



## Interlanguage and Its Implications to Second Language Teaching and Learning

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**Abstract:** Interlanguage refers to the knowledge system which is formed in a certain period in learners' second language learning process. The study on interlanguage is of great significance in the field of second language acquisition. This paper elaborates on the definition and characteristics of interlanguage, and analyzes five main factors contributing to the formation of interlanguage. The first factor is language transfer, especially negative language transfer; the second is transfer of language training, which means teacher overemphasized one form or pattern and used inappropriate or even faulty teaching materials, at the same time, teacher's incompetence in identifying non-English forms may also lead to interlanguage; the third factor is strategies of second language learning, which is often thought to be culture bound; the fourth factor is strategies of second language communication; the last factor is overgeneralization of target language. Through close study of the factors leading to interlanguage, this paper draws some implications to second language teaching and learning: the first is reducing negative transfer. Teachers can emphasize the importance of reinforcing the learners' responses by rewarding target-like responses and correcting non-target-like ones, and learners should be encouraged to read as much as possible the English writings by native English writers. Second is increasing cultural information teaching. Teachers can choose some culturally-authentic materials from the native speech community and adopt various cultural teaching techniques. At the same time, to optimize language input environment. Teachers are supposed to equip with high levels of L2 competence and provide students with the right thing in the right way. Another way to reduce language transfer is to increase the opportunity for output. Moreover, we can see that making errors is a part of language and error-correction can help interlanguage develop towards the TL, hence, adopting proper correction strategies are of great importance. Last but not least, applying proper learning strategies is also a better way to avoid the occurrence of interlanguage.

**Key words:** interlanguage, second language teaching and learning, implications

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### 1. Introduction

Interlanguage is a common phenomenon in second language (L2) learning. It refers to the knowledge system which is formed in a certain period in learners' second language or foreign language learning process. It is a transitional language system, which is changing and adjusting constantly with the increase of learners' second language knowledge.

The universality of interlanguage impels linguists and foreign language teachers to face its existence, study its law and offer theoretical foundation and practical guidance for the reform of foreign language teaching methods. Wang Jianqin (1994) studied the factors and interrelationships in the production of interlanguage; some researchers (DAI Weidong, CAI Longquan, 2001; Zhao Xuan, 2006) went further studying on "the systematic cognition of the interlanguage, which resulted in an interlanguage cognitive schema" [4]; HU Lingling (2018) and LI Zhong (2018) studied the phenomenon of the fossilization of interlanguage and its countermeasure for foreign language learning; Other researchers (GAO Xianli, 2019; WU Xiaorui, 2021) focused on the fossilization phenomenon of interlanguage and its impacts on English writing; MA Zhigang's research figures out that the "differing criteria in classifying categories in various languages to be one of the causes of syntactic and thematic errors in interlanguage" [14], which further illustrates the importance of studying interlanguage. However, researches in this field so far have only focused on one nature or phenomenon of interlanguage or its impacts, few made a thorough discussion of its characteristics and main factors leading to the formation of interlanguage.

This paper will try to discuss thoroughly the nature of interlanguage, the main factors leading to the formation of interlanguage and its enlightenment to second language teaching and learning. The significance of the study is that it can help researchers in the future get a clear map of the nature and main factors of interlanguage but also give some practical advice in second language teaching and learning.



## 2. Interlanguage Theory

### 2.1 Definition of Interlanguage

The term “interlanguage” was coined by L. Selinker in 1972 <sup>[17]</sup>. He adapted this term to refer to the interim grammars constructed by second language learners on their way to the target language (TL). And this systematic knowledge of L2 is independent of both the learner’s first language (L1) and the TL. The term interlanguage has come to be endowed with different but related meanings:

- (1) the series of interlocking systems which characterize acquisition;
- (2) the system that is observed at a single stage of development (an interlanguage);
- (3) particular L1/L2 combinations (for example, L1 Chinese/L2 English).

