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A Corpus-Based Analysis of Errors in Spanish EFL Writings

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Abstract

The present article discusses a study on common errors of Spanish EFL students. One of the most outstanding issues in teaching English as a second language in Spain is that, it has its peculiarities and those should be taken into account if our aim is to establish realistic teaching methodologies. Contrastive analysis, error analysis, interference and interlanguage theory are presented for a better understanding of the causes of common errors as they may certainly give some valuable insights into the matter. The main objective of the study is to analyze a learner corpus of written compositions in order to identify the most common errors. Based on the findings, suggestions to EFL teaching in a Spanish setting are made and conclusions are drawn.

Key words:

Spanish EFL students, interference, interlanguage, and error analysis.

Resumen

El presente artículo muestra un estudio sobre errores comunes que cometen los españoles que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera. Enseñar inglés en España tiene sus peculiaridades y éstas deberían de ser consideradas si nuestro objetivo es establecer métodos de enseñanza realistas. Los conceptos de análisis contrastivo, análisis de errores, interferencia e interlengua son presentados para un mejor entendimiento de las causas de errores. El objetivo principal del estudio que aquí se presenta es el análisis de un recopilatorio de writings con el fin de identificar los errores más frecuentes. En vista de los resultados obtenidos, se sugieren medidas de actuación dentro de un contexto español donde se imparte el inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave:

Estudiante de inglés como lengua extranjera, interferencia, interlengua, análisis de errores.

Introduction

Nowadays, learning English has become a strong requirement for being successful in the modern world. However, for many years, English language has been taught in a monotonous and process-oriented way in many Spanish schools, without giving the students the opportunity for noticing the gap. Tedious methodologies, techniques and activities have been greatly used by English teachers in our country, through which EFL students could not see the connection but just the repetition of grammatical structures. For these reasons, EFL learners still demonstrate difficulty in organizing their knowledge into coherent and common sense structures.

As a result, students tend to rely on their native language grammar to produce a sentence, consequently making an error. This is understandable since the students have deeply implanted their language and its system of rules as a part of a habit. This is what is called interference. According to Solano et al. (2014) “the interference of the mother tongue is a factor that hinders the development of the writing skill in the foreign language, which can produce a negative effect on language learning” (p. 41).

Since error analysis and foreign language teaching are closely related, we should bear in mind that, as English teachers, it is essential to know the context where we teach in order to analyse the possible repercussions interference and interlanguage might have on our students. The same way, we should know the four major approaches to the study of errors, which will be further explained. Those are: contrastive analysis, error analysis, interference and interlanguage.

This study aims to investigate the influence of the Spanish language on L2 writings gathered from students attending several private and public schools and language academies in Torrent, Valencia, where English is taught as a foreign language.

Considering the significance of this problem for EFL learners, this study seeks (1) to identify the most common L1 interference errors committed by Spanish speakers in written compositions; (2) to examine the most influential error theories, which are contrastive and error analysis, interference and interlanguage theory; and (3) to identify patterns of errors that could help teachers target the problem areas and find ways to improve their students' writing productions.

Theoretical Approach

During many years there have been many studies on the process of first language acquisition and second language learning and many linguists have concluded that the process of acquiring a second language works in a similar way (Erdoğan, 2005). What a L2 learner does in operating on the target language does not differ from that of a child does acquiring his first language.

The fact that children learning their native language make plenty of errors is a natural part of the language acquisition process. For this reason, errors have long been of interest for second and foreign language researchers.

Following Selinker, Rustipa argues "errors are indispensable to learners since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses to learn" (2011, p. 17). At this stage, we might then consider errors as a proof that the student is learning and as the route that a student must go through to achieve competence in any language.

During many years, important approaches carried out by linguists have tried to offer an explanation to the learners' errors. These theories are contrastive analysis, error analysis, interference and interlanguage.

Contrastive Analysis

Khansir defines Contrastive Linguistics as "a sub-discipline of Linguistics concerned with the comparison of two or more languages or subsystems of language in order to determine both differences and similarities between them" (2012, p.1027). He maintained that this discipline was a necessary component of a second language learning model which reliably predicted that the speaker of L1 would be able to produce grammatically deviant second language sentences, whose structural descriptions would resemble the first language sentences (2012). Therefore, a clarification of the differences between two grammars would be necessary for the learners so as not to confuse and mangle structures.

