicates that Indonesia is the second most linguistically and culturally heterogeneous country in the world.

These obstacles come from the use of terminology relating to second or foreign language, and this is determined in defining the first language (L1) and the learned language which is the second language (L2). Thus, the topic, *First Language and Second Language in the Multilingual Context* seems to be appropriate as it will guide the researcher on the choice of the first language in a multilingual setting before embarking on studies that bring together English language and the first language.

According to Graddol (1997:5), speakers of English can be divided into three categories: "those who speak it as a first language, those for whom it is a second or additional language, and those who learn it as a foreign language." Therefore, what does the term first language mean in a multilingual environment where speakers have their first languages?

Over the years, researchers have embarked on studies that involve L1 and L2 with a view to focusing on the influence of the prior on the L2 during the learning process. Brown (2007 states three processes of second language acquisition: *transfer*, *overgeneralization,* and *interference* which he considers not as separate processes, but as manifestations of one principle of learning.

In fact, the work of Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) includes the terms first language and second language in the sense that they concern the study of some difficulties that learners of English face since the first language can interfere with the second language because of the differences between them. This is a well-known and general hypothesis in second language learning. The authors have not specified in their study what is referred to as the first language and second language.

However, Yanti (2022) who studies the interference of Balinese in English pronunciation, describes Balinese as the mother tongue, that is to say the first language, and English as a foreign language. To be clear, the author specifies the status of the languages involved in the research, that is to say the mother tongue and the foreign language. In other words, Yanti's study is not purely English study.

The study of Amoakohene (2017) discusses error analysis in English writing made by First Year Students of the University of Health and Allied Sciences in Ghana to explore their competence. According to the author, English is adopted as an official language. So, it is a second language. In other words, Ghanaians are not native speakers of English. They have their indigenous languages. Among the causes of errors that the study reveals, the first language influence in the writing of the students is not mentioned. Obviously, that may be due to the fact that the researcher

does not know the different native languages of his students. Unlike other researchers, Amoakohene rather focuses on errors relating to the different aspects of English, and this seems to be correct in studies in English.

Abdulkhalek and Al-Khulaidi (2022) also conduct a study on writing problems in Yemen, but they do not report any difficulties pertaining to first language. As a matter of fact, they conclude in these terms: "writing difficulties, problems and causes of those problems in contexts where English is not a mother tongue, seem to be quite identical" (Abdulkhalek and Al-Khulaidi, 2022:46).

Tshotsho, Sekiso and Mumbembe (2015) investigate the English language grammar challenges faced by Congolese students who pursue their degree program in South Africa. The results of this research show that the Congolese French-speaking students faced challenges related to various aspects of grammar: tenses (present, past, present continuous, past continuous, future), infinitive forms of the verb and perfect tenses, concord, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, pronouns and punctuations. Some causes of these errors are attributed to the French background of the Congolese students that interferes with English. These authors, like Amoakohene (2017) do not include the Congolese indigenous languages in their research even though they are also Congolese. This is an evidence that it is not easy to study English while other languages come in.

Islam (2019) carries out a research on the teaching of English as a foreign language with a focus on writing. In his study, he compares Bengali and English, and it was found that similarities and differences exist in the teaching methods of English writing and Bengali. One may wonder if the teaching of Bengali writing in schools can improve the writing skill of Bengali learners of English. In this case, the present research encourages the teaching of English, not the native language in order to prevent the tendency of native language translation into English, which may result into errors.

The uniqueness of the present study lies in the fact that it discourages the use of L1 as an indigenous language and encourages the use of English as L2 in a multilingual context, because in such a context, there may be many first languages, and it would be impossible for the researcher to master them all, unless he is the native speaker of the L1. Thus, in a situation where there are English and other languages, reference to the first language and second language have to be explicitly mentioned in research. Studies in English should not include studies in indigenous languages, otherwise, the research is not worth doing in English studies since it becomes a linguistic study. So, studying the influence of an indigenous language on any aspects of English is the business of indigenous language studies, that is to say, linguistics. Chad can be taken as an example with more than 180 languages.