Brown, H.D. advocates interlanguage refers to the separateness of a second language learner’s system, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target language <sup>[1]</sup>. Actually, before the term “interlanguage” gained its wide popularity, several other researchers have used various alternative terms to refer to the same phenomenon. They are “transitional competence” <sup>[2]</sup> and “an idiosyncratic dialect” <sup>[3]</sup> and “an approximative system” <sup>[15]</sup> by Nemser (1971) who stressed the successive approximation to the target language. Corder (1971) used the term “idiosyncratic dialect” to connote the idea that the learner’s language is unique to a particular individual, that the rules of the learner’s language are peculiar to the language of that individual alone <sup>[3]</sup>.

In a word, interlanguage is neither the system of the native language nor the system of the target language, but instead falls between the two; it is a system based upon the best attempt of learners to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them. By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, learners slowly and tediously succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language.

### 2.2 Characteristics of Interlanguage

Selinker’s interlanguage hypothesis assumes that interlanguage are natural languages, which are systematic throughout their development <sup>[17]</sup>. Needless to say, interlanguage system bears some features of its own, and which were intensively discussed by many researchers. They are:

- (1) Permeability. This means that the rules that constitute the learner’s knowledge at any one stage are not fixed but are open to amendment. In many respects this is a general feature of natural languages. This means that in the process of second language acquisition, the target rules and forms gradually permeate the existing interlanguage system, which is in a sense similar to natural languages’ evolution over time <sup>[6]</sup>. Interlanguage differs from other language systems only in the degree of permeability. Therefore, the learner’s interlanguage system is not fixed, but open to amendment and it is always ready to absorb new knowledge.
- (2) Dynamicity. The L2 learner’s interlanguage is constantly changing. However, he does not drop from one stage to the next, but rather slowly revises the interim system. This takes place by the introduction of a new rule, first in one context and then in another, and so on. A new rule spreads in the sense that its coverage gradually extends over a range of linguistic contexts <sup>[6]</sup>. Thus the interlanguage continuum consists of a series of overlapping “grammars”. Each grammar shares some rules with the previously constructed grammar, but also contains some new or revised rules.
- (3) Systematicity. An interlanguage is not a random collection of items, rules or something else; it is systematic in its own right. Like any other natural languages, it has an internally coherent structure, which can be analyzed linguistically. Learners base their performance plans on their existing language system in much the same way native speakers base their plans on his internalized knowledge of the L1 system <sup>[6]</sup>. The learner behaves “grammatically” in the sense that he draws systematically on his interlanguage rules <sup>[5]</sup>.
- (4) Variability. At any one stage of development the language produced by learners will display systematic variability. This variability reflects the particular form-function correlations which comprise the rules of the learner’s grammar at that stage of development. The learner’s competence must be viewed as heterogeneous rather than homogeneous <sup>[6]</sup>.
- (5) Fossilization. Selinker notes that most L2 learners, unlike L1 learners, fail to reach target language competence. That is, they stop learning when their interlanguage still have rules or items different from those of the target language <sup>[17]</sup>. This phenomenon is referred to as fossilization. It occurs in most L2 learners and can not be rectified by further instruction. Fossilized forms may sometimes seem to disappear but are always likely to reappear in productive language use, a phenomenon known as backsliding.

The causes of fossilization are various and both internal and external factors should be taken into account. Ellis has made a clear summary of all the causes. One internal factor is age. It is believed that when learners reach a critical age their brains will lose plasticity, hence certain linguistic features are unable to be acquired. Another internal factor is the learner’s lack of desire to acculturate. It suggested that learners make no efforts to adopt target language cultural norms because of some social and psychological factors. The external causes which account for fossilization are: 1) communicative pressure (the pressure to use the target language beyond their competence will lead to fossilization); 2) lack of learning opportunity (learners don’t have the opportunities to get the L2 input and to use the target language); and 3) the nature of the feedback on learner’s use

of L2 (positive feedback which signals “I understand you” results in fossilization while negative feedback which signals “I don’t understand you” helps avoid fossilization) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### 3. Five Key Factors for the Formation of Interlanguage

Selinker (1972) lists five factors directly affecting the output of the interlanguage system, which are language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of L2 learning, strategies of L2 communication and over-generalization of TL material. The analysis of these factors can help us understand more deeply how interlanguage comes into being so that better ways can be found out to further develop it <sup>[17]</sup>.

