

'If I has a lot of money...': learner errors in foreign language writing¹

'Si yo tuvieras mucho dinero...': errores del aprendiz en la escritura en lengua extranjera

María Dolores García-Pastor

Universitat de València - GIEL

maria.d.garcia@uv.es

Rodica Teodora Selisteán

Universitat de València

rodica.selistean@uv.es

Abstract: This research explores Spanish Secondary Education students' errors in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing. More specifically, this study belongs to the field of second language acquisition, and adopts a product-oriented perspective on writing coupled with taking Error Analysis and Transfer Analysis as a starting point to deal with learner errors. The results of this study show that an analysis of learner errors in EFL can provide information that may help teachers plan future lessons, design class materials, and make decisions on correction techniques more attuned with learners' needs.

Key words: EFL, second language acquisition, Error Analysis, Transfer Analysis, foreign language writing.

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Resumen: El presente trabajo explora los errores de estudiantes españoles de Educación Secundaria en sus producciones escritas en inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). En concreto, este estudio se sitúa en el campo de adquisición de segundas lenguas, y adopta una perspectiva sobre la escritura orientada al producto, tomando el análisis de errores y el análisis de la transferencia como puntos de partida para examinar los errores de estos estudiantes. Los resultados de este estudio muestran que un análisis de los errores de los aprendices de lengua extranjera puede proporcionar información que ayude al profesorado a planificar futuras intervenciones didácticas, diseñar materiales para el aula, y tomar decisiones sobre técnicas de corrección que se ajusten en mayor medida a las necesidades de sus estudiantes.

Palabras clave: ILE, adquisición de segundas lenguas, Análisis de errores, Análisis de transferencia, escritura en lengua extranjera.

1. Introduction

The present research focuses on Spanish Secondary Education learners' errors in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing. In particular, these students are in their second year of High School, which is equivalent with 12th grade or year 13 in North-American and British High School respectively. Secondary Education has been described as “the most fraught and the most complex” of all contexts in which writing in a second or foreign language takes place (Leki *et al.*, 2008: 17). Therefore, exploring the errors of secondary education students in their written productions in the target language has been deemed worth pursuing.

This study belongs to the field of second language acquisition (henceforth SLA), and adopts a product-oriented perspective on writing (Polio, 2001, 2003) along with taking Error Analysis (Corder, 1981) and Transfer Analysis (Selinker, 1983) as a starting point to deal with students' errors. We believe that such approach can shed light on learner errors, hence learners' interlanguage systems (see, e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989; Darus & Khor, 2009), and provide useful information for teachers, who could then afford students with more appropriate feedback to raise their awareness of the linguistic and discursive features of the foreign language in a more adequate manner.

2. Theoretical background

Error Analysis (henceforth EA) is “a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make” (Gass & Selinker, 2008: 102) by attempting to establish their incidence, nature, causes and consequences (James, 1998). It emerged during the 60s and became

popular during the 70s. EA was a reaction to Contrastive Analysis (CA) and the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) (Lado, 1957), which evinced a behaviourist approach to language learning. Unlike CA and CAH, EA did not intend to predict errors based on a comparison between L1 and L2/FL, nor did it attribute errors to interference from the learner's L1; rather, it proved that errors are part of the learner's learning process, and that they reflect his/her knowledge of the target language, that is, his/her transitional competence (Corder, 1967) or his/her interlanguage (Selinker, 1972).

Additionally, a distinction was drawn between *errors* and *mistakes*. As illustrative of the learner's interlanguage, errors have been depicted as systematic distorted representations of the target competence, whilst mistakes are unsystematic and are errors of performance due to memory lapses, physical states and psychological conditions. Therefore, EA researchers and teachers should only concentrate on errors, since, unlike mistakes, they "tell us something about the learner's current knowledge of the rules of the language being learned" (Corder, 1981: 10). The difference between errors and mistakes is currently held by educational authorities in Europe such as the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, as indicated in documents like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). In this paper, we also maintain such distinction coupled with considering that it is important to develop a positive attitude towards errors, and use them as resources for language learning and instruction.

Notwithstanding all the criticism Error Analysis has received throughout time on the part of different researchers within the field of second language acquisition (e.g., Lennon, 1991; Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1977; Taylor, 1987; etc.), we believe that EA can still be considered a valid enterprise as a whole to provide an answer to certain research questions or test specific hypotheses besides enquiring into learners' interlanguage systems (cf. Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989; James, 1998; Taylor, 1986; etc.).

