

The Influence of the L1 (Spanish) on the L2 (English) Language Learning in a Rural School

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Abstract: *In order to analyze how the L1 (Spanish) affects the L2 (English) language learning in ninth graders of “Aurelia Becerra de Quiñonez” rural school in Rioverde, Esmeraldas Province, Ecuador, a qualitative-quantitative investigation of a descriptive type was carried out using the analytic-synthetic and hermeneutic methods with the techniques of interview, observation and a test, which were applied to a sample of eight students, three Spanish teachers, and three English teachers from the referred school. The results revealed that all of the students had serious structural, lexical and pronunciation problems in English. In relation to the writing ability, they presented insufficiencies because most of them were not able to write the paragraph requested, they even failed in Spanish, which revealed their lack of knowledge in both languages. In addition, some of the words that they wrote in Spanish were misspelled. One of the main factors for those problems was the lack of vocabulary, because they confused words that were similar in both languages, another problem was the structural borrowing from one language to another, showing lack of knowledge of the different classes of words, which was also present in Spanish. The subject-verb relationship was another problem, as they were not able to recognize when a subject was singular or plural and the correct use of positive and negative verbs. The investigation really showed the influence of the L1 (Spanish) on the L2 (English) language learning mainly because of linguistic interference that made students make frequent mistakes.*

Keywords: English Language Learning, ELT, Influence of L1(Spanish), Linguistic Interference

Introduction

Among students’ main complaints about difficulties in learning English as a foreign language are related to English grammar and pronunciation. These difficulties may be caused in part by linguistic interference. There are such examples when students make the same errors in both languages, and when students pronounce words as if they were in their first language.

The investigation took place in a rural school in Rioverde canton, Esmeraldas province, Ecuador, where the level of standardized Spanish features in the population (students and parents), and even in some teachers, is low. The poverty level of this people is 70.6 %, while the general rate in the country is 61%. The illiteracy rate is 10%, while the average educational level is 6th grade, and only 4% of the youth attend college. The official unemployment rate is 12%.

English teachers must understand the effect that L1 (Spanish) knowledge has on the process of learning a second language, because it is extremely important to teach students with specific methods and techniques, so that the referred problem can be overcome. Specifically, in ninth grade students, these problems are relevant, manifested in the lack of lexicon and grammatical structures to communicate ideas in English, either in speaking or writing, which means that they must have a basic level of English to continue with the next level. Therefore, the main problem to be solved was: How does the knowledge of L1 (Spanish) affects the L2 (English) language learning in ninth graders of “Aurelia Becerra de Quiñonez” rural school in Rioverde, Esmeraldas Province, 2020?

The general objective was to analyze the influence of the L1 (Spanish) on the L2 (English) language learning and the specific were to identify gaps and errors in the student's first language knowledge in their L1 (Spanish); to identify the most frequent errors that students make in the L2 (English) language learning and to determine the influence that L1 (Spanish) knowledge has on the L2 (English) language learning.

Mother Tongue

The acquisition of the mother tongue depends on the person's nationality, region, ethnicity, family background, etc. According to Illich, I., & Sanders, B. (1989), the first people to use the term were monks to differentiate the Latin that they used to speak from the vulgar romance language.

In the area of Esmeraldas, in the past, there was a language that was spoken in the XIX century. This language was not a variation of the Spanish language, although in an investigation done by J. M. Pallares in 1877, it was mentioned that 21% of the vocabulary collected included words from Spanish and Kichwa (García, 2016). The extinct language was known as "Esmeraldeño", an indigenous language that survived the conquest due to contact between indigenous and Afro-descendant populations.

Foreign Language

According to Moeller, A., & Catalano, T. (2015) a language is considered foreign when it is learned in a community context where that language is not spoken. It is a language that is not native for the person who is trying to learn it. Unlike the first language, in which the person must reach a full proficiency, foreign language students may not be able to reach that level. Everything will depend on the time expended practicing the language.

