



## Interference between Filipino and English prepositions: A comparative analysis of male and female Filipino bilingual learners in the World Englishes paradigm in the Philippine setting

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**Abstract:** Following Ellis' (1997) interference framework and Selinker's (1972) interlanguage hypothesis in light of Kachru's (1985) concentric circle, the present study aimed at establishing the common errors in the preposition in written narratives, identify the difference in the rate of preponderance of preposition errors of language learners who acquired English as either their first or second language, and determine the compensation strategies used in English to Filipino and vice versa. This paper employed an explorative-descriptive design with 40 secondary students from Reedley International School (10 males and 10 females) and Sta. Isabel College (10 males and 10 females). In carrying out the study, two wordless picture story sequences as used by Shapiro and Hudson (1991) was adopted. Findings show that participants from Sta. Isabel College participants recorded more incorrect English prepositions which are predominantly incurred by females as compared with the Reedley International's list which appears to be consistent with the incorrect Filipino prepositions. As regards the preponderance of preposition errors, the data revealed a 3.2 mean across the twenty narratives. The same mean shows for the occurrences of incorrect preposition use. In terms of the compensations strategies, the participants used overgeneralization, elaboration, simplification, and contextualization. The study concluded that the evidence of interference among Filipino bilinguals was not as high as expected due to the minimal use of compensation strategies and the mistakes recorded were purely ungrammatical and not a transfer issue within the syntactic surface.

**Key Words:** Interference, Interlanguage Hypothesis, World Englishes, Concentric Circle

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Interference, as defined by Dulay et al (1982 in Bhela, 1999) is the transfer of rules carried by the first language to the target language. Lekova (2010) views Interference as a deviation from the conventions of a specific language, the change of linguistic structures and structural elements. This concept of deviating from the established conventions of the English language has been slowly gaining keen interest in the field of psycholinguistic research especially with the increased acceptance of the concept of World

Englishes (Kachru & Smith, 1008 in Groves, 2010, p. 111) which, as suggested by Kachru (1985a) and Schneider (2003 in Groves, 2010, p. 111) has been a result of the multicultural growth and assimilation of the English language in various multilingual settings all over the world.

Al-Khresheh (2011) on the other hand, looked at the coordinating conjunction "and" of Jordanian EFL learners in written communication. It specifically analyzed the interference of Arabic syntactic structures into English. The data revealed subject differences caused the interference



between Arabic and English coordinating conjunction. Jordanian learners were found to rely on their mother tongue in learning English, thus making their L1 habits get in the way of acquisition. The study then concluded that Jordanians mostly employ their L1 knowledge in resolving their learning and communication problems and acquiring the target language, in this case, English.

Prepositions in the English language are used to denote position in sentences. Spatial concepts in writing require a very detailed and specific description due to the precise nature of directions and location. "Perspective taken in spatial descriptions varies within complex descriptions as well as across situations and environments" (Tversky, 1996; Taylor & Tversky, 1996 in Grabowski & Miller, 2000, p. 525) thus perhaps resulting to a wide variety of prepositions in the English syntactic repertoire. Cuypere's (2013, p. 122) semantic analysis on prepositions revealed that there are certain difficulties that need to be addressed when studying English preposition, specifically, prepositions of movement (e.g. to, towards, through, etc.). The study argued that certain prepositions of movement present complications with spatial concepts for non-native learners. Since these concepts may vary across different cultures there is high probability for discrepancies in the syntactic use of prepositions by ESL/EFL learners.

"Errors which deal with prepositions are the most common mistakes done by non-native speakers especially in their writing" (Tetreault and Chodorow, 2008 in Arjan, Abdullah & Roslim, 2013, p.167), confusion in preposition use may arise even between two commonly used preposition in sentence construction. Arjan, Abdullah & Roslim (2013) conducted a corpus-based study on the use of prepositions *on* and *in* across three different academic levels. Using the Malaysian Corpus of Students Argumentative Writing (MCSAW) frequency and types of errors in the narrative outputs were identified through a concordance and semantically analyzed. The results of their study determined that students found confusion in the correct usage of the prepositions *in* and *on*, particularly in matching them with the appropriate article. They also found that there was no concrete progress in the mastery and developmental pattern of prepositions within the two earlier grade levels (Form 4 and 5). This study further validates the results of other studies that claim that preposition

usage and mastery is problematic for non-native English speakers.