A product-oriented perspective on foreign language writing centres on writers' texts or products of writing in the target language

as opposed to other aspects of writing such as writing processes, namely, how the writer produces the text; participants involved in the learning and teaching of writing, that is, learners (their backgrounds, attitudes, etc.) and their teachers; or the context in which writing ensues within and outside the classroom (Polio, 2001, 2003). Studies taking such perspective on L2/FL writing already applied EA to learners' written products in the 70s with the aim of improving students' writing skills in the target language (e.g., Kroll & Schafer, 1978). In keeping with these investigations, we believe that a product-based perspective on FL writing may be adequate for error treatment, not only because it may help learners improve their writing skills, but especially because foreign language writers are different from second language learners, who typically have more opportunities for receiving input in the target language than the former. In this way, Myles (2002: 2) argues as regards L2/FL writing that:

the process approach [...], with its emphasis on the writing process, meaning making, invention and multiple drafts [...], is only appropriate for second language learners [unlike FL writers] if they are [...] able to get sufficient feedback with regard to their errors in writing.

3. Methods

3.1. Data and participants

In this study, we have attempted to enquire about the most frequent errors (transfer or intralingual errors) Spanish Secondary Education learners make in FL writing in general, and within morphology, lexis and syntax in particular. Additionally, we hypothesized a relationship between essay length and overall discourse quality, which has been understood in terms of the number of errors made.

In order to find answers to our queries, we collected a total of fifty-six opinion essays from forty-two Spanish Secondary Education learners, who belonged to three groups of approximately fourteen

students each, and had an A1/A2 average proficiency level in English (Council of Europe, 2001) at the time of the study. In these essays, students offered their opinion on current topics such as the environment, risky driving, technology, and money versus feelings. These topics were established by the teacher according to the syllabus. Learners' texts were complemented with secondary data consisting of fieldnotes from classroom observation, and spontaneous interviews with students on their own errors.

3.2. Analysis

The procedure for data analysis followed in this research includes four steps: error identification, error description, error classification, and error explanation (Corder, 1981). Errors in students' texts were then categorised as intralingual or transfer errors according to Richard's (1974) and Lott's (1983) taxonomies respectively. Therefore, intralingual errors were seen as the result of: over-generalization of FL rules or structures; ignorance of rule restrictions; incomplete application of target language rules; and faulty comprehension of target language distinctions, so that false concepts are hypothesized. Transfer errors were viewed as a consequence of overextension of analogy or the incorrect use of an item because of sharing features with another item in the learner's L1; transfer of L1 items or structures; and interlingual errors resulting from the absence of certain distinctions in the learner's L1.

4. Results

Before actually discussing the results of this research, it should be considered that we have applied Kröll's (1990) "syntactic reconstruction" criterion and procedure for error identification and classification, so that, we have established the syntactic reconstruction that most easily and economically described the sentence into acceptable English according to the context. We have also selected a

series of examples from the data to illustrate the error categories distinguished in this study. Thus, Examples 1-4 illustrate distinct types of intralingual errors in light of their source, and Examples 5-6 exemplify different kinds of transfer errors according to their origin as well.

Example (1). Intralingual error. Source: overgeneralization.

*I-pod is an interesting thing (syntactic reconstruction: The I-pod is an interesting thing).

This extract reflects an intralingual error resulting from the overgeneralization of the rule in the FL according to which no article is used with plural or uncountable nouns to talk about general things. The learner extends this rule here to the singular countable noun “I-pod”.

Example (2). Intralingual error. Source: ignorance of rule restrictions.

But *the happinees is another thing (syntactic reconstruction: but happiness is another thing)

In this example, the learner makes an intralingual error by ignoring rule restrictions on the use of the definite article with abstract nouns, since he uses the article “the” with the abstract noun “happiness”.

Example (3). Intralingual error. Source: incomplete application of rules.

I think that if a lot of people *not had mobile phones in the past, why now all the people must have had a mobile phone? (syntactic reconstruction: I think that if a lot of people didn't have mobile phones in the past, why should they have a mobile phone now?).

The intralingual error in this extract indicates that the learner has not been able to apply properly the grammatical rule governing the formation of negative forms.

Example (4). Intralingual error. Source: False concepts hypothesized.

I have *one phone since I'm 11 years old (syntactic reconstruction: I have had a phone since I was 11 years old.)

This extract illustrates an intralingual error originating from the faulty comprehension of the distinction between “one” and “a” in the target language, so that false concepts are hypothesized by the learner.

