

Does Mother Tongue Interfere in Second Language Learning?

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Abstract: Mother tongue largely refers to not only the language one learns from one's mother but also the speaker's dominant and home language. It's also called native language. This study was conducted to find whether mother tongue interferences in second-language learning, and if so; whether it affects the learners' performance in four language skills, and also in which skill(s) it has the biggest effect. Data collection tool included a questionnaire by which participants were asked to rate the questions and tick-circle or write in the correct blank. The questionnaire was based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches with the help of 4-point Likert-scale questions and one open-ended question at the last part. The participants of the study were 20 volunteer students (15 females and 5 males) in Uludag University on whom the questionnaire was randomly applied. They ranged in age from 18 to 40 and the mean age was 23. Their mother tongue was Turkish, and they knew English as a foreign language. The questionnaire shows that mother tongue interferes with second language learning in some way. In English language, the most challenging part was Grammar, while the most difficult and influenced skills was Speaking. In addition, participants had difficulty with speaking without any preparation. When it comes to having difficulty, participants had difficulty with determiners, English tenses and articles. The results indicated the interference of mother tongue in almost all aspects.

Key words: Interference, native language, second language learning, mother tongue.

Introduction

Mother tongue largely refers to not only the language one learns from one's mother but also the speaker's dominant and home language. It's also called native language. Learning of a mother tongue takes place in a quite natural way. Regarding the mother tongue, language is learned through input and reciprocal interaction but it's also believed that kids are born with an innate and special ability to discover the

underlying rules of a language system. This was named Universal Grammar by Noam Chomsky. When second language learning is taught, it can be said that input, feedback, aptitude, motivation, instruction and social interaction have a big effect; but what about the mother tongue? Does it interfere or helps the learners to make the language clear?

To investigate this subject, a lot of research was done (Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013) to find the most affected skill. Some researches (He, 2012) claim that viewing L1 as potentially valuable learning resource instead of a mere source of interference opens up greater pedagogical space and hence may bear constructive implications for L2 instruction, especially in homogenous contexts where both teachers and learners share the same mother tongue and target language. This paper reports the results of a study which attempted to find whether mother tongue interferes in second language learning or not.

Literature Review

Mother tongue interference can be seen as a transfer that affects learning both negatively and positively. According to Mede, Tatal, Ayaz, Çalışır and Akın (2014) there is high probability of cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition and this influence may cause some errors, which are caused by negative transfer. Manrique (2013) stated that mispronunciation and grammatical errors are the most common types of interference between the mother tongue and the target language. Also, it was affirmed that writing has been considered as the most difficult of the four language skills (Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 2013). They demonstrated that L1 interference categories of each writing genre varied in terms of L1 syntactic and semantic properties. That is, in narration, the L1 interference categories with frequency counts of more than 100 errors were verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article preposition, while the L1 interference types in descriptive writing were article, sentence structure, word choice, singular/plural form, and subject-verb agreement, respectively. In comparison and contrast to writing, the L1 interference

categories with frequency counts of more than 100 errors were singular/plural form, word choice, article, subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, and preposition.

Furthermore, according to Maros, Kim and Salehuddin (2007), omission and the use of wrong forms are the two most common types of errors in all categories; although not all the errors are due to mother tongue interference, a large number of errors identified in the use of determiners, subject verb agreement and copula "be" reflected the interference of mother tongue. Additionally, Cartes (20050) explained the subject with an enhanced disclosure and listed some other errors like semantic, syntactic, morphological, spelling, vocabulary mistakes and also phonological errors which are very difficult to identify in written texts.

Additionally, Ashari and Munir (2015) advocated that the interference occurred in sixteen terms of grammatical errors. The grammatical interference involved word order, number, countability, personal pronouns, genitive and possessive pronouns, it and there, past time, to be, non-finite forms, modal auxiliary verbs, active and passive, negatives, complex sentences, range and choice of vocabulary, transfer, and confusions. However, they claimed that the interference occurred because students did not receive input that facilitated them to write. It also occurred because of the lack of students' knowledge in second language acquisition.