#### 3.1 Language Transfer

Language transfer refers to the transfer of the learner’s L1, including linguistic and cultural aspects, to his/her organizing the L2 data, learners’ interlanguage systems are greatly influenced by them. When the characteristics of the L1 expressions the learner refers to are the same as or similar to those of the L2 expressions, the transfer is positive, that is, the transfer facilitates the learning of TL; otherwise, the transfer becomes an interlingual interference, namely, negative transfer.

Negative language transfer is an important factor of causing learners’ errors, including linguistic and pragmatic ones, though not the sole factor leading to interlanguage. It mainly falls into the following two categories:

(1) Linguistically wrong. Linguistic transfer would most probably occur when L1 and L2 share a meaning but express it in a different or slightly different way. For example: Chinese expression “因为...所以...” and English expression “...because...” and “...so...”. They have the same meaning, but they can not be used in the same way, for the reason that in English “...because...” and “...so...” could not be placed together in one sentence.

(2) Culturally unacceptable. Chinese learners often deny compliments when other people praise them and use self-deprecation strategies to express modesty, which seems very awkward to native English speakers.

#### 3.2 Transfer of Training

“If a learner is taking part in formal instruction, some errors will be a direct result of misunderstanding caused by faulty teaching or materials”<sup>[12]</sup>. Transfer of training refers to the phenomenon that L2 learners may have done excessive training on certain interlanguage structures that they cannot successfully continue to develop the new structures. Transfer of training can not only cause errors but also reinforce erroneous forms. Generally, ways and materials of training and teachers are the two main elements that affect language training.

(1) Ways and materials of training

Non-target language forms may sometimes result from inappropriate ways of training and teaching materials. And some of these non-target forms, for lack of notice from learners or their teachers, may remain in the learners’ interlanguage. Such errors often occur when the rule is probabilistic, but are stated as categorical <sup>[19]</sup>: one form or pattern is overemphasized or overpractised; inappropriate or even faulty teaching materials are used, etc. For instance, if the teacher or the teaching material emphasizes repeatedly that an adjective plus ‘-ly’ equals an adverb, the learner may very probably overuse the rule and make such sentence as “He treated me friendlyly.”

The inappropriate or faulty teaching materials are easiest to give birth to incorrect or inappropriate language forms, especially in China, as the learners consider textbook as standard of the TL. Professor He Ziran expressed the same opinion when he cited examples from some textbooks

— What’s your name?

— My name is Li Lei.

— How old are you?

— I’m forty.

— Are you writing a letter to your wife?

— Yes, I am.

— How often do you write to your wife?

— Once a week <sup>[9]</sup>.

Obviously, those dialogues which are of correct grammatical structure can be seen as typical pragmatic failures, for, using such expressions in the real communication will be considered to be impolite or even infringing other’s privacy.

(2) Teachers

Improving the learner’s linguistic and intercultural communicative competence and developing their interlanguage towards the target language depend to a great extent on well-trained teachers with fairly high level of the TL and target culture.

However, most Chinese teachers are English learners themselves. Their words often include such non-English forms as linguistic errors or inappropriate expressions, Chinglish, for example, which they resort to when they cannot find the proper English words, or expressions or when they are eager to get across to the learners. Their non-English forms may be directly transmitted to learners. At the same time, because of their own incompetence, sometimes teachers are unable to help learners identify non-English forms, especially pragmatical non-English forms, let alone to help learners correct these forms. That is

why we often hear such greetings as “Good morning, Teacher” from English classrooms in the morning and also why we sometimes find obvious errors in some textbooks edited by the Chinese teachers of English.