Example (5). Transfer error. Source: overextension of analogy.

We should not *deny all these *tips. (syntactic reconstruction: We should not reject all this advice).

In this example, the learner's confusion as regards the deployment of the words “deny” versus “reject”, and “tips” versus “advice” might be due to a lack of a distinction between these pairs in a bilingual dictionary. The learner therefore uses the first term of the pair because it is analogous to, or shares some features with an item in his/her L1.

Example (6). Transfer error. Source: transfer of structure.

A lot of people *has mobile phones. (syntactic reconstruction: A lot of people have mobile phones).

This extract illustrates a typical error learners make concerning the term “people” in English. This term is a plural noun in the target language, but it is a singular noun in Spanish. The learner transfers here the structure “gente + singular verb form” from his/her L1 Spanish to the target language, providing evidence of a transfer error.

Finally, transfer errors of the interlingual kind, that is, errors occurring when a particular distinction in the target language does not exist in the learner's L1 (e.g., do and make in Spanish), did not emerge in the data.

As regards the most frequent errors (intralingual or transfer errors) Spanish Secondary Education learners make in FL writing, it was observed that intralingual errors outnumbered transfer errors in students' written productions. However, when focusing on the different linguistic areas distinguished in this study, namely, morphology, lexis and syntax, different results ensued. Intralingual errors were predominant in morphology, whilst transfer errors were more frequent at the level of lexis and syntax. The category Intralingual/Transfer was established in light of a few cases, whose categorization was ambiguous.

These findings provide further evidence to the idea that morphology tends to be the weakest language system as regards learner errors in comparison with syntax and lexis in L2 writing (Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989). Additionally, intralingual errors typically prevail over transfer errors in compositions versus other writing tasks, e.g., translation tasks (Ellis, 2001). The results of our research as regards intralingual and transfer errors in morphology, syntax and lexis are illustrated in the following tables and figures.

Morphological category	Intralingual errors	Transfer errors	Intralingual/Transfer errors
Article	9	1	
Adjective	3	0	
Adverb	1	0	
Determiner	9	0	1
Noun	4	1	
Preposition	7	6	2
Pronoun (pronoun referencing)	2	0	
Verb (total)	17	11	
3rd person –s	4	0	
There is/there are	2	0	
Negative forms	4	0	
Verb-subject agreement	1	1	
Gerund and infinitive	3	3	
Tenses/voice	1	6	
Modal verbs	2	1	
TOTAL	52	19	3

Table. 1. Intralingual and transfer errors in morphology: percentages

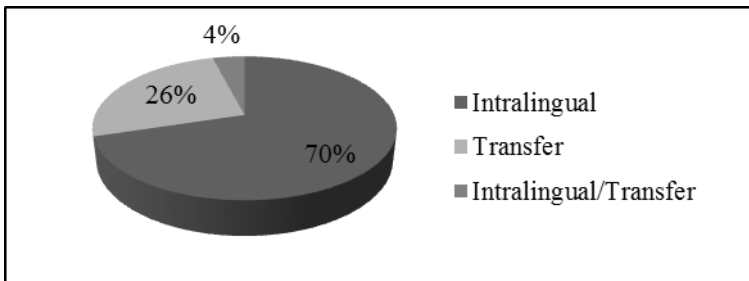


Fig. 1. Intralingual and transfer errors in morphology: percentages

Syntactic category	Intralingual errors	Transfer errors
Subordinate clauses	9	1
Subject omission	0	1
Clause connectors	0	3
Word order	0	11
TOTAL	9	16

Table 2. Intralingual and transfer errors in syntax.

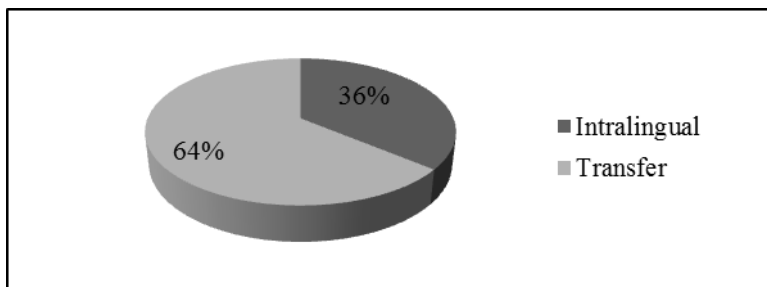


Fig. 2. Intralingual and transfer errors in syntax: percentages.