Until the end of the sixties, the contrastive theory seemed to be the solution to the errors' problem. By this time, errors were thought to be the result of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the L1, considered a result of interference. However, errors that could not be explained in this way were undervalued. As a result, error analysis theory appeared in order to demonstrate that learner errors were not only because of the learner's native language but, there were some universal strategies which considered language transfer as the basic process of second language learning (Erdoğan, 2005).

Nowadays, Error Analysis is one of the major topics in the field of second language acquisition research since it allows for prediction of the difficulties involved in the L2 learning process.

Error Analysis

Foreign language teachers can benefit from the findings of Error Analysis in many ways. Firstly, errors tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn (Corder, 1981). Following the student's progress, the teacher is able to carry on his studies in accordance with what the learner needs to know and what part of the teaching strategy has to change or reconstruct. In other words, errors are a means of feedback for the teacher reflecting how effective he is in his teaching style and what changes he has to make to get higher performance from his students (Erdoğan, 2015). Additionally, errors are significant data for syllabus designers as they show what items are important to be included or which items need to be changed.

Errors might also help the teacher how to deal with the error itself. In other words, the source of the error is an important clue for the teacher to decide on the sort of treatment. The technique of correcting the error by just presenting the data repeatedly and going through the same set of drills and exercises to produce the grammar correctly is not enough. The process requires that the teacher is aware of the source of the error so that he can provide appropriate remedy, which will resolve the learner's problems and allow him to discover relevant rules.

Bose (cited in Khansir, 2012) argues that one of the reasons for learner errors is the *interference* of the learner's mother tongue, which is described as the negative and positive transfer between the mother tongue and the target language.

Interference

Interference happens when second language learners tend to rely on their native language (L1) structures to produce a response when writing or speaking in the target language (L2) (Bhela, 1999). Because of that, interference errors are considered errors in the learner's use of the target language that can be traced back in their mother tongue (Lott, 1983).

Interference of habits from L1 explains many of the difficulties a second language learner has to face in the phonology, vocabulary and grammar of L2. However, not only is the native language the main factor of error. Bhela argues that the circumstances of learning a second language are like those of a mother tongue (1999). Sometimes there are interferences and responses from one language system in the other language. Therefore, many linguists and also psychologists have analyzed how children acquire a language in order to compare this process with second language acquisition.

Now, interference might be highly expected if the level of the learner is very basic since he will tend to use more elements from his native language (L1) when using the L2 productive skills. Those instances of language transfer or interference are the most apparent examples of fossilization items in second language acquisition.

Nonetheless not all errors in second language are due to interference. There is however a strategy of learning by means of which the learner tests out his/her hypothesis about the structure of the language. Those strategies are distinctive characteristics of the interlanguage.

Interlanguage

The interlanguage theory was developed in the 1970s to emphasize the dynamic qualities of language change that make language a unique system. According to Stern (1983), "the concept of interlanguage was suggested by Selinker (1972) in order to draw attention to the possibility that the learner's language can be regarded as a distinct variety or system with its own particular characteristics and rules" (p. 125). The concept of interlanguage was based on the theory that learners build up a system for themselves while learning a second language.

According to Lennon (2008) the term Interlanguage refers to a language intermediate between the native and the target language and it is characterized for being systematic, dynamic and always changing. Selinker knew that although Interlanguage is systematic, it could also be variable. It could happen that in any time a learner may show forms of interlanguage that have not disappeared completely. Furthermore, learners may in many situations of stress, fatigue, anxiety and fear, revert into earlier stages of their interlanguage (Lennon, 2008).

Because of its characteristics, Hulya argues that interlanguage theory plays a crucial role in providing an explanation for how both children and adults acquire a second language, and for arriving at findings on how L2 learners move from their mother tongue towards the target language (2009).

Within the interlanguage theory, the concepts of overgeneralization and fossilization need to be pointed out. Overgeneralization is the use of previously available strategies in new situations (Richards, 2015). But, when the learner uses the generalization, he is guided not by the grammar of his mother tongue but by what he already knows of English and his own intuitions. An example of overgeneralization would be the omission of the final "-s" in the third person singular. Similar processes would happen with the use of prepositions in English. The learner, encountering a particular preposition with one type of verb might think he can use the same preposition with similar verbs. E.g.: *He said to me* might give *He asked to me*.

