

Language Transfer: Interlingual Errors in Spanish Students of English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at finding out the most common types of interlingual errors that Spanish students make when they are learning English as a foreign language. The subjects that have taken part in this study are a group of twenty-eight first-year High School students. The interlingual errors obtained from the corpus have been divided into four types: transfer of structure, overextension of analogy, interlingual/intralingual and substitution. Each of these types has been analysed separately taking into account the wordclass where it occurs.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims at discovering the main types of interference errors that Spanish students make when learning English as a foreign language. Secondly, attention will also be paid to the wordclasses associated with those errors.

It is divided into three parts. Section one will deal with the review of literature regarding the classification of interlingual errors. Secondly, I shall focus on the methodology followed, then I shall concentrate on the analysis and discussion of the data. Finally, the conclusion derived from the above will be offered.

2. Review of literature

Corder, as far back as 1974, established the steps to be followed in order to analyse errors. According to him, the first stage to be taken is the selection of the corpus. Then comes the identification of the errors. The third stage is concerned with their analysis. The fourth focuses on the classification while the fifth concentrates on the evaluation.

The classification of interlingual errors is obviously to be seen as Corder's fourth step. However, he offers no specific classification model for this type of deviant forms.

Dulay and Burt (1974) refer to only one type of interlingual error which they call *interference like goofs*. They are defined as those reflecting mother tongue structure and which do not appear in the L2 acquisition data of the target language. Apart from these, they also recognize *ambiguous goofs* which are composed of those deviant forms that can be classified as interference-like goofs or L1 developmental goofs.

Nevertheless, neither Corder, nor Dulay and Burt's classification are thorough enough to take into account every type of interlingual error.

In contrast, Lott (1983) proposes a more precise classification. Three types of interference errors are distinguished. The first one is defined as *overextension of analogy*; it occurs when the student misuses a vocabulary item because it is similar, either phonetically, orthographically, semantically or syntactically to another form in the L1. *Transfer of structure* deviant forms constitute the second group. These happen when the student commits a grammar error because the mother tongue rules are followed. The third type is called *Interlingual/Intralingual*.¹ This group consists of the grammar or vocabulary errors students make because a word distinction, either lexical or grammatical, which is made in the L2 does not exist in their native language.

In spite of this, none of the above scholars accounts for those errors produced by the literal use of the native language word instead of the foreign one. I have included them in a different group that I label as *Substitution* errors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subjects

The subjects who participated in this survey are twenty-eight first-year High School elementary students aged fourteen or fifteen taking English as a foreign language in the northwest of Spain.

3.2. Materials

The research material used is a written composition. Students were to write on the topic "Describe the last film you have seen." This topic was chosen because the cinema as an entertainment appeals to teenagers who are usually keen on writing about their leisure time activities. Apart from that, a descriptive theme compels students to use different verbal tenses and be precise in the use of vocabulary.

3.3. Procedure

The students were asked to write the composition during the last twenty minutes of their English class. They did not know in advance that they would have to undertake this classroom task.

4. Analysis of the data

The analysis of the twenty-eight compositions gave the following results:

Table 1: Types of interlingual errors

ERROR TYPE	OCCURRENCES
Transfer of structure	96
Overextension of analogy	28
Substitution	8
Interlingual/Intralingual	6
Total	138

Table 2: Classification of interlingual errors according to their word class.²

	TS ³	OA	S	I-I
Noun	4	10	5	0
Adjective	4	5	1	2
Adverb	2	0	0	4
Verb	21	8	2	0
Determiner	6	0	0	0
Pronoun	24	2	0	0
Prepositi	7	3	0	0
Conjuncti.	1	0	0	0
Other ⁴	27	0	0	0
Total	96	28	8	6

5. Discussion of the data

5.1. Transfer of structure

Most of the errors in the corpus are due to transfer of structure. It seems that the linguistic structures of the mother tongue are the main cause of interference when writing in the L2. Students tend to apply the rules of their first language when they do not know the rules of the second language.

It is not surprising that most of these deviant forms correspond to phrases, sentences or clauses since the student takes the structures of the mother tongue as a starting point and he/she applies those rules to the second language. The result is sentences like the following:

1. *because the parents of the two boys robbed in a Institute some papers very important.*⁵
2. *this woman visited his girlfriend for speaking of her boyfriend.*
3. *the rector wanted that Leone was in prison for ever and made hi a lot of bad things.*

In example one the word order is altered, sentence two shows the translation of the Spanish structure *para hablar de* instead of the English one *to speak about*. In example number three the verb form *wanted* should be followed by the preposition *to+infinitive*, but instead the Spanish structure *que+infinitive* is employed.

Pronouns are the second reason for transfer of structure errors. The syntactic and morphological complexity of this wordclass in Spanish makes it difficult for students to cope with its use in English.

Example four contains the omission of the subject pronoun because it is not needed in Spanish. Example five exhibits the confusion caused by the use of subject and object pronouns, while example six indicates the wrong use of reflexive pronouns. The verb *wear* does not take a pronoun in English, but the Spanish structure does require one.

4. *this is a film stupid, for my is very bad but I laugh much.*
5. *Laura, then, know whar her family loved she and came back with them.*
6. *He weared him a woman's dress.*

Deviant forms in the use of verbs make up the third main cause of transfer of structure errors. Most of the deviant forms are due to the elision of the third person -s in the present indicative. This feature is not required in Spanish, as seen in example 7. Example 8 shows an alteration in the word order of the verb, and example 9 provides evidence of the incorrect use of the verb *to have*, since in English the verb *to be* is used to refer to age.