Nevertheless, there are dissenters who thought that mother tongue not always interferes but also help learners in second language learning. For instance Bhela (1999) indicated that adopting L1 structures in L2 texts provide convenience to second language learners while understanding the whole text. Moreover, according to Cole (1998), monolingual English language classes can benefit from appropriate use of L1 so L1 may be used from introductory to upper-intermediate levels on a decreasing scale but in lower levels, translating individuals words, explaining grammar use and facilitating complex instructions, since it can save time and anguish especially for mature learners.

In the grand scheme of the thing; Sinha, Banerjee and Shastri (2009) alleged that monolingual students were better in English receptive vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing fluency. Nevertheless, in English grammar awareness, phonological awareness, expressive vocabulary, vocabulary density and writing quality both groups were equivalent. This showed that bilinguals despite being proficient in two languages (L1 and L2) do not completely excel the monolinguals in reading and writing related skills.

Finally, Kavaliauskiene (2009) expressed different results. First, all the learners customarily rely on their mother tongue in learning English and also the students' autonomously generated reading comprehension exercises, summary writing and back-translation activities help raise learners' awareness of differences between English and the mother tongue, and facilitate linguistic development. As is seen, there are lots of articles about mother tongue interference and each of them reveals different aspects of the subject. Therefore, this study was done to clarify the issue.

The present study aimed at finding the answers of the following questions:

1. Does mother tongue interfere in second language learning?
2. In which skill(s) does mother tongue interference have the biggest effect?
3. How can language background affect the learner's performance in the target language?

Methodology

The methodology of the present study was based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches by the help of 4-point Likert-scale questions and one open-ended question at the last part. Nevertheless, the qualitative part failed due to insufficient data.

Participants

The present study was conducted at Uludag University involving 20 students (15 females and 5 males) who were volunteers, on whom the questionnaire was

randomly applied. They ranged in age from 18 to 40 and the mean age was 23. Their mother tongue was same: Turkish; and they knew English as a foreign language. Thirteen of twenty participants (10 female and 3 male) were students of Uludag University at English Language Teaching Department. They were all at grade 2 and their ages ranged between 19 and 33. They ranged in proficiency levels from Upper-intermediate to Advanced. Five of them also knew German.

Other seven participants (5 female and 2 male) were from a local German course (BUSMEK) in Bursa and they were trying to learn German apart from English. One of them was the teacher of the course, and was graduated as a German teacher from university. They were at A2 level except the teacher, who claimed to hold a B1 certificate in English. Four of those participants from the course were still students of Uludag University, studying in different departments of the university. The other three of them completed their academic career years ago.

Instruments

The data collection tool as a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was designed to identify the probable interference of the mother tongue in second language learning, and to evaluate the participants' views.

It was a Likert-scale questionnaire and it was pilot-tested with four students of the Uludag University at English Language Teaching Department whom were at grade 2. After the testing phase, required editing (such as the year item in the demographic background part was changed into Grade; Some 3rd person singular "s" mistakes) were done.

The questionnaire was one paper in total (both-sided), and it consisted of 5 different parts: four parts aiming at collecting quantitative, and one part aiming at qualitative data. Part 1 was 4-point Likert-scale (Most of the time-Sometimes-Seldom-Never) and it aimed at revealing in which language areas and how much mother tongue interference occurred in language learning. Part 2 was again 4- point Likert-scale

(from Always to Never) and it aimed at determining in which language skills and how much mother tongue interference occurred in language learning. Part 3 aimed at identifying the reasons of making errors in target language. It was 5-point Likert-scale (Strongly agree-Agree-Undecided-Disagree-Strongly disagree). Part 4 was again 5-point Likert-scale (from A great deal to Never). And finally, Part 5 was an open-ended question that aimed at eliciting the participants' views and comments in addition to the mentioned fixed questionnaire items.

Procedure

The questionnaire was implemented throughout a week (9-13 May) with 20 participants in their free time. It was applied individually according to voluntary basis. The questionnaire was given to the 13 participants who were students in the ELT Department during their free time at the faculty. The remaining 7 participants of the German course were given the questionnaire during the recess time in the building of BUSMEK.