As mentioned earlier, Chad is a French and Arabic speaking country. Chadian learners of English will consider French or Arabic as L1, and English as L2 regardless of their native languages (the languages that they learned from childhood). Viewed from this point, it would be easier for a Chadian English teacher to study the influence of French or Arabic on English, because the teacher is either a Francophone or an Arabophone.

From this perspective, it seems appropriate to make clear what is referred to as L1 and L2 in the multilingual context. This is a situation where L1 could be L2, and L2 could be L3. For example, in Francophone African countries, French is L2 and

English is L3, and L1 could be any native language of the speakers, which seems appropriate in research.

However, this paper is limited in scope as it could not find out how many first languages a speaker could have. This could be a subject for further research. Nevertheless, studies on English flourish.

As in the case of Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) who has not specified L1 and L2, the present research could help in the future to state clearly L1 and L2. The study of Yanti (2022) who has studied the interference of Balinese in English pronunciation, the present would also help to focus on English pronunciation regardless of Balinese. If Abdulkhalek and Al-Khulaidi (2022) in their study have not made reference to the Yemeni mother tongue as discouraged in the present study, they would just focus on writing problems in English. The investigation of Tshotsho, Sekiso and Mumbembe (2015) on the English language grammar challenges faced by Congolese students also shows that the use of indigenous languages is not needed in studying English.

The study of Islam (2019) is also an indication of studying English with a native language. This approach can help the students in identifying similarities and differences between the structure of English and Bengali. Unlike the study of Islam, the current research pays much more attention to the explanation of the native language and the target language, and suggests that studies in English are not linguistic studies, therefore, the study prefers English to native language in the context of foreign language learning to facilitate fully the mastery of English language.

Only the research conducted by of Amoakohene (2017) are in line with the focus of the present research, and it just deals with the problematic aspects of English in writing. It should be noted that the study was carried out in Ghana, and Ghanaian speak English as an official/ second language. So, reference to the indigenous languages in the study of English is not worth contributing to the study of English in a multilingual classroom.

RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative method has been used to reach the objective of the research since numerical data have not been involved. This research did not need a research site and data collection. It did not involve participants. So, the data and findings in this type of research came from the body of the paper. By the body of the paper, it should be understood that reference was made to books and articles from academic journals. Information contained in these literatures were analysed from the perspective of the researcher in order to make suggestions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As a matter of fact, in francophone countries like Chad where French coexists with many indigenous or native languages, **L1** which is learned in the first position, that is to say before another language, is sometimes confused with **L2**. English, in colonies other than the British ones, like French colonies, is not widely spoken. It is considered a foreign language (**FL**). Arguably, in French colonies like Chad, English may be said to be known as a third language (**L3**), because it is learned in the third

position after indigenous languages and French or Arabic. The latter is considered a second language in Chad. To sum up this view, English is:

L1 in native Anglophone countries like the US or GB, etc;
L2 in non-native Anglophone countries like Kenya or Indonesia, etc;
L3 in Francophone countries like Chad, etc.

Language Status

The learning process of L1 and L2 is the same, but the work of Van Els et al. (1984) describes the differentiative factors that characterize L1 and L2 so that the concept of first language and second or foreign language should be put into a definitional perspective for a better understanding:

> L1 and L2 may be learned simultaneously or successively; In the latter case, L2 may be learned at various ages: it may be learned by children, adolescents or adults; L2 may be learned in either an L1 or an L2 environment; in the former case, L2 is usually learned through instruction, while in the latter case, L2 is learned through verbal contact with native speakers in a 'natural' environment often in combination with L2 instruction (Van Els et al., 1984, p. 35).

These different ways have given rise to such terms as *foreign language* and *second language*. Research on first language acquisition is an older field than research on second language acquisition or third language acquisition. When talking about first language acquisition, we can think of children. A first language is by definition a language that a person has learned from childhood. Saville-Troike (2006, p. 4) considers that the terms 'first language', 'native language', 'primary language', and 'mother tongue' are synonyms in the literature. They are all abbreviated as L1.

