

# The Evolution of Transfer Theory in Second Language Acquisition: From Behaviorism to Sociocultural Perspectives

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**Abstract.** This study explores the dynamic interaction and developmental perspectives of transfer theory (TT) in the context of second language acquisition (SLA). First proposed by psychologist Edward Thorndike in 1913, transfer theory focuses on describing how learners utilize existing knowledge or skills to acquire information or skills in new learning situations. Over time, research on transfer theory has deepened from the early behaviorist perspective of unidirectional transfer to the role of bidirectional transfer and situational factors under cognitive and sociocultural theories. This paper explores the complex dynamics of transfer theory in second language acquisition and its impact on language teaching by synthesizing the early and recent research results to provide theoretical guidance and strategic suggestions for teaching practice. By analyzing the phenomenon of language transfer among different learners in diverse contexts, the research aims to reveal the broad applicability of transfer theory and its important implications for educational strategy development. The findings will provide educators and researchers with deeper insights to optimize language teaching methods.

## 1 Introduction

The term “transfer” comes from behaviourist psychology and describes how existing knowledge or abilities are used to acquire new information or skills during learning. The American psychologist Edward Thorndike first proposed the transfer theory in learning in 1913. Understanding how knowledge and skills acquired in one context affect performance or learning in another has long been a central concern in various fields of education, psychology and linguistics.

The transfer phenomenon is particularly important in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) because learners draw on their existing linguistic competence when acquiring a new language. Over the years, researchers have explored the transfer theory from different perspectives, aiming to reveal its complex dynamics and impact on language learning.

Research on transfer theory has made significant progress, reflecting changes in the theoretical framework and conceptual understanding of language acquisition. Early perspectives, influenced by behaviorism, focused on transfer as a unidirectional process in which learners apply knowledge or skills from their first language (L1) to the target language (L2). However, with the emergence of cognitive and socio-cultural theories, scholars have begun to recognize the bidirectional nature of transfer, acknowledging the interplay between languages and the role of contextual factors in shaping the outcome of transfer. Research exploring the dynamic interactions between transfer theory and SLA contexts has received increased attention recently. This interdisciplinary approach integrates

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insights from cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, and educational research, aiming at a comprehensive understanding of migration.

This study addresses new questions in the field based on exploring the dynamic interactions between migration theory and SLA contexts. It synthesizes important findings from earlier studies to contribute to the ongoing discussion. By delving into migration theory, this study aims to reveal the complex structure of the migration process and its implications for language learners and educators.

This study focuses on the following questions:

1. how does migration take place between different linguistic and socio-cultural environments?
2. how does migration theory affect language acquisition from cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives?
3. what are the main mechanisms of the migration process?

To address these questions, this study will use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively explore the application and impact of migration theory in SLA, employing literature analysis, experimental research and case studies.

By deeply analyzing the dynamic interaction of migration theory and its application in SLA, this study aims to provide theoretical guidance and strategic suggestions for language teaching practice. This not only helps to understand the complexity of the migration phenomenon but also supports teachers in developing more effective teaching strategies.

This section outlines the historical development of migration theory from early behaviorist approaches to contemporary cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives. The importance of transfer theory in SLA contexts is also emphasized, highlighting its role in shaping learners' language development and teaching practices. Situating the study within this broad theoretical framework lays the foundation for further exploration of the phenomenon of transfer and its impact on language learning.