7. *A boy dance everynight with a girl.*
8. *His son, the children from the house of his neighbors went to the room where was the machine.*
9. *the other is a white man, he has about 32 years old.*

As for prepositions, most of the errors correspond to the use of a verb + preposition structure which uses the mother tongue pattern. In the following examples, the deviant forms clearly reflect the Spanish pattern:

10. *Then the boy loved to the girl.*
11. *and the police will try take Simon "the thief."*
12. *A policeman is obsesioned for find him.*

Transfer of structure errors are less habitual concerning determiners, adjectives and nouns. This happens because those items are not as complex as verbs or pronouns in their use of the structure of the clause. In most cases the errors are due to the wrong use of number agreement.

13. *This oil is used for others children.*
14. *And like all americans film the good boy wins.*
15. *The baby waited in the city and at night his parents and the polices found out to the baby.*

Adverbs and conjunctions are the least frequently occurring errors. Wrongly used adverbs show an alteration in the word order of the clause, and the only example found in the corpus of a conjunction error corresponds to the use of *and* instead of the correct form *to*:

16. *They were working always.*
17. *He went to the cinema and see this film.*

5.2. Overextension of analogy

Overextension of analogy errors are most frequent with nouns since they are directly related to vocabulary. The examples show the literal translation of the Spanish word into English.

Example eighteen confuses the word *role* with the Spanish *papel*. Example nineteen shows an orthographic analogy to the Spanish word *máquina* instead of *machine*. Example twenty mixes up the nouns *assistant* and *charwoman* due to the Spanish interference *asistenta*:

18. *and your paper is very difficult.*
19. *A inventor began to build a maquine.*
20. *and he went to his house saing that she was an assistant.*

Verbs constitute the second most frequently occurring overextension of analogy errors group. All of them enhance the confusion of the Spanish word and the English one. In the following examples, the Spanish words *protagonizar* instead of *to play the lead*, *divorcie*, instead of *divorce* and *secuestres* instead of *kidnap*, are to be seen:

21. *The last film I have seen were "Forrest Gump," a film protagonized for Tom Hanks.*
22. *The parents were divorcied.*

23. *The terroris secuestres the doughter.*

Adjectives are the third most frequently occurring type of error; they imply an orthographical or morphological similarity to the Spanish word. In the examples below the adjectives *difficult*, *strange*, and *leading* have been replaced by the deviant forms:

24. *A policeman work in a dificult caso.*

25. *The animals was extrain.*

26. *The principal actor were 3 man.*

Prepositions and pronouns are a less common type of error because they do not allow for lexical analogy as much as nouns do:

27. *Peter take a woman at the airport.*

28. *but she can't say nothing.*

It is interesting to point out that students do not have problems with determiners, adverbs or conjunctions. No examples of overextension of analogy errors related to these wordclasses have been found in the corpus.

5.3. Substitution

The substitution errors analysed restrict themselves to nouns and verbs. There is only one example of this type related to an adjective. The incomplete knowledge of vocabulary makes students replace the unknown English word with its Spanish counterpart and so we find sentences like:

29. *The film have acción.*

30. *The cats are rich and they are very interigents and finos.*

5.4. Interlingual/Intralingual

The last errors that remain to be examined are the interlingual - intralingual ones. They are found in two wordclasses: adverbs and adjectives. This happens because a distinction exists in English which does not appear in Spanish, as the following examples show. The adverb *mucho* in Spanish corresponds to the English ones *very* and *a lot*, their wrong use in English enhances the mistake. On the other hand, the adjective *solo* corresponds to *only* and *alone* in English.

31. *he has very problems and then he works very hard.*

32. *Yesterday in the night, I was only in my house.*

6. Conclusion

The most common type of Interlingual errors is constituted by transfer of structure deviant forms. Overextension of analogy errors form the second most frequently occurring group. Interlingual-Intralingual and Substitution errors do not constitute an habitual type of deviant form.

These results show that the structures of the mother tongue represent the main factor of interference in the L2. Phonetic, orthographic, syntactic or semantic similarity to the items in the L1 are also problematic for Spanish students. However, grammar and vocabulary errors due to a lack of distinction in Spanish or to the literal translation of L1 items are not an important cause of error for these students.

In addition to that, deviant forms occur most frequently in the verbal and pronominal system along with linguistic structures. It does appear that these three points are the main sources of interference errors.

From a didactic point of view, the teacher of English as a foreign language should then focus on the commonest type of deviant forms and should try thus to eliminate the transfer of structure and overextension of analogy errors committed by the students. This can be done by means of exercises oriented to the practice of the use of linguistic structures and the wordclasses, ie., verbs and pronouns, where these interference phenomena must be tackled.

Notes

1. The term *Interlingual* is used in this paper to refer to all types of interference errors. Nevertheless, the type of errors labelled as *Interlingual/Intralingual* by Lott (1983) constitute the third type of interlingual errors that this author describes.

2. Although some scholars, like Hudson (1990) distinguish four parts of speech: noun, verb, ad-word, conjunction, in this study I followed a fairly traditional classification of the parts of speech making a distinction between open-system items: noun, adjective, adverb, verb, and closed-system ones: determiner, pronoun, preposition, and conjunction.

3. The abbreviations TS, OA, S and I-I stand for Transfer of structure, Overextension of analogy, Substitution, and Interlingual/Intralingual respectively.

4. This group includes those errors that deal with units greater than the word, ie. phrases, sentences and clauses.

5. In most of the examples reported there are more errors than the ones I mention. However, for the purpose of this study I concentrate only on interlingual errors.

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