Using the print material sub-corpus of the Philippine component of the International Corpus of English (Bautista, Lising & Dayag 1999), Bautista (2000a, summarized in 2000b) investigated the use of prepositions among English learners of different L1 backgrounds. She found numerous instances of deviations in subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, tenses, mass and count nouns, pronoun-antecedent agreement, word order, and comparative constructions. She showed the sentences with deviations to a native speaker of English to confirm whether these seemed to be a divergence from Standard American English (SAE). For instance, Filipino speakers would use *result to* and *based from* instead of *result in* and *based on*. She argued that these instances were due to the absence of distinctive items to represent the prepositions *on*, *in*, *at*, *toward* in the Filipino syntactic repertoire which has only one generic preposition known as "*sa*" which is equivalent to various English prepositions. However, prepositions such as *result to* and *based from* and the variable use of *at*, *on*, *in* might be acceptable in educated Philippine English (PE) because of semantic considerations. According to Bautista (2001), the Filipinisms *result to* and *based from* can be explained as the association of destination with "to" and of source with "from" thus prepositional usage here may not be a serious breach of grammar. But English teachers in the Philippines should still correct the prepositions and use the occasion to explain idiomatic usage and why PE usage is judged deviant in those instances.

This study aims to answer the following research questions;

- (1)What are the common errors in the preposition use of male/female Filipino secondary learners in their written narratives?
- (2)What is the difference in the rate of preponderance of preposition errors of male/female Filipino secondary learners who acquired English as their first language and those who acquired English as their second language?
- (3)How do male/female secondary learners compensate for the lack of equivalent Filipino prepositions in the process of translating their narratives written in English?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 *Participants*



The study has a sample population of forty (40) students composed of twenty (20) male and female Filipino secondary students who have an age range of 14 to 18 years old and a mean age of 15.58 years old ( $M=15.58$ ). They were chosen through a non-random, convenience sampling method. The first group consists of Grade 11 (fourth year high school) students from Reedley International School, who have been brought up with English as their first language and Filipino as their second language. On the other hand, students from Santa Isabel College employ English as their second language and mostly come from the middle to the upper socioeconomic class of society.

### 2.2 Instrument

The narrative writing task used for the study is an adapted version of the task used by Bhela (1999) in his study on native language interference in second language learning. A pilot test was initially done with two participants each from the two chosen educational institutions to determine if there will be a possible comparison of errors in the preposition use of students as found in their written narratives outputs. Proceeding from the results of the pilot study, the actual writing task was administered to the intended number of participants for the study. The study adapted two wordless picture story sequences as used by Shapiro and Hudson (1991) in their study on cohesion and coherence in children's narratives.

### 2.3 Method of Analysis

The study used a comparative analysis in determining interference errors in the preposition use of Filipino secondary students who employ English as either their first or second language. The first research question is addressed in the study through the analysis of correct and incorrect preposition use in the participants' written narrative outputs. This was done to determine the common prepositional errors committed by the participants of the study. Meanwhile, the second research question is addressed through the tabulation of correct and incorrect prepositions using frequency count which were then transmuted into percentages. Computation of the mean was subsequently done. Results are then segregated according to gender and separated according to correct or incorrect preposition use in the narratives written in the participants L1 and L2. Upon extraction of the necessary quantitative data, a comparative analysis of prepositional errors

committed by the participants in their narrative outputs commenced. Finally, research question three is discussed through an analysis of the compensation strategies used by the participants to determine how the participants resolved issues in the translation of prepositions from English to Filipino in their narratives.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Common preposition errors

Table 1 shows the incorrect prepositions committed by Sta. Isabel and Reedley students. As can be seen, nine kinds of incorrect prepositional words were used within the narratives out of a total of twenty narratives from the Sta. Isabel participants. Of the nine incorrectly used prepositions, most of the errors were committed by female participants. On the other hand, male participants incorrectly used only three words from the total list of prepositions used, manifesting lower incorrect prepositional use as opposed to the females. The prepositional words *in* and *into* had the highest frequency of errors, and were mostly found in the narratives of female participants. Narratives from the Reedley participants had only two kinds of English prepositions that were incorrectly used, *in* and *to* which were both found in the male participant's narratives.