## **2 Analysis and discussion**

The study of transfer theory in the context of second language acquisition (SLA) has been an important topic of interest and research for many years. Transfer theory, i.e., how learners apply acquired knowledge and skills to new learning situations, has been recognized as one of the central mechanisms in the language acquisition process. Researchers have explored transfer theory from various perspectives, including behaviorist, cognitive, and socio-cultural theories, aiming at a comprehensive understanding of its multiple effects on language learning and teaching. Under the behaviorist perspective, the transfer is regarded as a simple stimulus-response mechanism, focusing mainly on how learners transfer their knowledge from their first language (L1) to their second language (L2) learning. With the development of cognitive science, the study of transfer theory has gradually shifted to an in-depth exploration of cognitive processes. Cognitive theory emphasizes that transfer is not just a simple application of knowledge and skills but a complex process involving the learner's cognitive structure and information processing style. Within the framework of socio-cultural theory, transfer is viewed as a phenomenon in social interaction and cultural context. Learners' language acquisition is not only affected by individual cognitive processes but also deeply influenced by the social environment and cultural context in which they live. Socio-cultural theories emphasize that learners' interactions and experiences in different linguistic and cultural environments are important in their language transfer process.

In recent years, interdisciplinary research methods have gradually become the mainstream of migration theory research. The combination of cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics and educational research has made the study of transfer theory more comprehensive and in-depth. Through a multidisciplinary perspective, researchers can better reveal the application and effects of transfer theory in different contexts and provide more scientific and practical guidance for language teaching.

## **2.1 Historical development of transfer theory in second language acquisition**

The origins of transfer theory can be traced back to the behaviorist perspective, with early research focusing on applying acquired skills and knowledge to new learning situations. Behaviorists view learning as a habit formed through repeated practice and reinforcement and transfer as the process of applying these habits from one context to another. In this process, learners adapt their behavior to the new learning task based on their experience and knowledge. This unidirectional process of transfer occupies an important place in behaviorist theory.

With the development of cognitive psychology, the transfer theory entered a new phase. Krashen's monitoring theory, first introduced in his seminal study of second language acquisition, proposed two separate systems for conscious language learning and subconscious language acquisition [1]. The theory emphasizes meaningful interaction in language learning and suggests that learners acquire language naturally through communication and interaction. At the same time, the monitoring theory also points out that the role of error correction in language acquisition is limited because too much correction may interrupt the learners' thought process and affect their natural language acquisition process. On this basis, Jacobovitz further suggested the need to systematically analyze transfer effects in SLA. He argues that surface features between languages may affect the transfer effect more than deep structural relationships [2]. This view emphasizes the importance of the similarity of surface features of language (e.g., lexical and syntactic structures) in the migration process rather than just the deep semantic and syntactic relations of language. This perspective laid the foundation for later studies that led researchers to focus on the role of language form and structure in the migration process.

In addition, early studies found that transfer was not limited to the application of language knowledge but also involved the transfer of learning strategies. For example, learning strategies learners use in the first language, such as memorization techniques and reasoning methods, can be transferred to learning the second language, thus improving learning efficiency. These findings give the transfer theory more extensive application and explanatory power in second language acquisition research.

By sorting out the historical development of transfer theory, the research finds that transfer theory has evolved from the one-way transfer of behaviourism to the two-systems theory in cognitive psychology, and then to the focus on the surface features of the language, reflecting its continuous evolution and enrichment process. This process not only deepens our understanding of the phenomenon of language transfer but also provides new perspectives and methods for future research.

## **2.2 Cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives on migration**

With the development of cognitive theories, researchers' understanding of migration has changed significantly. The rise of cognitive psychology has led to the fact that migration is no longer seen as just a simple transfer of knowledge and skills but as a complex cognitive process. This process involves learners applying acquired knowledge to new learning situations through their cognitive structures and information-processing styles.

Gass delves into the role of the mother tongue in SLA, recognizing its influence while discussing its appropriate role in teaching and learning [3]. He points out that the mother tongue plays an important role in second language acquisition by influencing learners' language input, output and comprehension. However, the influence of the mother tongue is not static. It varies as learners' language proficiency improves and the learning context changes. Garth's study emphasizes the role of proper use of the mother tongue in teaching while avoiding its negative impact on second language learning. Maysel views migration as a second language strategy and focuses on detecting migration in SLA and bridging the gap between observed mediated language products and underlying processes [4]. He proposes that learners utilize their existing linguistic knowledge and strategies to solve new linguistic tasks during second language acquisition. This strategic transfer helps learners learn the second language more effectively and bridges the gap between mediated language products and underlying language competence. Messer's study reveals the importance of migration in second

language learning strategies and provides a new perspective to understand the dynamic process of migration.