First, they were asked to fill the blanks about their demographic background information (department-grade-age-gender-any other language that they know). Second, they were asked to complete the four Liker-scale parts and to write any comments or views that they think haven't been covered in questionnaire in the last part in the space provided. The last question aimed at collecting more detailed data related to the participants' views and comments apart from those which were given in the questionnaire. Although the first four parts were completed fully, unfortunately, no answer was given for the last open-ended part. The seven participants from the German course were helped with the Turkish explanations when needed. The words that they didn't know were clarified in Turkish. It lasted no longer than 5-7 minutes for the ELT students but for the course students it lasted 10 minutes or longer to complete the questionnaire.

The data were analyzed by calculating and estimating the answers with regard to the frequency adverbs used in the Likert-scale questionnaire. The charts were prepared

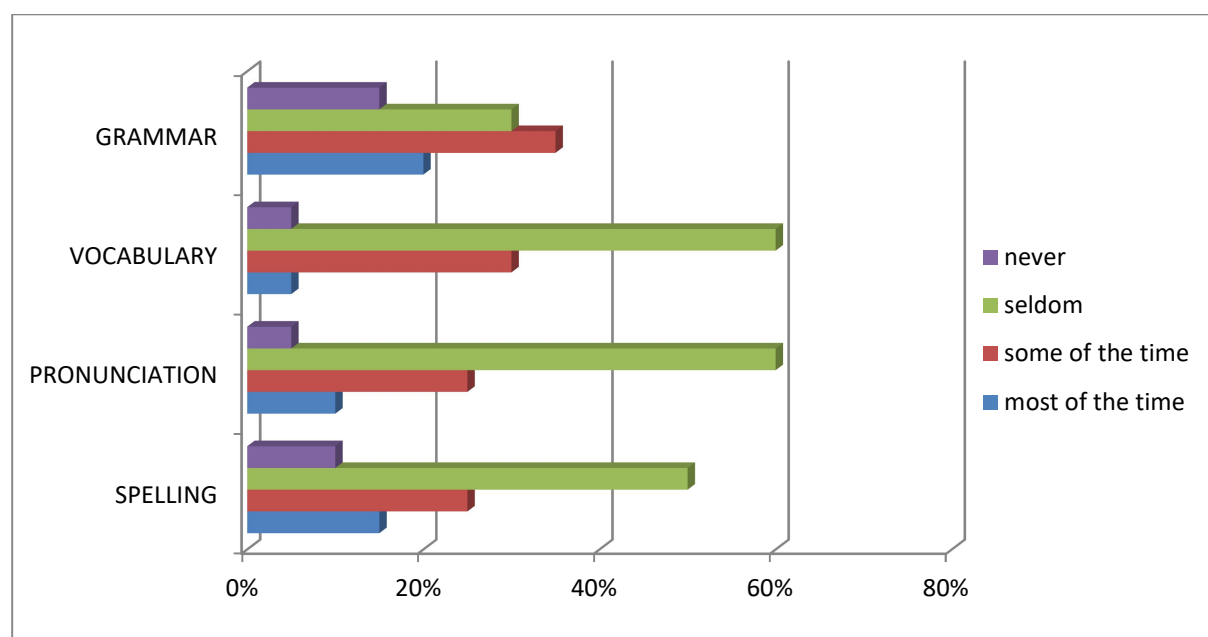
so that they reflected the percentages of the responses given to each item. All numbers were indicated in percentages.

Results and Discussion

The results that were derived from the present study and discussion of the findings are presented in the following:

Table 1 shows the interference of mother tongue in language areas; Table 2 presents interference of mother tongue in language skills; Table 3 shows the reasons of making errors related to mother tongue, and finally Table 4 shows the points with which language learners have difficulty.