### **3.3 Strategies of L2 Learning**

L2 learning strategy refers to learners’ regular study method. Selinker thinks that learners’ L2 learning strategy is culture bound<sup>[18]</sup>. Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, Chinese L2 learners tend to adopt avoidance and simplification strategies when confronted with difficulties in L2 learning. For instance, they often avoid using attributive clauses in writing, which can be easily proved by their CET4 and CET6 writings. Students’ long-term avoidance of using attributive clauses will eventually lead to fossilization in this aspect. And the following examples can clearly show us students’ simplification strategy:

—I go to clothes shop. (I’ll go shopping for clothes)

—I not play the computer. (I don’t use a computer.)

—I ready to home. (I am ready to go home.)

### **3.4 Strategies of L2 Communication**

In real communication, learners may sometimes turn to communication strategies, a systematic skill that a speaker resorts to while having difficulties in expression to keep the communication going on<sup>[21]</sup>. Unfortunately, sometimes such “successful use of communication strategies will prevent acquisition”<sup>[6]</sup>, Ellis says, for the learner may become “skillful” in making up for lack of linguistic knowledge by the use of various communication strategies so that the need to learn new TL knowledge decreases. The communication strategies reflecting cognitive occurrence of interlanguage include:

(1) Paraphrase: approximation, word coinage, circumlocution;

(2) Borrowing: literal translation, language switch;

(3) Asking for assistance;

(4) Gestures;

(5) Avoidance: topic avoidance, message abandonment.

### **3.5 Overgeneralization of TL**

Overgeneralization of TL refers to the interlanguage cognition produced in expanding TL rule. According to Richard’s viewpoint, overgeneralization includes learners’ expanding or mixing some language rules<sup>[16]</sup>. The premise of overgeneralization is the similarity of suitable objects of the rules. But the essence of overgeneralization is the similar analogy. Individual similarity may become partial or all similarity. Once generalization is excessive, errors will appear. However, this kind of cognition is normal with regard to the development of learning process.

The foundation of interlanguage cognition is reflected in L2 learning process. For example, in sentence “Tom goed there”, learners may expand past tense form of regular verb to irregular verb “go”. The sentence “The professor let us to recite the text”, suggests that learners apply the rules of infinitive verbs in a wrong way. In sentence “Tom asked me whether was I willing to go together with him”, learners are not clear of the rules that there is no need to invert subjects and objects when the interrogative sentence serves as the object subordinate clause.

## **4. Implications to L2 Teaching and Learning**

The nature of interlanguage and the main factors leading to its formation are discussed in detail in the previous parts, from which several enlightenment can be got in terms of how to develop learners’ interlanguage system to get close to or reach the destination of the TL in L2 learning.

### **4.1 Reducing Negative Transfer of L1**

Negative transfer of L1 is one of the most important reasons leading to the formation of interlanguage. For example, the omission of the third singular present tense final “s” and the omission of the relative pronouns, etc. are concerned with L1 interference. Considering this situation, the teacher should pay more attention to the influence of L1 interference on the learners’ English study.

On the one hand, teachers may adopt behaviorist views of language learning and of language teaching. They emphasize the importance of reinforcing the learners’ responses by rewarding target-like responses and correcting non-target-like ones. Therefore, when teachers teach learners to learn certain grammatical rules or sentence structures which are similar to L1, teachers should use intensive techniques such as repetition or drills to overcome the interference and establish the necessary new habits. For instance, the teacher could ask the learners to repeat various sentences containing relative clauses after explaining the specific rules about relative clauses.

On the other hand, all learners should be encouraged to read as much as possible the English writings by native English writers. Reading is a kind of personal experience in the language. By reading learners can get the exact meanings of some words, familiarize themselves with some useful sentence structures and acquire many writing skills unconsciously. Eventually, they can develop language awareness, which is helpful in avoiding the negative transfer of L1.

### **4.2 Increasing Cultural Information Teaching**

In the process of second language learning, students are influenced by their native culture embedded in their L1 language, which hinders the development of their interlanguage. Therefore, it is important to make the students familiarize with the

similarities and differences between the target culture and the native culture and develop cultural awareness while using the target language.

To realize this, it is suggested that cultural information teaching should be combined with language teaching in class. For example, teachers can choose some culturally-authentic materials from the native speech community, which display the genuine components of the culture. Learners will experience the culture by themselves with their own keen experiences. Sources of this kind for classroom use may include unabridged classical literature works, articles from magazines, reports of current events, editorials, travel guides, restaurant menu and other printed materials.