Lexical errors	Intralingual errors	Transfer errors
Formal errors	4	7
Semantic errors	4	10
TOTAL	8	17

Table 3. Intralingual and transfer errors in lexis.

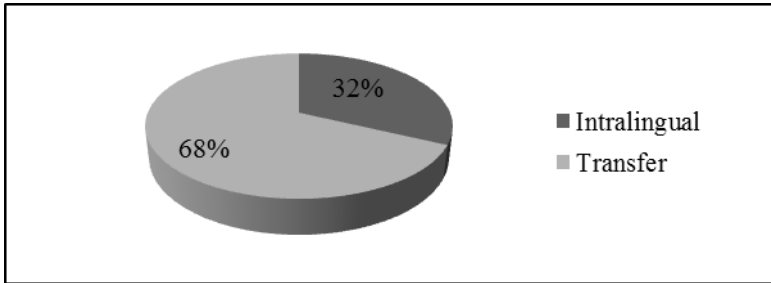


Fig. 3. Intralingual and transfer errors in lexis: percentages.

As it can be observed in Table 4 and Figure 4 below, intralingual errors were seen to mostly affect verbal tense and voice, the use of articles and other determiners, prepositions, and noun endings. This is attuned with FERRIS's (2002) observation that the most problematic issues for L2 English learners are verb tense and aspect, the use of articles and other determiners, noun endings, and word order.

Linguistic elements	Intralingual errors
Articles	10
Adjectives	3
Adverbs	1
Determiners	10
Nouns	5
Prepositions	15
Pronouns (pronoun referencing)	2
Verbs (total)	28
3rd person –s	4
There is/there are	2
Negative forms	4
Verb-subject agreement	2
Gerund and infinitive	6
Tenses/voice	7
Modal verbs	3
TOTAL	74

Table 4. Intralingual errors in the data.

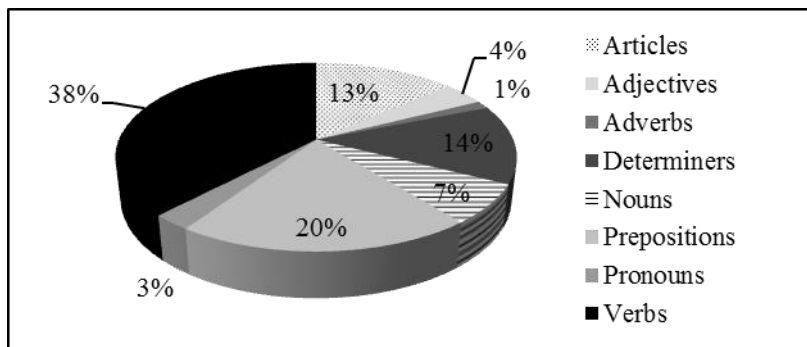


Fig. 4. Intralingual errors in the data: percentages.

Intralingual errors in our data were also found to be mainly due to overgeneralization of target language rules and ignorance of rule restrictions (see Examples 1 and 2 above).

On the other hand, transfer errors appeared to be mostly transfer of structure errors (Example 6 above) than errors due to overextension of analogy (Example 5). Transfer errors within syntax mainly consisted of wrong word order, misuse of subordinate clauses and clause connectors, and subject omission. Transfer errors within lexis were mainly semantic versus formal errors. Table 5 and Figure 5 illustrate these findings.

Linguistic elements	Transfer errors
Word order	11
Subordinate clauses	10
Clause connectors	3
Subject omission	1
Semantic errors (lexis)	14
Formal errors (lexis)	11
TOTAL	50

Table 5. Transfer errors in the data.

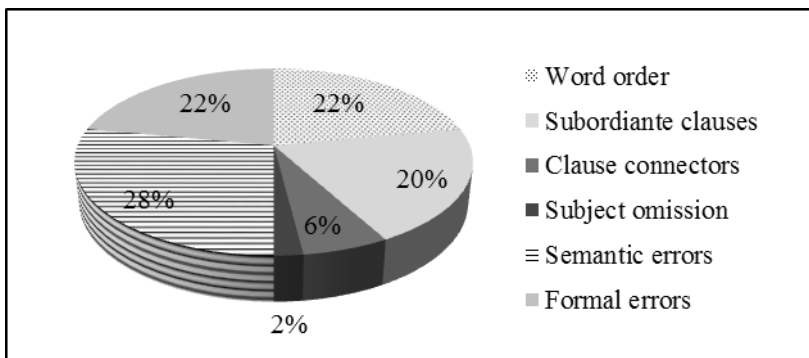


Fig. 5. Transfer errors in the data: percentages.