Table 1.  
Sta. Isabel and Reedley: Incorrect use of English prepositions

	<i>Sta. Isabel College</i>		<i>Reedley International School</i>	
	Total number of prepositions used by male and female student	% of errors committed by students	Total number of prepositions used by male and female student	% of errors committed by students
onto	1	100		
in	13	69.2	3	10
on	3	100		
by	1	100		
into	5	60	40	
of	3	100		
over	1	100		
out	1	100		



to	1	100	1	100
	Total number of prepositions used:		Total number of prepositions used:	
	29		4	

The data indicates that students who learned English as their second language committed a higher number of errors in English preposition use compared to students who learned English as their first language. The former group also encountered more difficulties in determining the proper usage of the different English prepositional words, committing a total of nine (9) kinds of prepositional errors compared to the latter group, which only had two (2) kinds of prepositional errors.

The results show consistency with Bhela 's (1999) findings that learners commit significant number of errors in their target language. This is perhaps due to the absence of the wide prepositional variety in their L1 in contrast to the English language. In the case of the Reedley participants who employ English as their L1, they show minimal errors in preposition use. Although English is their native, it seems that errors are still likely to occur. As Bhela (1999) noted, native speakers continue to show relative error in preposition despite having achieved a higher level of mastery than ESL learners. From the two participants, *in* and *to* are recorded to be the most common errors in the English preposition which is consistent with a study done by Arjan, Abdullah & Roslim (2013).

In the Santa Isabel College group, the males have shown the least number of occurrence of errors while the females somewhat double the result which is consistent with the findings from Reedley where males show minimal errors while the females recorded more. It can be inferred that males, regardless of their L1 and L2, reveal a consistency of result in English preposition use, making them more linguistically competent in the use of this syntactic feature than the females, at least in the Philippine setting.

### 3.1.1 Errors in Filipino preposition use

Table 3 indicates the two prepositions in Filipino, which are 'ng' and 'sa' that were incorrectly used in the narratives of the

participants. Participants from Sta. Isabel showcased higher rates of errors when using Filipino prepositions compared to participants from Reedley. Sta. Isabel students committed a total of twenty incorrect Filipino prepositions in contrast with Reedley students' lower rate of twelve errors. Table 3.

Sta. Isabel and Reedley: Incorrect use of Filipino prepositions

	<i>Sta. Isabel College</i>			<i>Reedley International School</i>		
	Total number of prepositions used by	% of errors committed by		Total number of prepositions used by	% of errors committed by	
Preposition	male student	female student	males	male student	female student	males
ng	8	37.5	62.5	8	25	75
sa	12	58.3	41.7	4	75	25
	Total number of prepositions used:			Total number of prepositions used:		
	20			12		

The data reveal that students who learned English as their first language experienced fewer interference errors when accessing words in their second language. Since there are fewer prepositional devices in the Filipino language, learners may have had an easier thought process when retrieving words during their writing task. It may be easier to make connections using the English language first towards the Filipino language than the other way around due to the less complicated structure of the Filipino prepositional devices. It is interesting to note the consistency of errors committed by the Sta. Isabel group who employ Filipino as their L1 yet recorded more errors than that of the Reedley group. This then partly debunks the idea that once a learner is a native of the language fewer errors are expected. The result of the Filipino prepositions is in contrast with the English preposition findings.

### 3.2 Rate of preponderance of preposition errors





### 3.2.1 Preposition errors in English

Table 5 and 6 show the mean occurrence of the correct and incorrect preposition use of English prepositions by students from Sta. Isabel College and Reedley International School. Statistical treatment of the data posted a mean of 3.2 which indicates that across twenty narratives there was only an average of 3.2 occurrences of incorrect preposition use. Santa Isabel College female respondents posted an average occurrence of 2.4 incorrect prepositions while a mean of about 0.78 was found for the male students.