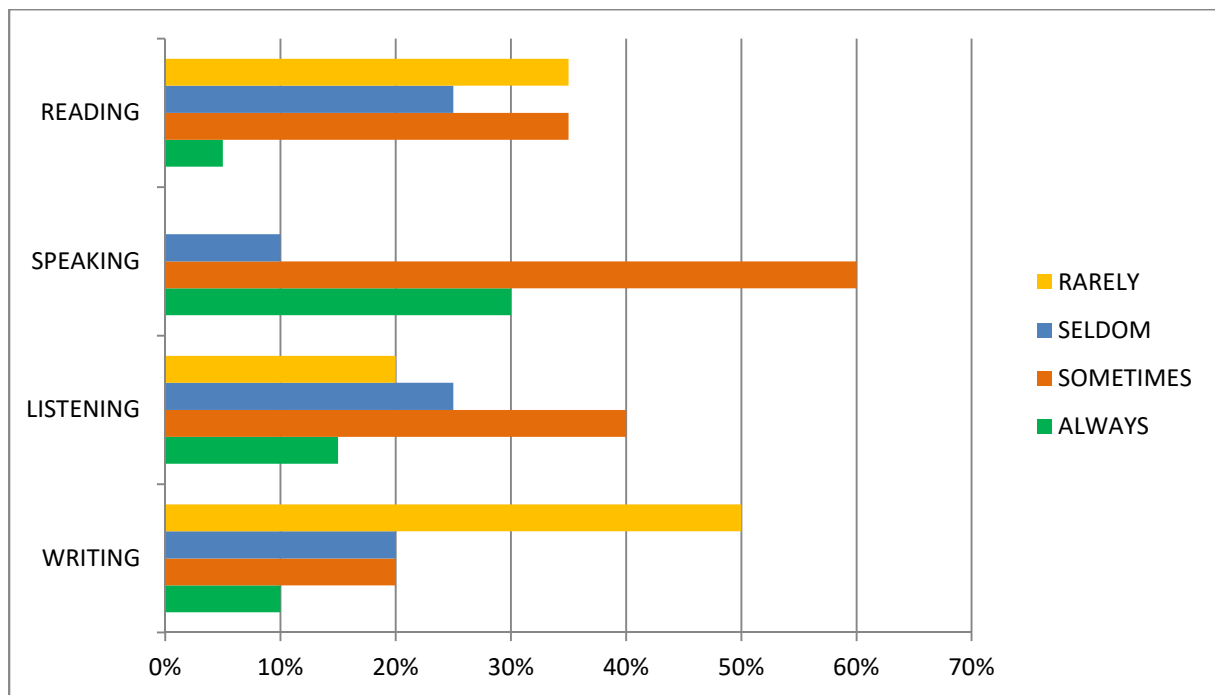
Table 1. The interference of mother tongue in the language areas.



According to the findings; the participants think that they experience the interference of mother tongue in grammar most of the time. The percentage of this group was 20%. Moreover, first language interference which occurs sometimes was pretty high especially in pronunciation and vocabulary. The percentage was 60%. At the same time those two items were seen as the items in which mother tongue interferes never more than 5%. In spelling participants who said some of the time decreased to 50%.

Regarding the research question 2, it can be said that, the effect of mother tongue was observed most of the time in grammar and very rarely in vocabulary or pronunciation.

Table 2. The interference of mother tongue in the languages skills.