Besides, teachers can adopt various cultural teaching techniques. For instance, a teacher may present a passage about the misunderstanding in the communication between different cultures first, and then, give several possible interpretations. After that, he stimulates the students to give the right response in the target cultural situation. Various activities can be created by means of this method and students can be fully involved in these culture learning activities, which are likely to have good results.

### **4.3 Optimizing Language Input Environment**

In the case of Chinese learners, who lack exposure to natural language environment, the language input from the formal classroom teaching is the major input they may derive. So the provision of optimal classroom input seems especially crucial to reduce their language fossilization. As is discussed in the previous part, the problems arise from teacher talk, textbooks or teaching materials and pedagogic methods do have an inhibiting impact on learning, and promote fossilization at different linguistic levels. From this point, the measures to help learners develop their interlanguage system are to optimize language input environment.

#### **(1) Teachers**

Teachers are a vital part in language training. Their pronunciation, knowledge of the language and ways of communicating directly influence the students. Therefore, it is of great importance that teachers themselves have a strong command of English. They should make sure that no or few mistakes are made during the process of teaching so that no negative effect is exerted on the students through teachers' talk. In addition, teachers' teaching methods may also influence students' learning. Thus, teachers should be well aware where the students are and what they need in learning and provide them with the right thing in the right way.

#### **(2) Multi-Media**

Very often, teachers with high levels of L2 competence are simply not available. In such cases, the language laboratory maybe the right place to provide genuine, grammatically accurate and comprehensible input--tapes, records, films, books, etc. including authentic materials, arranged according to the level of comprehensibility and students' interest, may help develop learners' interlanguage. In other words, the use of multi-media may be considered as the most effective way to provide optimal input and therefore to lessen the influence of imperfect teacher or peer talk in the foreign-language environment. First of all, multi-media input presents the standard spoken language with native pronunciation and choices of words and structures. This may become a remedy to the flawed classroom input. Second, multi-media input creates a virtual L2 environment by providing a variety of authentic speech, which takes place in the contexts of various communications. Meanwhile, this type of input becomes more comprehensible and easy to acquire, due to the non-verbal information like body language and physical settings. Moreover, the input in real communication situations often proves to be a good way for learners to learn the TL culture beyond their systematic knowledge because it always reflects the TL customs, world view, values and beliefs. Third, the input presented through multi-media is interesting. The integration of sound, image, and plot makes the language class joyful, relaxing and motivating, therefore arousing learners' interest and facilitating language learning.

#### **(3) Textbooks**

In the formal language classroom, textbooks or teaching materials indicate the content and form of teaching in the daily activities of classroom, thus, have a great impact on the learners.

The material in many English textbooks used by Chinese learners, though comprehensible, is hard to motivate students due to its limited range of content and its discrete presentation of TL forms. Some of the content is even out of date or isolated from real life, which may have serious negative influence on students' learning. In the light of this, practicality and validity should be taken into account. To be precise, a wider scope of topics closely related to the real life should be added to the textbook.

### **4.4 Increasing Output**

Another way to reduce language transfer is to increase the opportunity for output, because it promotes accuracy and fluency in the cognitive domain. In Swain's view, leaner production is crucial inasmuch as it creates opportunity for learners to enhance fluency, test hypotheses, and notice gaps in the interlanguage<sup>[8]</sup>. Furthermore, she points out that output may set notice in train, triggering mental process that leads to modified output, which results in improved performance and gains accuracy of the second language.

The role of output, however, in the development of L2 proficiency, has been paid little attention to in China. In present Chinese colleges and universities, much focus is put on reading and listening courses, or to be exact, reading courses while speaking and writing training get less stressed in curriculum except for English majors. It is consequent that most students obtain high scores in examination but low competence in production. The suggestion, therefore, is that more opportunities of speaking and writing should be provided to L2 learners in teaching. For instance, in listening class, teachers may give the students a related topic for discussion, debate or role play. In reading class, teachers can choose some topics from the reading materials that students are mostly interested in as writing assignment for students to practice after class. Such practice will contribute to promote L2 learners' language fluency and accuracy because: 1) by trying to speak or write in the L2 they realize that they lack the grammatical knowledge of some feature that is important for what they want to express; 2) they can try out a rule and see whether it leads to successful communication or whether it elicits negative feedback.