When children grow up, they cannot acquire, but learn another language called second language. In this case, learning several languages as second languages is not as easy as a child does. From this perspective, Yule (2010, p. 187) argues that "learning a language that is not generally spoken in the surrounding community" means learning it as an FL while "learning a language that is spoken in the surrounding community" is learning it as a L2. For instance, Chadian students in Chad which is a francophone African country learn English as a foreign language, and the same students would learn it as a second language if they were in the United States of America. Nigerians also learn English as L2. In language studies, FL is commonly called L2.

All researchers have not yet come to definite definitions of the status of languages. The ultimate objective of having the list of these definitions is to highlight the confusions and contradictions that abound variably according to different authors (Mitchell and Myles, 2004; Saville-Troike, 2006; De Angelis, 2007) over the years with a view to setting forth terms relating to language learning in a non-native environment.

Researchers' views reflect the various attempts to define second language, additional language, third language, and foreign language attracting criticism. For

instance, Gass and Selinker (2008) considered third language as second language. Mitchell and Myles (2004) include foreign languages under the term of second languages; Saville-Troike (2006, p. 2) believes that "the additional language is called a second language (L2)" while De Angelis (2007) considers a third language and additional language as interchangeable. So, the term second language covers many meanings. The following are language specialists' statements full of confusion and contradictions.

Conceptual Confusions and Contradictions

These concepts, first language second language, (Mitchell and Myles, 2004; Saville-Troike, 2006; Gass and Selinker, 2008; Yule, 2010), have more than one definition. The various definitions enable to highlight the confusions and contradictions among scholars. The following are language specialists' definitions of the terms:

Saville-Troike (2006, p. 4): "A second language is typically an official or societal dominant language needed for education, employment, and other basic purposes". It is understandable that by linking this definition to English, non-native speakers of English are concerned, particularly, those who have been colonised by the British, but the definition is not applicable to countries that are not British colonies like Chad that has French and Arabic as second languages.

Mitchell and Myles (2004, p. 5): "Second languages are any languages other than the learner's native language or mother tongue'". This definition seems to include both French, Arabic, and English, and it is supported by Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 7) who provide additional explanation in these terms: "as with the phrase 'second language', L2 can refer to any language learned after learning the L1, regardless of whether it is the second, third, fourth, or fifth language". However, in research on the interference of L1 on L2 in the context of Chad, French and Arabic would be L1. The reason is that it may not be possible for the researcher to know the students' individual L1. Logically, only English is L2.

Mitchell and Myles (2004) and Yule (2010) consider the expression second language learning as being used to also describe foreign language learning. To illustrate, Chad and Nigeria are taken as examples: English is a 'foreign language' in Chad, but it is a 'second language' in Nigeria. Politically, English has the status of a foreign language in Chad, because Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 7) believe that: "foreign language learning refers to the learning of non-native language in the environment of one's native language (e.g., French speakers learning English in France or Spanish speakers learning French in Spain, Argentina, or Mexico". So, English is an official language for Nigerians. For Chadians, it is a foreign language. In English studies, it would be preferable to present English under the umbrella of L2, be it in Chad or in Nigeria when it comes to language studies.

Krashen's Five Hypotheses and Second Language Acquisition

It would be interesting also to refer to Krashen's theory on second language acquisition with his five hypotheses in order to understand how languages are acquired or learned. In fact, the five hypotheses established by Krashen (1982) in the field of second language acquisition are:

1. **Acquisition-learning hypothesis**: this hypothesis emphasizes the difference between language learning and language acquisition. In fact, the first refers to conscious learning through the teaching of the grammar and the structure of the language while in language acquisition, the learner picks the language unconsciously when he is exposed to it like children who acquire their mother tongue.
So, in the multilingual context, it can be said that learners of first language acquisition the language while learners of English as a second/foreign language learn the language. In other words, they need to be taught the language. It is interesting to clarify that even though learners of first language are exposed to it, learners of English as a second language could also be said to be exposed to the language since they live in which they live is Anglophone. Therefore, they are in frequent contact with the language compared to the Francophone learners of English as a foreign language who are only exposed to the language through teaching in the classroom.
The acquisition-learning hypothesis means that learning and acquisition are the basis of the development of the first language competence and the second or foreign language competence, but the development of language competence takes time as confirmed by the monitor hypothesis.