Rural Schools

Rural schools are defined as schools where the location is isolated from urban places and the population in the area is smaller. Students from those areas must travel a long distance to attend school. Also, most of the teachers come from outside and must travel to get to their jobs. Most of the time, schools are between one to three hours away from students' homes. The school schedule starts at 7:00 am, so they must wake up early in the morning to arrive on time. Most of the time, parents do not know anything about their children's performance in schools.

Rioverde is one of the seven cantons in Esmeraldas province, most of which are rural undeveloped areas. It is two hours away from the main city of Esmeraldas. Many of the students that attend the Aurelia de Becerra Quiñonez School live in areas accessible only by horseback, so they must leave home very early to arrive on time, meaning that most of them don't even have a proper breakfast to start their day.

Language Learning

According to Tarone, E., & Swierzbina, B. (2009), language learning is the production of the language when learners are trying to communicate using a foreign language. By observing how learners produce the language, teachers can improve their pedagogy to better promote language learning.

The process of learning a new language is complex. It is not only a matter of intelligence and aptitude, but also attitude and motivation. According to Espinar, R., & Ortega, J. (2015), motivation is an essential factor that teachers need to consider when they are teaching a new language.

Linguistic Interference

According to Dulay, H., Burt, M. & Krashen, S. (1982) interference is the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. The language learner's L1 affects the learning of the L2, meaning that the learners tend to use aspects of the first

language like grammar, vocabulary, accent, spelling and others. According to Manrique, C. (2013) the most common errors are mispronunciation and grammatical errors between the mother tongue and the target language.

Antecedents

In research done by Yim, Y. (1998) about the role of grammar instruction in an English second language program, 242 non-native speakers of English were chosen to be the sample of this investigation. The result of the investigation presents that grammar instruction plays a significant role in students of a second language consciousness of linguistic accuracy.

The study done by Tran, T. (2010) explores the relationship between Vietnamese students' knowledge of (L1) grammar and their English grammar proficiency. The study showed that there was no significant correlation between the (L1) test score and the English (L2) grammar proficiency test score. It also indicates that L2 grammar proficiency and language transfer depend on the age at the onset of learning English, L1 and L2 proficiency levels, and the areas of language transfer.

According to Zaretsky, E. (2017), in his research entitled Cross-linguistic Transfer: The Role of L1 Grammatical Morphology in L2 Reading Comprehension among ELLs from Low SES, he studied thirty English learners attending fifth and sixth grades, all in second through fifth levels of English language proficiency. The result shows a strong, significant correlation between L1 Grammatical morphemes and L2 language proficiency. It also shows that the participants' reader status had positive or negative correlation.

An investigation carried out by Rizzo, B. & Villafane, S. (1975) showed the influence of the Spanish language in written English. Errors were a characteristic in Spanish-speaking students in urban schools. As a result of this investigation, it can be found that Spanish interference has an effect in the English language production since people tend to copy grammar structure from the mother tongue and apply it into the new language.

Method

The school where the present investigation was carried out was "Aurelia Becerra de Quiñonez". The institution is in the township of Lagarto, in the canton of Rioverde, in the northern part of the Esmeraldas province. This is a remote rural area, and the student population has many difficulties that they must overcome to have access to education.

This investigation followed a mixed approach with a descriptive scope because it gathered information that aimed to describe an aspect, rather than measure it. These were composed of impressions, opinions, and perspectives. It sought to deepen the subject to obtain information about people's motivations, thoughts, and attitudes.

The population was formed by 30 students enrolled in ninth grade, and 4 Spanish and English teachers. The sample was chosen with the non-probability sampling mode since this group was already observed, and was constituted of eight students, three Spanish Teachers, and three English teachers from Aurelia Becerra de Quiñonez basic school in the township of Lagarto Esmeraldas Province, 2019.

This investigation had as its hypothesis that there is a high influence of the first language (L1) linguistic features in the process of learning English as a foreign language in ninth graders.