Fossilization refers to a state where interlanguage cannot develop any more despite added instruction or input and it is considered the most important distinguishing factor related to L2 acquisition. Hulya contends that there are possible causes for fossilization to occur. One could be the age (learner's brains lose plasticity at a critical age, therefore, certain linguistic features cannot be mastered), another could be a lack of desire to articulate (learners make no effort to adopt target language norms), another would be the communicative pressure (the learner is pressured to communicate ideas above his/her linguistic competence), and negative feedback on the learner's use of L2 (2009).

Research Data

Subjects

In order to carry out this research project, a number of 79 written compositions were gathered.

The students who participated in this research were carefully selected: the largest group was formed by 53 High School senior students; the second group was formed by a heterogeneous body of 16 students whose ages ranged from 13 to 40 years old; and the third group consisted of 10 students in secondary education. All groups were learning English as a foreign language in schools located in Valencia (Spain).

Procedure

Each student was asked to write a composition, following a number of instructions (e.g.: describing, suggesting, inviting or apologizing). Thereafter, their compositions would be analysed to determine the frequency of errors.

The topics were diverse: from a description of their town to their favourite place or to more concrete issues such as writing a letter of complaint or an informal letter to a friend.

List of Most Common Errors/Mistakes

From all the grammatical errors found in the written compositions, below I introduce the ones that had a persistent rerun:

- 1) Misuse of pronouns, mainly improper formation of possessive pronouns (e.g. *his* for *she*)
- 2) No auxiliary with negative and interrogative sentences
- 3) Use of present for past
- 4) Use of present for present perfect
- 5) Improper formation of present perfect and past perfect when have is the main verb
- 6) Contractions not fully developed (e.g. *don* for *don't*)
- 7) Improper present participle (e.g. *I go for to buy* instead of *I go to buy*)
- 8) Improper use of *for*
- 9) Improper subject/verb concord number, mainly when dealing with the present simple third person singular
- 10) Subject Omission vs. Double subject
- 11) Omitted coordinate conjunction
- 12) Omitted preposition (verbs with preposition, e.g.: *depends of* instead of *depends on*)
- 13) Improper prepositions mainly in, on and at
- 14) To before direct object
- 15) *Since* for *for*
- 16) Article added vs. Article omitted
- 17) Improper article
- 18) Plurals confusion. Countable and Uncountable Nouns

- 19) Misuse of Future tenses. Improper use of future modals (e.g. *will can to*)
- 20) Literal translation (e.g. *I am agree* / *I have* fourteen years old)
- 21) Confusion with *before* and *after*

Each of the 23 categories shows the most repetitive errors that the Spanish students who collaborated in this research made in their English compositions. In the graphic below I present the most outstanding errors from the ones presented above:

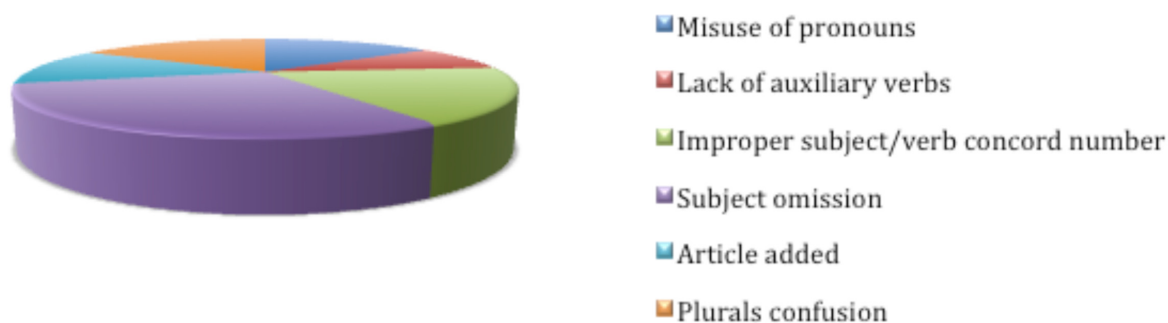


Figure 1: Frequency of the most outstanding errors in EFL written compositions

Possible solutions to learners' errors

It can be assumed that language teaching cannot stand away from the findings of error analysis. Students' errors have always been of interest and significance to teachers, syllabus designers and text developers because they have helped them to devise appropriate materials and effective teaching techniques in order to deal with global errors (Erdoĝan, 2005).