Results of the analysis for Reedley International School students, whose L1 is English as reflected in Table 6, indicate that across twenty narratives the students only posed an average of 2 errors in preposition use. Breakdown of the data according to gender shows that out of ten narratives there was an occurrence of a mean of 1.5 errors in English preposition use by the female students while male students posted an evidently low mean of 0.5. These results inform us that students from Reedley International School encountered very little difficulty in the use of prepositions in their narratives. Computation of the mean also indicates that both schools have a high mean of occurrence for the correct use of English prepositions across the twenty sample narratives with Santa Isabel College garnering a higher mean ( $M=20.16$ ) that Reedley International School ( $M=12.43$ ). However, the length of the participants narratives should be taken into consideration as most of the students from Reedley International School only wrote an average of two to eight sentences as opposed to the four to ten sentence narratives that students from Sta. Isabel College produced.

Table 5.

Sta. Isabel and Reedley's computed average for correct usage of English prepositions

School	Kinds of prepositions	Number of occurrences	M
Sta. Isabel College	24	484	20.16
Reedley International School	21	261	12.43

Table 6.

Sta. Isabel and Reedley's computed average for incorrect usage of English prepositions

School	Kinds of prepositions	Number of occurrences	M
Sta. Isabel	9	29	3.2

College			
Reedley International School	2	4	2

The data indicates that both set of students encountered very little difficulty in their use of English prepositions despite the widely established belief that prepositions are one of the most problematic syntactic elements in terms of English language acquisition (Richards, 1974; Ravina, 1982 in Castro, 2013; Arjan, Abdullah & Roslim, 2013). This perhaps may be attributed to the present linguistic environment in the Philippines which is increasingly growing more exposed to the common use of the English language in various forms of media over the years. Students now have more resources in learning and acquiring the different syntactic elements of the English language As Hardy and Friginal (2012, p. 145) suggests, "social networking through Facebook, Friendster, and Twitter; blogging, and ubiquitous English-based websites allow many Filipinos to read and write in English regularly through online technology platforms." The list of resources in the latter statement gives us an overview of the accessibility of the English language to Filipino ESL learners today. Although this amount of exposure may not be credited as an established determiner of linguistic competence it is still a concrete indicator of the opportunities for learning available to Filipino ESL learners in the current Philippine linguistic setting. A multifaceted language experience has been found to stimulate the brain of bilingual learners (Li, Legault & Litcofsky, 2014) thus it can be assumed that the varied resources for language learning and interaction may have had a positive effect in the process of second language acquisition by the Filipino bilinguals today.

The number of different prepositions correctly used by the students is also relatively high with 24 different kinds of English prepositions used by Sta. Isabel students and 21 different kinds of English prepositions used by bilinguals from Reedley International School. The wide variety of prepositions used by students from Sta. Isabel College is particularly of interest since these are learners whose L1 is Filipino. Given that there are "fewer linguistic markers in Filipino in contrast to the many kinds of prepositions that exist in English" (Lofranco, Peña, & Bedore, 2006, p. 30) with only *sa* and *ng* widely in use it would have been plausible if Filipinos who are learning English

as a second language would only utilize a few prepositions or would have committed more errors due to the possibility of interference. However, as previously stated due to the accessibility of other resources Krashen's (1998, p.80) claim that "interesting and comprehensible input will result in language acquisition" may be a reasonable explanation for the competent use of English prepositions by the participants of this study.

It was also determined that although there was no significant difference in English preposition errors between male and female students from Reedley International School there was a slight difference between the male and female students of Sta. Isabel College. Female students from Sta. Isabel College were found to have more occurrences of errors (M=2.4) than the male students who only posted a mean of 0.78. It can be said that females are possibly more prone to prepositional errors than males in narratives due to the women's inclination to competence in verbal fluency (e.g., Herlitz, Airaksinen, & Nordstrom, 1999; Kimura & Harshman, 1984; Larsson, Lovden, & Nilsson, 2003; Loonstra, Tarlow, & Sellers, 2001; Maitland, Herlitz, Nyberg, Backman, & Nilsson, 2004 as cited in Kaushanskaya, Gross & Bauc 2013, p. 82) which inadvertently may cause carelessness in terms of sentence construction. On the other hand, compared to the number of correct English preposition occurrence the females (M=7.05 across ten narratives) outperformed the male students (M=5.38 across ten narratives) which is an evident reversal of roles in terms of their performance in the use of prepositions in their narratives.

