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A Critical Review of the Research on First Language Interference in Second Language Learning: A Study of Urdu Influence on English Acquisition in Pakistan

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Abstract

This critical review evaluates the research article "Interference of L1 (Urdu) in L2 (English) in Pakistan: Teaching English as a Second Language" by Masood et al. (2023). The study explores how Urdu influences English language learning among Pakistani ESL learners. While the topic is contextually relevant, the article lacks theoretical depth, methodological clarity, and analytical rigor. The review highlights shortcomings in research design, literature integration, and pedagogical implications, and recommends a more theory-driven and systematically structured approach for future research. Key concepts from second language acquisition such as interlanguage, transfer, and error analysis, are used to guide this critique.

Introduction and Topic Relevance

The paper addresses a significant issue in second language acquisition (SLA): the interference of the first language (L1), Urdu, in learning English (L2), particularly within the Pakistani context. This topic is relevant due to Pakistan's multilingual educational landscape and the official use of English as a medium of instruction (Rahman, 2002; Mansoor, 2004). The authors highlight the impact of L1 interference on syntactic and lexical structures, a phenomenon broadly supported by earlier studies (Odlin, 1989; Ellis, 1997).

However, the introduction remains general and lacks a focused articulation of the research gap. The authors mention the significance of L1 interference but fail to position their study in the context of recent empirical findings or ongoing debates in SLA research. A more robust engagement with studies specific to Urdu-English interference would have contextualized the study more effectively (Mahboob, 2009; Jabeen et al., 2011).

Abstract and Keywords

The abstract adequately summarizes the topic and the broad research aim. However, it omits essential methodological information such as the sample size, data collection methods, and key findings. According to Swales and Feak (2009), a well-written abstract should include these elements to inform readers about the study's scope and credibility. Moreover, while the keywords such as “L1 Interference,” “ESL,” and “Pakistan” are relevant, including terms like “Contrastive Analysis,” “Negative Transfer,” or “Error Analysis” would improve academic indexing and precision.

Research Objectives and Questions

The research objectives are loosely defined and not operationalized into measurable constructs. The questions are broad and descriptive rather than analytical. This lack of specificity makes it difficult to assess whether the data and findings effectively address the research aims. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), well-constructed research questions are critical for guiding data collection and analysis, especially in qualitative inquiry.

Literature Review

The literature review is one of the weaker sections of the paper. Although foundational works like Lado (1957) and Corder (1967) are referenced, the review neglects more recent and relevant research on L1 interference, particularly those focusing on South Asian or Pakistani learners (e.g., Khan & Chaudhary, 2012; Mahmood, 2014). There is little to no discussion of more contemporary theories such as Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998), or the Dynamic Systems Theory (Muhammad Zaman, Jamal, & Buriro, 2025), which could have added theoretical rigor.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable absence of engagement with empirical studies that document the specific types of errors Pakistani ESL learners make due to L1 interference (e.g., Farooq & Mahmood, 2017; Haider, 2019). The review is heavily reliant on theoretical generalizations and lacks critical synthesis.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of the study is loosely based on Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), yet the authors do not formally declare or critique it. CAH, as proposed by Lado (1957), posits that difficulties in L2 learning arise due to differences between L1 and L2 structures. However, this theory has been criticized for its predictive limitations and deterministic stance (Ellis, 1994; Odlin, 1989). The absence of a clearly stated theoretical framework weakens the study's interpretive strength. A multi-theoretical approach integrating Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory would have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of learner errors (Muhammad Zaman, Majeed, & Naper, 2025).

Methodology

The paper claims to follow a qualitative research design using purposive sampling but provides no details about participants, instruments, data collection procedures, or ethical protocols. There is no indication of how data were coded, analyzed, or validated. The lack of transparency severely compromises the study's reliability, validity, and replicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013).

Moreover, the authors neither justify the sample size nor describe the demographics (e.g., age, proficiency level, educational background) of the participants. This omission is particularly critical in SLA research where learner variables significantly influence language acquisition outcomes (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014).

Data Analysis and Findings

The findings are presented in a narrative form and mention types of errors—such as verb misplacement, preposition misuse, and incorrect sentence structure—but are not supported by actual data excerpts or systematic categorization. There is no frequency analysis, coding scheme, or typology of errors provided. As per established practices in applied linguistics, qualitative findings should be supported by rich textual evidence and organized thematically (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Additionally, the discussion lacks analytical depth and does not relate findings to existing studies. It reads more as a description than a critical interpretation. Incorporating learner samples and aligning the errors with SLA theories would have enhanced the academic rigor.

Conclusion and Implications

The conclusion reiterates the findings in broad terms and calls for curriculum revisions but offers no specific pedagogical recommendations or frameworks. There is no mention of teacher training, material development, or policy-level suggestions. Effective research should offer practical implications based on evidence (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

The authors also fail to propose directions for future research in a meaningful way. For example, they could have suggested longitudinal studies or comparative analyses across regional languages in Pakistan.

Overall Contribution and Limitations

This paper raises a timely and relevant issue in ESL education in Pakistan but falls short on methodological transparency, theoretical grounding, and analytical rigor. While it contributes to the discourse on L1 interference, its scholarly value would have been significantly enhanced with:

- Clear theoretical positioning,
- Detailed methodological exposition,
- Systematic error analysis,
- Integration of recent empirical studies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research paper identifies an important issue but does not meet the standards expected in contemporary applied linguistics research. To enhance its contribution, the study requires clearer research design, more recent literature, and systematic data analysis grounded in contemporary SLA theory. Future research should aim to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, use triangulation for credibility, and focus on learner-specific variables in Pakistan's multilingual educational context.

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