Therefore, as language teachers we need to try to combine different methods if we want our students to master the grammatical rules of any language. Batstone comments that "to be noticeable, language has to be significant to the learner", and that "it is what is noticeable to them that matters, and it is their hypotheses which count" (1994, p. 40 - 41).

Accordingly, to allow learners to really notice, subsequently internalise and eventually produce new structures, teachers need to present them in a relevant and clear context, where equal attention is paid to meaning as to form. For that, I suggest the combination of two different approaches that have dealt with the acquisition of languages: the PPP approach (an ordered sequence of three stages: presentation, practice and production) and the task-based approach that lets the students interact, produce and manipulate with the language. The first one also called deductive teaching or traditional/structural approach presents the grammatical rules explicitly through instruction. One might think the students do not see the connection but just the repetition of grammatical structures. The latter is called inductive learning and corresponds to an approach where examples of sentences containing grammar rules are given. The students use the language from the start in order to acquire it and derive the rules from practice, which leads to implicit knowledge of grammar. Moreover, the emphasis is laid on learning processes rather than on the end products of the processes.

In my lessons, I tend to apply the inductive approach so the students themselves are the ones proceduralising, then noticing and finally restructuring the grammar content. But, if I see they have difficulty, I present the students the grammatical rule first and then, I make them work with the new grammatical structure through exercises for its acquisition, while applying a deductive approach.

Among all the common errors previously mentioned, the three most tedious ones I had to deal with in class were:

- 1) Misuse of pronouns
- 2) Improper subject/verb concord number
- 3) Subject omission

Now I am going to provide examples with a few activities that I carried out in my class, trying to reduce those errors. Some of the activities presented below have been taken from the book *"Gramática Inglesa para Dummies"* by Geraldine Woods. In her book, she uses a set of differentiated, sequential, problem-solving activities involving the learner in some joint selection from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures. Every time Woods introduces new grammar content, she presents basic ideas in relation to it, and later, she provides the reader with a short test. Moreover, Woods takes into account the importance both interlanguage and linguistic interference have in second language acquisition, as her book is mostly focused on errors/mistakes.

1) Misuse of pronouns

When dealing with pronouns it is very helpful asking questions with surprise. For example one student once told me that his friend has not attended class because he was in *my* house. I surprisingly asked him: In *my* house? Does he know where I live? And he corrected the possessive adjective *my* (1st person singular) for the correct form his (3rd person singular) right away.

When using pronouns *it* is important to put it into the correct form. The pronoun *it* should of course be the plural *them* because it stands for the plural noun pronouns. So a good advice to avoid this error is to pause after writing a pronoun and to look for its antecedent in order to check whether a singular or a plural form is needed.

Now, I will present you an example of misuse of pronouns that Woods uses in her book and might give you an idea on how to avoid the possessive pronoun issue:

b) What does this sentence mean?

"Alexander and his brother went to Arthur's birthday party, bus *he* didn't have a good time".

- 1) Alexander did not have a good time
- 2) Alexander's brother did not have fun
- 3) Arthur had not fun

The correct answer would be: *Who knows?* Rewrite the sentence again, unless you were talking to someone at the party and this person knows that Arthur's girlfriend left him just before he suffered a measles outbreak and the police came (2010, p.160 – 161).

Moreover, role-play activities are highly useful to avoid the pronoun issue. Some of my students who confused the object and possessive pronouns, mainly with the third person singular possessive adjectives, swiftly realized their mistake and corrected it after working with the importance of pronouns during a couple of lessons, through communicative and reinforcement activities.

2) Improper subject/verb concord number

This is one of the most common errors Spanish speakers make when they speak or write in English. Every time I show students this mistake, they complain because they claim to know it already. I tend to use this example: "Hollywood directors have tried to convince us that opposite sexes feel attraction. But the grammarians do not agree since they prefer couples that match. This is what is called grammatical concordance" (Woods, 2010, p. 167)

I also found an interesting video on YouTube about the mistake correction of the final "-s" in the third person singular. It is a very basic technique that consists of writing an "-s" on a colored piece of paper and posting it on the wall. If after some time, the student makes the same mistake, point at the sign on the wall and smile. After using the visual reminder on the wall for some lessons, replace it with a piece of paper of the same color you used previously, but this time without writing anything on it. When the student makes the same mistake again, point at the colored piece of paper and smile again. Despite its simplicity, it works.

I believe the final "-s" should be learnt as part of a fixed structure. In other words, it should be seen as a peculiarity intrinsic to the third person singular of the present simple. We should not give students the possibility of removing the final "-s" as this is part of the English grammar structure.