### 3.2.2 Preposition errors in Filipino

Table 7 and 8 shows the mean of correct and incorrect Filipino preposition use across twenty narratives written by students from Sta. Isabel College and Reedley International School. Mean occurrence suggests that in an analysis of twenty narratives for each institution there was only an average occurrence of 10 errors in Filipino prepositional use for students from Sta. Isabel College while an average of 5.5 error occurrences were found for Reedley International School. For the participants from Sta. Isabel College both the male and female students garnered an average mean of 5 incorrect occurrences of Filipino prepositions across ten narratives while for Reedley International School female students had a mean of 2.5 and male students had a mean of 3.5 occurrences across ten narratives for each group.

Table 7.

Sta. Isabel and Reedley's computed average for correct usage of Filipino prepositions

School	Kinds of prepositions	Number of occurrences	M
Sta. Isabel College	4	427	106.75
Reedley International School	3	215	71.67

Table 8.

Sta. Isabel and Reedley's computed average for incorrect usage of Filipino prepositions

School	Kinds of prepositions	Number of occurrences	M
Sta. Isabel College	2	20	2
Reedley International School	2	4	5

Data shows that although there was a higher average occurrence of correct usage of Filipino prepositions from students from Sta. Isabel College (M=106.75) in comparison to students from Reedley International School (M=71.67) the results are challenged by the higher rate of occurrence of Filipino prepositional errors for the Sta. Isabel students. Filipino bilinguals from Reedley International School only had a total mean occurrence of 5.5 in contrast to students from Sta. Isabel College who had almost double the number with an average of 10 errors across ten narratives. These results contradict previous studies that state that the difference in the syntactic structure of the Filipino and English languages may give rise to difficulties in the interaction of the two languages. As the data shows, the students appear to be generally competent in their use of the Filipino language. The students found it easier to choose from a very limited number of prepositions with *sa* and *ng* easily interchangeable as well without causing any grammatical discrepancies. This phenomenon has been described by Grosjean (2011, P. 15) as, "interferences due to performance errors", they are due to the inadvertent intrusion of an L1 [L1] element in the processing of L2 [L2]." This may be due to the constant exposure of the Filipino bilingual learner to the English language resulting to the loss of the learners' firm grasp on his/her native syntactic rules and thus resulting to interference. Furthermore, Grosjean (2011, P. 16) classifies this as "dynamic interference" which was

described as a "dynamic element of one language which slips into the output of the other language." This claim validates the notion that as English language continues to be absorbed to the various disciplines of the Philippine culture it also affects the learners' grasp of the native language resulting to confusion and consequently error in production even from native speakers.

### 3.3 Compensation strategies

It is found that Filipino bilinguals regardless if their L1 is English or Filipino, use different compensation strategies in order to express statements when writing from English to Filipino. These strategies include overgeneralization, elaboration, simplification, and contextualization as explicated with the given examples below.

#### 3.3.1 Overgeneralization

FS3: (1) *On* a Sunday morning Alex and her mother went *to* the market to buy the ingredients they needed *for* the party.

(2) \**Sa* isang umagang linggo si Alex kasama ang nanay niya ay napunta *sa* palengke upang bilhin ang mga kakailanganin *para sa* pupuntahan nilang pagsasalo-salo.

Sentence (1) elicits correct use of prepositions in L2 such as "*on*", "*to*", and "*for*" which are basically used in order to introduce time, location and object. When writing in L1, sentence (2) uses the general locative marker "*sa*" in order to introduce time and place. However, compound preposition like "*para sa*" is used in order to introduce an object.

It can be said that female bilingual learners whose L1 is Filipino seem to display correct use of prepositions in L2 narratives; however, they show incorrect use of preposition in their L1 that elicits *overgeneralization* on the use of "*sa*" in lieu of several prepositions (e.g. on, to, in) when writing from her L2 to L1.

MS6: (3) \*...and the mother wants to be out *in* the bakery.

(4) Gusto *ng* ina na umalis na sya at umuwi na *sa* kanilang bahay.

Sentence (3) uses preposition *in* that makes it ungrammatical. However, sentence (4) appears to be grammatical in the use of equivalent preposition 'sa' in their L1. This occurrence likely shows that both male and female Filipino bilingual learners whose L1 is Filipino use *overgeneralization*, an intralingual error (Corder, 1981; James, 1998 in Castro, 2013), as one of their compensation strategies that are apparently based on errors. It is

worth emphasizing, however, that female bilinguals tend to employ correct use of preposition in their L2 while male bilinguals display correct use of preposition in their L1. In addition, female bilinguals elicit incorrect use of preposition in L1 narrative while male bilinguals elicit error in their L2 narrative.