2. **The monitor hypothesis** focuses on the early acquisition of some grammatical rules and structure of the language and late acquisition of some others that occurs progressively over time in a conscious way, enabling the learner to become competent through self-monitoring. Again, it should be remembered that the grammatical rules and structures of the language are acquired subconsciously by the first language learners through exposition to the language. Competent first language learners are able to do self-correction. So, they do not need to be taught or corrected for their mistakes.
Thus, learners of English as a second or foreign language need a native speaker, an advanced learner, or a teacher to use the rules of the language to correct them for their errors. They will progressively be self-corrected and use the language correctly in writing, speaking, reading, listening when they reach native speaker's competence approximately, but it should be emphasized that the occurrence of errors is not totally impossible. So self-monitoring as shown in the monitor hypothesis is not done in the same by first language learners and second or foreign language learners. The order in which first language learners and second/foreign language learners acquire the language is universal. This will be explained in the natural order hypothesis.

3. **The natural order hypothesis**: according to this hypothesis, the grammatical rules and structure of the language are learned by learners of first language and learners of second/foreign language predictably all over the world. That is why Chomsky (1965) talked about "universal grammar. For instance, all languages have morphemes, and Krashen (1982, pp. 60-61) argues that "both children and adults acquire the morphemes of a second language in a remarkably similar order". From

another perspective, the development of first language competence and second language competence occur in the same order. Languages are acquired at home first, then pedagogically, learned in the classroom, and this is applicable to first language learners. Second language learners only learn in the classroom. Thus, children acquire their first language in the same way; adults also learn another language in the same way.

The input hypothesis emphasizes more the acquisition and understanding of the second/foreign language through extra-linguistic knowledge. In other words, the learner makes extra effort to learn the language. The rules and structures of English are learned consciously by second or foreign-language learners through instructions, and they develop as Krashen states, through "comprehensible input" since learners need to go beyond what they have learned in order to use the language successfully. The 'comprehensible input' is determined by the affective filter.

4. **The affective filter** is based on the assumption that emotion and the environment in which the learning takes place can affect the learning positively or negatively. According to Krashen (1982), motivation and self-confidence contribute to high performance while anxiety contributes to low performance. In an environment where English is a foreign language, learners cannot practice the language outside the classroom. This can limit their possibility to develop their speaking skills.

In addition, a lack of library or high cost of textbooks can also prevent them from reading in order to develop their vocabulary and knowledge. Krashen affective filter is confirmed by research done by Shahzadi and Ahmad (2011) who described such factors as home environment, study habits, learning skills, and academic interaction as significant in students' academic performance. The affective filter concerns both first-language and second or foreign-language contexts.

CONCLUSION

The comprehensive view of the conceptual definitions provides a current understanding of L1 and L2, and reflects a theoretical development that considers L2 as L1 in the field of English studies in the multilingual context. In the multilingual setting, the "first language" is considered to be the indigenous language(s). This view will be important when it comes to study English language. Since there are many ethnic languages and dialects spoken in Africa or Asia, it would be impossible for a teacher who is not knowledgeable in those languages to identify the learner's ethnic language that interfere with English. This would be the best way to avoid confusing the students' L1 which is multiple with L2. Combining two languages in the study of English falls within the field of linguistics.

If the English language is L1 for native speakers like the British, L2 for non-native speakers who use it as official language, then, English could be called L3. If the students' mother tongues are considered to be their first languages, then it would be difficult or even impossible for a researcher to study the effect of L1 on L2 or to identify languages that interfere with a target language in a multi-ethnic and

multilingual setting, unless he knows the language of the individual students or he is from the same ethnic and linguistic group as the students. Therefore, it is hoped that in such a context, and in English language studies, further studies would consider the study of English without including other languages or the students' native languages. It would be interesting to mention that there is an ongoing study on error analysis in the written productions of EFL learners in Chad with a view to comparing their results with learners in ESL context.

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