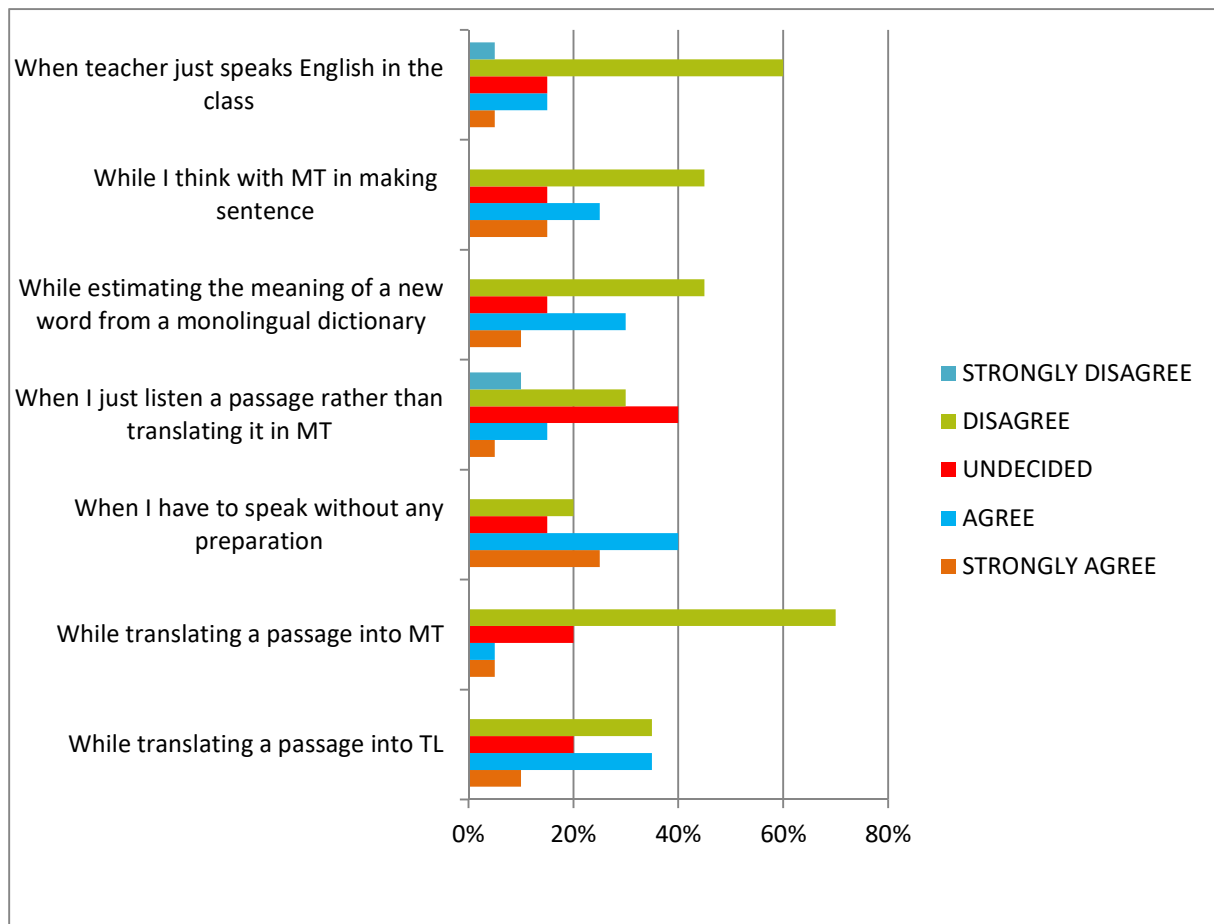
In contrast to Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) who affirmed that writing has been considered as the most difficult of the four language skills, the findings show that the interference was seen rarely in writing. The percentage of this group was 50%.

In contrast with Watcharapunyawong and Usaha, 30% of the participants experience interference of mother tongue always in speaking, and 60% of them increased that rate by saying sometimes. Apart from those, there were 10% participants who said rarely.

Another interesting observation was that in reading, 30% of the participants experience the interference sometimes, whereas again 30% of them experience rarely.

Regarding the research question 2 again, it can be stated that the answer of the research question 2 is speaking.

Table 3. The reasons of making errors related to mother tongue interference.



The analysis of statistics showed that 60% of the participants disagree the idea of making errors due to speaking only English of the teacher in the class. Apart from that rate, 5% of them strongly disagree while again 5% of them strongly agree that idea. When dealt with the making sentences, 45% of the participants strongly disagree that thinking in the mother tongue during making sentence cause making errors. In contrast to that group, 25% of the participants agree that view and also 15% of the participants strongly agree that view. Using monolingual dictionary and looking up the meaning of a word from it, were different controversial subjects. While 45% of the participants disagree that idea, 30% of the participants agree that

looking up the meaning of a word from a monolingual dictionary was the reason of making errors. Also 15% of the participants remained undecided to that idea.

Another finding shows that, just listening to a passage rather than translating it to first language wasn't the reason of making errors according to 45% of the participants. At the same time 40% of the participants were undecided. Also people who strongly agree that aspect were no more than 5%. As seen in the Table 1, speaking was the most challenging part and they agree that speaking without any preparation was the main reason of making errors. The percentage of the group was 40%. People who circled strongly agree were at the rate of 25%. In that part, there was no one who circled strongly disagree. When it comes to translation, 70% of the participants disagree the idea of making errors while translating the passage into mother tongue. The rate of agree and strongly agree were really low. The percentage of both group were the same 5%. Contrast to translating a passage into mother tongue, translating a passage into the target language was another controversial subject. Both disagree and agree rate were 35%. People who were undecided were 20%. Considering research question1 and 3, participants have difficulty with some parts of the language due to their mother tongue and they make errors because of them. Therefore, we can understand that mother tongue interferes with the participants' way of language learning, and it causes making errors, that's why their performance may be affected by the mother tongue.