#### **4.5 Adopting Proper Correction Strategy**

From the nature and reasons of formation of interlanguage, we can see that making errors is a part of language and error-correction can help interlanguage develop towards the TL. Here the author suggests three correction ways.

##### **(1) Self-correction**

As Julian, E. says, "Involving learners in judgments about correctness helps them become more accurate in their own use of language"<sup>[11]</sup>. Self-correction is important for learners to be independent in learning and thinking. By participating in self-correction, learners can be autonomous in making study policy, and be responsible for their learning activities. Most importantly, self-correction makes learners re-experience the language, which is helpful in internalizing the language data. Obviously, the scope of learners' self-correction needs to be confined only to minor errors, or "slips", which are within the learners' ability to solve. It needs to be balanced by teachers' correcting of major errors.

##### **(2) Peer Correction**

Peer correction is particularly important for learners working together in groups where teacher's help is not always available. When two learners work together on correcting each other's work, the discussion helps each other to learn from his/her own errors. As the saying goes, two heads are better than one. It is difficult for learners to find out errors by themselves. Cooperation helps develop an ability to find out their errors.

##### **(3) Teacher Correction**

Teacher correction is of significance in the process of correcting learners' errors. Because of learners' limited competence, they cannot know how they make errors and where they are, and they also cannot explain some errors. Thus it is the teacher's task to explain the causes of errors and provide correct alternative explanations. Correction helps learners rethink of the language and make correct hypotheses against the language later.

Though correction is important for learners' interlanguage development, we need be careful as to when to correct errors. Only errors which hinder communication and result from lack of knowledge should be corrected while those caused by carelessness, nervousness should be tolerated to some extent.

#### **4.6 Applying Appropriate Learning Strategies**

Learners should concentrate on forming some good learning habits and not get too much bothered by trying to correct each and every error that occurs. Here the author takes oral language learning for example.

Learners are advised to learn from the way a child learns to speak. It is interesting to see how babies and young children learn to talk. They learn from people around them. They learn by repeating what they have heard. They learn through trial and error. When they first say a word, use a phrase or make a sentence, they would most likely do it wrong. But they are not "afraid" of such errors. They would keep trying, making adjustments in the process, until they could make sense. From the way a child learns to speak, much can be learned as far as language learning is concerned. In a lesson, learners can listen and observe carefully how other people, especially native speakers, speak English. Then they can open their mouths and speak out their ideas. Perhaps it is better to speak a little less in the early stages and concentrate more on reading and listening to correct structure and writing down new words, investigating correct usage, and practicing etc.

Interlanguage is unavoidable in L2 learning process. The strategies discussed above, if fully utilized, can surely help further develop learners' interlanguage system so as to reach the destination of the TL.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The study of interlanguage has great practical significance for language teaching and learning. For teachers, understanding interlanguage deepens their understanding of learners' errors, learners' language, and many other aspects involved in language teaching and their relationships, on the basis of which they can reflect on their teaching and learners' learning and make

sensible pedagogical decisions. For learners, understanding interlanguage can help them to identify different errors and take proper attitudes to different errors. In this way, learners may have great progress in language learning. This paper has accomplished three goals: 1) discussing the nature of interlanguage; 2) analyzing in detail the key factors leading to the formation of interlanguage; 3) elaborating on implications of interlanguage to L2 teaching and learning. However, there are still some shortcomings in the paper: first, the author just focuses on the theoretical discussion of the formation of interlanguage and neglect empirical study; second, most of the implications to L2 teaching and learning discussed in the paper are only drawn on the basis of theories and have not been proved efficient by experiments yet. So in the future, researches on the topic can focus on these aspects.

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