#### 3.3.2 Elaboration

FS4: (5) Mike *after* seeing the sign that indicated the beach, Mike got excited seeing the sign.

(6) ...kung saan pupunta sabe nito *sa* beach na excite si Mike nang marining ito.

Sentence (5) uses a phrase that is introduced by the preposition '*after*' while sentence (6) seems not to use any preposition at all. The absence of preposition in sentence (6) seems to show mismatch from L2 to L1 translation but an effort to semantically compensate for L2 to L1 translation, the preposition 'after' was used in order to elaborate an utterance that is incorrectly structured in L1 narratives.

It can be concluded that female bilingual learners whose L1 is Filipino use prepositional phrase in order to give more modification and description to their utterances via elaboration. It is found out that there was no elaboration as compensation strategy used by male bilingual learners.

#### 3.3.3 Contextualization

FS7: (7) \*The mother decided to fix and try the car's engine out of his luck and he figured out what's the problem and had fixed it.

(8) Sinubukan ni Gng. Manuel na ayusin ang sasakyan *sa* kanyang swerte, napagalaman nya kung ano ang problema ay naayos niya ito.

Sentence (7) uses a phrasal verb 'out of' but functions as a preposition that introduces an object (which is *his luck*). Although sentence (7) is obviously ungrammatical, its meaning is conveyed through the use of the phrasal verb that functions as a preposition. This use of preposition in sentence (7) is elicited in order to contextualize its meaning.

As can be seen, sentence (8) shares the same semantic features with sentence (7). It is worth mentioning, however, that sentence (8) elicits correct use of preposition both in its structure and meaning, in contrast to sentence (7) which appears ungrammatical in pursuit to contextualize the use of idiomatic expression preposition vis-à-vis its intended meaning.

It may well be concluded that female bilingual learners tend to use prepositional phrase which turned out to be an idiomatic expression to contextualize their intended meaning. In the case of Filipino bilinguals whose L1 is English contextualization is used not in their L1 but in their L2 narratives as shown in this example:

- MR4: (9) *After a while Mica smelled something fishy then her mom opened the oven then it's over cooked.*  
(10) *Higit isang minuto may inamoy si Mica na kakaiba. Kaya pala ang rason ng may amoy sunog pala ang mga cookie.*

Sentence (9) obviously did not elicit any single preposition; however, sentence (10) elicits preposition 'ng' to complete its thought. It can be said that male bilinguals whose L1 is English need not use the function of preposition in order to complete the meaning in their L1 narratives as opposed to their L2 narratives which would necessitate a preposition.

#### *Simplification*

- MR8: (11) *Once upon a time little sally felt like baking.*  
(12) *Gusto ng sally mag bake kasama ng mommy niya.*

Sentence (11) uses preposition 'upon' that is used to introduce time while sentence (12) uses preposition 'ng' in order to introduce a name. The latter was just used as strategies to simplify the text while the former has no apparent one-to-one translation. This only shows that male bilingual learners whose L1 is English may simplify their narrative when translating from L1 to L2.

#### 4 Conclusion

The phenomenon of World Englishes in the Philippine setting has paved the way for a unique linguistic environment for Filipino bilinguals thus creating room for study in a mostly uncharted territory of second language acquisition. Interference has evolved into a more dynamic process, grounded in previous studies (Grosjean, 2011). The present study examines the interference errors of English and Filipino prepositions committed by Filipino bilinguals whose first language varied: one having acquired English as their L1 while the other acquired it as their L2. The results indicate that although there is evidence of interference it is not as high as expected in lieu of the wealth of studies claiming the general interference between L1 and L1. Furthermore, interference has been found to be not only in the form of the native language affecting acquisition of

the second language but evidences of the English language providing a smoother transition for learning Filipino prepositions. The use of compensation strategies by Filipino bilinguals has been found to be evident but also minimal allowing an assumption that since they have a better understanding of the language transfer of syntactic features is minimal. More often than not mistakes committed are purely ungrammatical but not an evidence of the transfer of the syntactic features of their L1 to their L2.

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