The methods of investigation used were analysis, synthesis, and hermeneutics. A guide of observation was used for the observation technique: It was formed by indicators to detect structural, lexical and pronunciation errors. A list of errors was provided to identify the most common errors students make in English language learning. Two questionnaires were used for the survey technique: one for Spanish

teachers to identify the most frequent errors students make in the L1 (Spanish) language learning. A second questionnaire was applied to English teachers to identify the correlation between errors in L1 (Spanish) and L2 (English). The test consisted of five questions to diagnose gaps in the students' language knowledge of the L1 and to identify the most frequent errors that they make in the L2 language learning. The data were processed and tabulated manually, then taken to tables. The results obtained were compared by means of the technique of triangulation.

Results

Regarding the gaps and errors in the student's first language knowledge or their L1 (Spanish) and the most frequent errors that students make in the L2 (English) language learning, the results revealed that there were structural, lexical and pronunciation errors as can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Students' frequent errors in Spanish and English

Structural errors	Lexical errors	Pronunciation errors
Teachers agreed that most of the students have difficulties in both English and Spanish in:	Teachers agreed that most of the students have difficulties in both English and Spanish in:	Teachers agreed that most of the students have difficulties in both English and Spanish in:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguishing grammatical tenses. • Subject verb agreement. • Placement of adjectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate vocabulary. • Cognates. • Collocation. • Idioms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mispronunciation of consonants at the end of the word. • Mispronunciation of vowels. • Stress in wrong syllable

Source: survey applied to Spanish and English teachers. Author's own elaboration

Regarding the most frequent errors that students make in the L2 (English) language learning, the results showed structural errors due to the fact that most of the student borrowed structure from their L1 and applied to the L2 revealed as follows:

Students' frequent errors in English: it is observed that the students' main errors are found in the English language use. The results of the observation revealed that students usually commit errors that are linked with errors in their mother tongue.

Structural errors: Students commit errors using the incorrect grammatical tenses in sentences the teacher wanted them to write. Also, students have problems recognizing the correct verb for the subjects. Students misplaced adjectives using Spanish sentence order. Some of the students confuse gender pronouns in English. Most of the students used wrong prepositions in sentences and the most common error they had was the borrowing of the syntactic for Spanish.

Examples:

Distinguishing grammatical tenses:

- I *play* yesterday (*instead of played*)
- She *work* last night (*instead of worked*)
- There *is* (*instead of was when mentioned the existing of something in the past*)

Subject verb agreement

- She *are* (*instead of 'is'*)
- I *is* (*instead of 'am'*)
- My mother *work* (*instead of 'works'*)

Use of articles

- *The (instead of 'he' or vice-versa)*

Order in questions

- *She is a doctor? (instead of 'Is she')*
- *There was a pen? (instead of 'Was there')*

Placement of adjectives

- *The cat black (instead of 'black cat')*
- *My mom beautiful (instead of 'beautiful mom')*
- *The man smart (instead of 'smart man')*

Lexical Error: Students have inadequate vocabulary for the level they are, and they confuse words that are similar in English and in Spanish (cognates). They don't know verb collocations to use and a common error they have is that they translate idioms literally from one language to another.

Examples:

Inadequate vocabulary

- Lack of knowledge of common verbs according to their level such as: *to be, to have, to do, to say, to make, to go, to know, to think, to look, to want, to use, to ask, to feel, to call*
- Lack of knowledge of common adjectives according to their level such as: *long, great, little, high, different, large, important, public, quickly, fast, smart, rapidly, interesting.*

Cognates

- *Carpet (to say carpeta)*
- *Black (to say blanco)*
- *Soap (to say sopa)*

Collocation

- *Wake up*
- *Get out*
- *Get up*

Idioms

- *Pull the leg (they translate 'jalar la pierna' instead of 'tomar el pelo')*
- *Take it easy (they translate "tómalo facil' insted of 'tómalo con calma')*

Pronunciation errors: Most of the students mispronounce consonants at the end of the word, this problem is also common in Spanish. Students mispronounce the vowels in English and Spanish. The students stressed words in the wrong syllable.