Socio-cultural theory also plays an important role in migration studies, emphasizing social interaction and cultural context's influence on language acquisition. According to socio-cultural theory, language learning is not only an individual's cognitive process. Still, it is also strongly influenced by the social and cultural environment in which he or she lives. In this theoretical framework, results are transferred from learners' social interactions in different linguistic and cultural environments. Learners gradually acquire new linguistic knowledge and skills through interaction with the people around them. For example, learners' language interactions at home, school and community significantly impact their second language acquisition. These interactions not only provide opportunities for language input and output but also help learners understand and adapt to different cultural contexts. The sociocultural theory emphasizes the diversity and complexity of learning environments, pointing out that the transfer process involves not only the transfer of linguistic forms and structures but also the transfer of cultural practices and communicative strategies.

The introduction of cognitive and sociocultural theories has led researchers to a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of migration. These theories reveal the mechanisms of cognitive and social interactions in the transfer process and emphasize the influence of transfer strategies and cultural contexts on language acquisition in different contexts. These new perspectives provide a rich theoretical foundation and practical guidance for studying migration theory.

### **2.3 Interdisciplinary research on migration**

Interdisciplinary research has further enriched the understanding of migration theory. By combining cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, and educational research, researchers can more comprehensively reveal the complexity of the migration process and its performance in different learning situations. These interdisciplinary studies not only expand the scope of the application of migration theory but also provide more scientific guidance for educational practice.

Research in cognitive psychology shows that migration is not just a simple transfer of knowledge but an activity involving complex cognitive processes. The complexity of transfer and its impact on second or third-language learning was emphasized in a 2011 study by Daftarifard and Shirkhani [5]. Their study pointed out that learners utilize their existing linguistic knowledge and cognitive strategies when learning a new language. This transfer process is influenced by a combination of learners' cognitive abilities, similarities in linguistic structures, and the learning environment. Sociolinguistic research, on the other hand, focuses on the social interaction and cultural factors in language transfer. By studying the language use of different social groups, researchers can reveal the social dynamics of the language transfer process. Murphy studied the role of transfer in learning a third language, emphasizing the importance of considering second-language transfer for third-language learning [6]. His research shows that learners are influenced not only by their first language but also by their second language when learning a third language. This multiple migration phenomenon reveals the complex interaction in language learning and emphasizes the importance of cross-linguistic migration. Educational research provides a practical basis for the application of transfer theory. By analyzing the effects of different teaching methods, researchers can determine which teaching strategies effectively promote language transfer. Karim and Nassaji explored the effects of native language transfer on second language writing, reviewing the major studies and changing perspectives in the field [7]. Their study found that instructional approaches based on transfer theory, such as utilizing knowledge of the native language to aid in the comprehension and production of second-language texts, can significantly improve learners' second-language writing skills.

These studies emphasize the practical implications of the multidisciplinary integration of transfer theory for language teaching and learning. By combining the results of cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics and educational research, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple influences on the migration process, thus providing more scientific and effective strategies for language teaching and learning. For example, when designing language courses,

teachers can consider utilising learners' existing linguistic knowledge and cognitive strategies, combined with appropriate social interaction activities, to help learners better master the new language.

Overall, interdisciplinary studies have provided new perspectives and methods for developing transfer theory. These studies not only deepen the understanding of the migration process but also provide valuable guidance for educational practice, helping teachers and learners better cope with language learning challenges. By continuously integrating research results from different disciplines, transfer theory will play an even more important role in language education in the future.