These results support Bardovi-Harlig and Bofman's (1989) findings on the typical syntactic errors EFL students with different L1s and proficiency levels make in L2 writing. These authors established that word order, absence of major and minor sentence constituents, and errors in combining sentences were the most frequent errors in syntax.

Concerning the relationship between essay length and overall discourse quality in terms of number of errors made by the students, we analysed a selected sample of twelve essays. It was observed that essay length was actually related to a learner's proficiency level, so that the longer the essay the higher a student's proficiency level, and vice versa: the shorter the essay the lower the learner's proficiency level. These results support the findings of previous investigations on learner errors and L2 writing (e.g., Frantzen, 1995). Thus, contrary to what we originally expected, longer essays were less affected by error than shorter essays (see Table 6 and Figure 6 below):

	Errors longer essays	Error %	Total words	Errors shorter essays	Error %	Total words
	3	2,1	138	12	14,4	83
	8	4,9	163	26	29	89
	8	4,8	165	17	17,3	98
	18	10,4	173	14	13,7	102
	23	11,7	195	13	11,2	116
	8	3,9	205	13	10,2	127
AVERAGE	11,3	6,3	173	15,8	15,9	102

Table 6. Errors in longer and shorter essays.

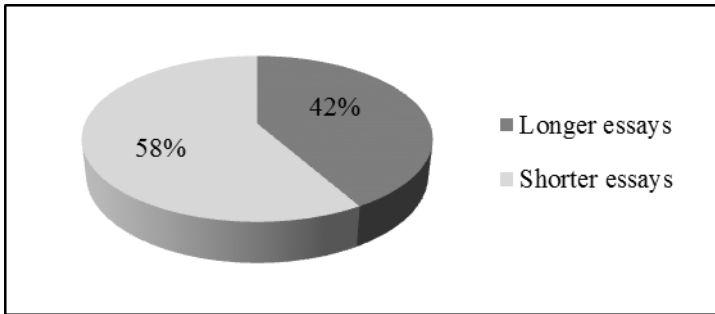


Fig. 6. Errors in longer and shorter essays: average percentages.

4. Conclusions

This study has attempted to explore the errors that Spanish Secondary Education learners in their last year of high school make in EFL writing. From a product-oriented perspective on L2 writing and taking Error Analysis and Transfer Analysis as a starting point for the study of learner errors, this research has evinced that the Spanish Secondary Education students participating in this investigation mostly make intralingual versus transfer errors when writing in the target language. Additionally, intralingual errors mainly emerged in morphology, whereas transfer errors primarily occurred in syntax and lexis. These findings indicate learners' overall decreasing reliance on L1 as regards morphology, but their greater reliance on L1 in syntax and lexis. This tendency is not surprising in L2 writing for learners with low proficiency levels, since, albeit developing first in second language acquisition (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Lighbown & Spada, 1999), morphology has been proved the weakest language system in this specific skill. In addition, L1 transfer in the lexical plane has also been attested as more common than in other linguistic areas (cf. Ellis, 2001).

As regards the relationship between essay length and learner errors hypothesized in this study, we found that the length of students' texts did not have a direct influence in the number of errors emerging

in their writings; rather, it was the students' level of proficiency that affected essay length and the amount of errors in the texts. In consequence, longer essays were observed to belong to learners with higher proficiency levels and were found to show less quantity of errors than shorter essays, which typically belonged to learner with lower proficiency levels.

In spite of the above results, some limitations of this study refer to the lack of statistical tests to verify, *inter alia*, the relationship between essay length and a student's proficiency level in L2 writing. Only in this way, could we affirm that the differences observed in our data are significant as well as extend our results to other groups of adolescent EFL writers.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that teachers should foster learners' development of morphology in Secondary Education, and should work on syntax and lexis in a more contextualized and comprehensive manner, so that learners become less reliant on their L1 in these linguistic areas. In spite of the positive effects some scholars have adduced as regards L1 transfer in L2 composition (cf., e.g., Valdés *et al.*, 1992), we believe that low proficiency learners could still have problems in transferring knowledge from their L1, and should be trained to this end first (Manchón, 2001). All in all, this research has modestly aimed to show that the study of learner errors can provide useful information that can help teachers and learners to become more conscious of the importance of errors in the EFL classroom.

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