To sum up participants think that mother tongue cause making error when making sentence mostly and they disagree the idea of speaking only English in the class and translating a passage into mother tongue were the reasons of making errors.

Table 4. The items with which participants have difficulty.

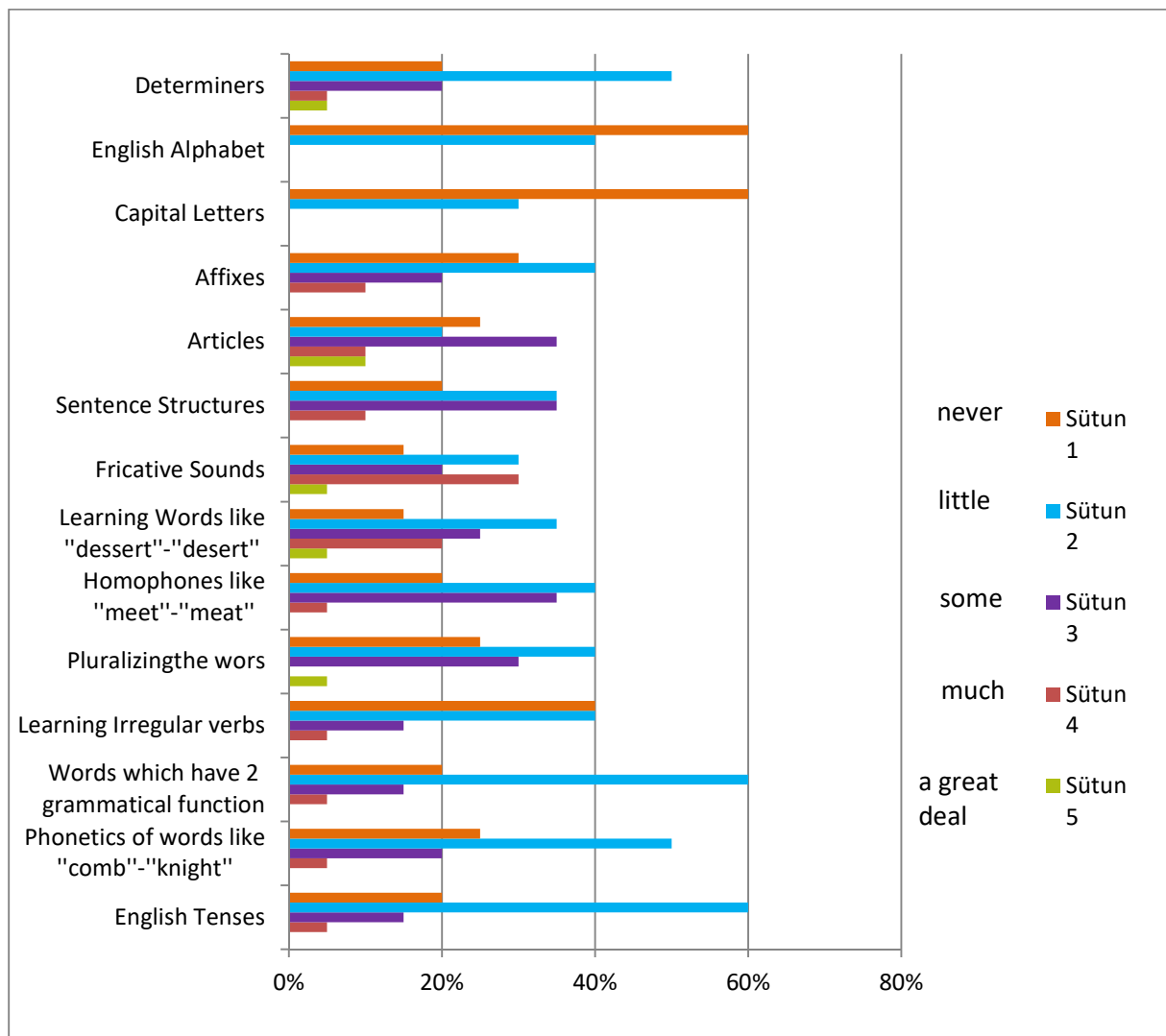


Table 4 shows the parts with which learners have difficulty. According to the findings, English alphabet and capital letters were the parts in which no difficulty was observed. The percentages of the group were 60% in both. When it comes to English tenses and words which have 2 grammatical functions and also determiners, learners have difficulty at the rate of 60%. Additionally, 30% of the participants think that fricative sounds were the point which they have difficulty with by saying much.

In contrast to Kim and Salehuddin (2007) who said that omission and wrong usage of forms are two most common types of errors in all categories, and Cartes (2005) who listed some other errors like semantic, syntactic, morphological, spelling, vocabulary mistakes and also phonological errors; the findings of the present study revealed that

the most seen errors were errors caused by fricative sounds, sentence structure (word order) and articles.

To sum up, according to the participants, in second language learning the most challenging was grammar while, the most difficult and influenced by the mother tongue skill was speaking. Also, participants have difficulty with speaking without any preparation as is seen in the Table 2. When it comes to having difficulty, participants have difficulty with determiners, tenses, and articles.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest some evidence about interference of mother tongue. In addition to other researches about mother tongue interference, in brief it is possible to say that mother tongue interferences in second language learning in almost all aspects. The biggest effect of mother tongue interference can be seen in the speaking as a language skills and grammar as a language area. In addition to its effect in second language learning, it also affects the learners' performance. Results show that it leads learners to making errors especially in speaking without preparation and translating a passage into the target language. In addition, it is possible to say that learners especially have difficulty with determiners, sounds, sentence structures, and articles.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

The present study was carried out with the participants from a single university who were grade 2 and some students from a German Course who were graduated from university years ago. So, it might reveal more reliable results when applied in several ELT Departments with different grades at various universities throughout Turkey and including a higher number of participants. Additionally, qualitative data could be gathered to ensure in-depth evaluation and crosscheck.