## **2.4 Impact of Migration theory on language teaching practices**

Migration theory has had a profound impact on the development of teaching strategies. Educators can design more effective teaching methods to help learners better acquire second language skills by understanding the cognitive and social factors involved in the migration process.

In his study, James discusses transfer teaching in second language learning and advocates the integration of positive transfer in language teaching methods [8]. He emphasizes that teachers can design more targeted teaching activities by taking advantage of learners' prior language knowledge and experience. For example, when teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures, teachers can help learners understand and master the new knowledge faster by drawing analogies to familiar native language structures. The integration of positive transfer not only improves teaching efficiency but also enhances learners' self-confidence and motivation to learn. Karim and Nassaji explored the impact of native language transfer on second language writing, reviewing the major studies and changing perspectives in the field [7]. They found that learners often rely on the grammatical and lexical structures of their native language in second-language writing. This transfer can sometimes lead to language errors, but it can also be used as a teaching resource to guide learners in correctly using second language structures through targeted teaching activities. For example, teachers can design comparison exercises to make learners aware of the differences between their mother tongue and second language, thus reducing the errors caused by negative transfer. Teaching suggestions and strategies based on transfer theory can help improve teaching effectiveness and provide language learners with more effective learning paths. The following are some specific teaching suggestions:

1) Utilize learners' background knowledge: Teachers can design teaching activities that better meet the needs of learners by understanding their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This approach can help learners to better apply their prior knowledge to new language learning [9].

2) Designing contrastive exercises: By comparing the linguistic structures of the mother tongue and the second language, learners are helped to recognize and understand the differences between the two, thus reducing errors in language transfer [10].

3) Promote interactive learning: Social interaction plays an important role in language transfer. Teachers can enhance learners' language application and social skills through interactive activities such as group discussions and role plays.

4) Provide timely feedback: Timely feedback can help learners realize and correct mistakes through repeated practice. Teachers should pay attention to learners' language output and provide constructive feedback.

5) Integrate multimedia resources: Utilizing multimedia resources, such as video, audio and online exercises, enriches the teaching content and enhances learners' interest and participation.

In summary, these studies highlight the multifaceted nature of transfer theory in SLA, emphasizing its complex dynamics and impact on language learning and teaching. By synthesizing key insights from classic works and recent studies, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving perspectives of transfer theory and its relevance in SLA research and teaching. Future research should continue to explore the application of transfer theory in different language environments and learning contexts to provide more scientific and practical guidance for language teaching and learning.

### 3 Conclusion

Exploring transfer theory in SLA presents a rich tapestry of perspectives and insights, revealing its multifaceted nature and significant implications for language learning and teaching. Throughout the literature, various scholars have illuminated different facets of transfer theory, contributing to a deeper understanding of its complexities and dynamics.

Early behaviorist interpretations of transfer theory saw it as a one-way process in which learners transferred skills or information from their first language (L1) to the language they were learning (L2). Nonetheless, a paradigm shift has occurred with the rise of cognitive and sociocultural theories, which recognize language transfer's reciprocal importance and bidirectionality. This recognition highlights the role of situational factors and learner agency in shaping transfer outcomes, underscoring the dynamic interplay between transfer theory and SLA contexts.

Moreover, recent studies have emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of transfer theory, integrating insights from cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, and educational research. By studying how learners transfer between different languages and sociocultural environments, researchers aim to elucidate the mechanisms of language acquisition and provide practical guidance for teaching practices. This holistic approach offers valuable insights into the complexities of transfer phenomena, informing pedagogical strategies tailored to learners' needs and contexts.

In conclusion, scholars' diverse perspectives underscore the intricate nature of transfer in SLA and emphasizes the importance of considering its multifaceted effects on language learning. By synthesizing key insights from seminal works and recent studies, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of transfer theory's evolving perspectives and relevance to SLA research and pedagogy. Further research into transfer phenomena promises to enrich our understanding of language acquisition processes and enhance language teaching practices.

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