Examples:

Mispronunciation of phonemes

- *Th* sound

Mispronunciation of consonants at the end of the word

- *Sleep*
- *Jump*
- *Turist*

Mispronunciation of the vowels

- *Keys*
- *I*
- *Play*

Mispronunciation of “ed” in regular verbs in the past tense

- *Looked*
- *Asked*
- *Played*

(Source: Observation of the English language teaching-learning process. Authors’ own elaboration)

Regarding the influence that L1 (Spanish) knowledge has in the L2 (English) language learning, the results showed that all the students had problems mainly in word order, meaning of words and writing, as illustrated in figure 1.

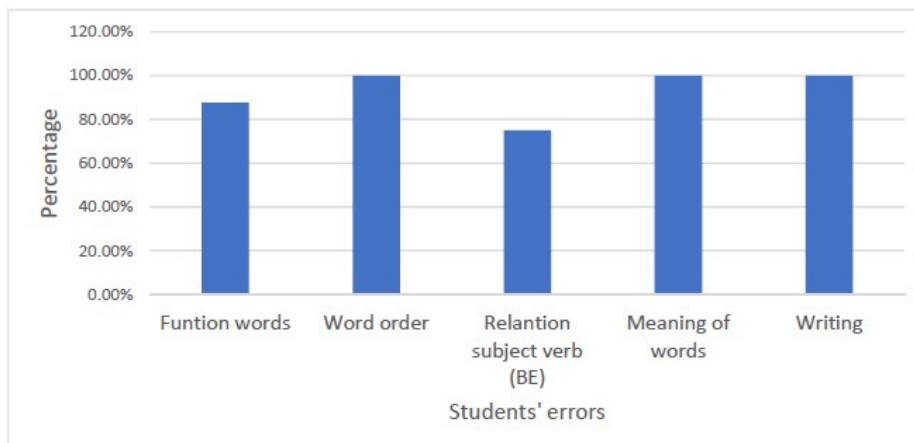


Figure 1: Students’ frequent errors in English and Spanish. Source: Test applied to students

Discussion

Some of the results obtained in this investigation showed the relationship between grammar structure and language learning and showed an agreement with the investigation done by Yim, Y. (1998). The result of these two investigations presented that grammar instruction plays a significant role in students of a second language consciousness of linguistic accuracy. This means that certain amount of grammar knowledge is necessary to develop learners’ language proficiency.

This investigation also reflects that there was a significant influence of knowledge of the first language with the foreign language learning. There were common errors in both languages that affect the

development of the skills in English. However, these results were not in agreement with the investigation done by Tran, T. (2010), in which the results indicated that L2 grammar proficiency depends on the age at the onset of learning English, rather than only grammatical knowledge in L1. Nevertheless, the investigation shows an agreement with the research done by Zaketsky, E. (2017). The result shows a strong, significant correlation between L1 grammatical morphemes and L2 language proficiency.

The investigation done by Rizzo, B. & Villafane, S. (1975), in which the area of the school was considered, shows a correlation in the error in L1 with the L2 language learning. The errors in the Spanish speakers were influenced by the environment where they were living due to the fact that they have a different manner of speaking the Spanish language. Language interferences are a common factor in both investigations. Spanish interference has an effect on the English language production due to the fact that people tend to copy grammar structure from the mother tongue and apply it into the new language. Other problems such as word placement errors, use of the English definite article, or omitted nouns or pronouns were also found in both investigations.

Students have serious problems in English, especially in written skills, because most of them did not write the paragraph requested, and they did not even do it in Spanish, showing the lack of knowledge in this area. Some of the words that they wrote in Spanish were misspelled. One of the main factors in these problems is the lack of vocabulary, because they confuse words that are similar in both languages, and the structural borrowing from one language to another.

Conclusions

The investigation showed that students had gaps and errors in the first language knowledge. According to the teachers, most of the students have problems identifying grammar structures that led them to commit the same errors in English. Also, it was evident that the students' writing ability was inadequate for students in that level.

The test revealed that the written skills were the most difficult to learn since most of the students didn't write the paragraph requested, not only in Spanish but also in English, showing the lack of knowledge in this area, being one of the main factors the lack of vocabulary, because they confuse words that are similar in both languages, and the structural borrowing from one language to another.

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