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Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is designed to help identify whether "Mother Tongue" or "Native Language" interfere in second-language learning or not. Your responses are useful for writing article about Mother Tongue Interference.

Please answer each question carefully based on your own opinions and learning experiences.

Instructions: For each item "tick" the appropriate space or "write" in the space provided. For questions where a scale is provided, please "circle" the relevant number.

DEPARTMENT:

AGE:

GRADE:

SEX: M () F ()

PART1: I experience interference of Mother Tongue in:

1-most of the
time

2-some of the
time

3-seldom

4-never

1 Grammar/while learning grammatical structures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2 Vocabulary/While learning new words	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3 Pronunciation/While learning Pronunciation Of words that I learned	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4 Spelling/While writing the spellings of words that I learned	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

PART2: Mother Tongue make second-language learning hard while:

1-Always

2-Sometimes

3-Seldom

4-Rarely

1 Reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2 Speaking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3 Listening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4 Writing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

PART3: I make errors;

- When teacher speak just English in the class

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- While I think with Mother Tongue in making sentence

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- While estimating the meaning of a new word from a monolingual dictionary(English-English)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- When I just listen a passage rather than translating it in first-language(Turkish)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- When I have to speak without any preparation.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- While translating a passage into my mother tongue(Turkish)

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- While translating a passage into target language(English)



5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

PART4: I have difficulty with:

	A Great Deal	Much	Somewhat	Little	Never
❖ English alphabet					
❖ Capital Letters					
❖ Affixes					
❖ Articles(a-an-the)					
❖ Prepositions in English					
❖ Fricative Sounds(ð, q)					
❖ Learning Words like "dessert" and "desert"					
❖ Homophones like "meet" and "meat"					
❖ Pluralizing the words(goose-geese)					
❖ Learning Irregular Verbs					
❖ Learning words which have 2 grammatical function(verb-noun)					
❖ Phonetics of words like "knight" or "comb"					
❖ English tenses					



PART5: Please feel free to add below any comments or views that you think have not been covered in this questionnaire.

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Thank you!