Finally, once they know the English grammar rule, we should reinforce its importance by implementing a communicative approach in our classroom rather than a process oriented way. It could be taken as a habit; the same way children interiorize the grammar structures of their native language.

Subject omission

This is the most common error gathered from the Writings. It is very hard to deal with this problem since native Spanish speakers always tend to omit the subject.

I would recommend making the students aware of the importance of the subject in English. We have to show them that English and Spanish are two different languages and therefore, differences in grammar are visible.

In Chapter 2 of her book, Woods reinforces the importance of a verb within a sentence. Without a verb, the sentence would be running out of meaning. However, the same importance is given to the verb as to the subject in order to convey meaning. Woods introduces the subject issue by presenting the reader with the following imaginary situation: "Imagine a truck, whose wheels are verbs and whose driver is the subject. Could you imagine a truck, travelling a high-speed along a highway, without driver?" (2010, p. 57). What she is actually doing here is exaggerating the importance of the subject by comparing it to a truck driver.

Spanish language interference makes the learner forget the subject. In order to locate where or who is the subject, learners should ask the following question (*who* or *what?*) (Woods, 2010). Once they know that in English they cannot omit the subject, we can work with different types of activities to reinforce the theory.

For example, we can use process-oriented activities, we can ask the students to create a dialogue that can be read aloud in class or we could even give the students a play they will have to represent in front of their classmates. However, both the dialogue and the play share an advantage: they contain a considerable repetition of pronouns. Every time a subject pronoun appears on the script, a high pitch or a sound should highlight the pronoun. Its simplicity makes it very useful for the internalization of the pronoun use.

For this reason, I would highly recommend using the Task-based approach to lessen the common errors and mistakes of subject omission, as it maintains a close relation with the communicative approach; and through communication it makes it easier for the student to fully comprehend the importance of the subject in the English language.

Conclusions

It would be a mistake to consider the possibility of teaching English grammar within a Spanish environment leaving apart the idea that we are dealing with native Spanish speakers. Thus, it is necessary to take into account (1) probable teaching barriers we might encounter due to the learners' native language habits and (2) methodologies we are going to use for the fully acquisition of the target language, diminishing the presence of errors. This is entirely related to the influence interference and interlanguage have in the processes of both teaching and learning EFL. Therefore, it would be useful, grammatically speaking, to show the students the main differences and similarities between both languages since contrastive analysis can give some valuable insights into the matter.

The teacher should be aware of the fact that L1 and L2 acquisition reveal some similarities and differences. Consequently, teachers should not base their teaching on just a single claim, but they should rather emphasize, understand and analyse all the factors involving L2 learning (Bhela, 1999)

It is evident the L1 Interference with L2 is one of the possible causes of most common errors. This was clearly shown in the way the learners used their L1 structures to help them form L2 texts, indicating a direct interference of L1 on L2. Moreover, interlanguage also plays an important role in second language acquisition. Thus, the L2 learner produces his/her own variety of language with its own particular characteristics and rules. This might lead to fossilization; this is when the learner will eventually reach a state where he cannot develop any more despite added instruction or input.

After this analysis, I strongly believe that understanding, relating and internalizing concepts are the keys for success when learning a second language. Therefore, the instruction should take place within the context of whole texts together with a combination of grammatical and communicative approaches by combining the PPP approach and the Task-based approach. This would seem the most effective way to significantly increase the learner's awareness of the problems Spanish speakers face when learning English, without leaving aside the role idiosyncrasies, interference and interlanguage alongside with their peculiarities and processes, play in second language acquisition.

I believe teachers should, although in rare occasions, explain the English grammar content in their native language in order to avoid a lack of understanding from the students. In other words, if we are in a Spanish setting, we could use the Spanish language to explain English grammar for our students to fully understand its meaning and usage.

At this point, it is important to highlight the fact that the total omission of errors/mistakes is impossible and also unnecessary, but just their decrease. Errors are significantly important in second language acquisition as they tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn. In some way, errors are a mean of feedback for the teacher reflecting how effective he is in his teaching style and what changes he has to make to get higher performance from his students. Moreover, errors are significant data for syllabus designers as they show what items are important to be included or which items need to be changed in the syllabus. For all these reasons, the existence of errors is a crucial subject to all language-teaching theories as they are crucial for second language learning.

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