



Can ICT Help Overcome L1 Interference in L2 Writing? — Implications and Challenges for the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Learning English as a foreign language can posit a number of difficulties to students whose native language is Latin-based and therefore ethymologically different from a Germanic language such as English. Despite the abundance of Latin vocabulary in the English language, syntax and morphology may be difficult to master for a speaker of a Latin language, namely Portuguese students. A number of studies (Silva 1993, Picard 2002, Bhela 1999, for example) have already highlighted how L1 can deeply interfere with the learning of L2 and how some processes of transfer are regularly applied by speakers of a foreign language. The aim of this paper is to identify the most common processes of L1 interference and transfer based on a corpus of 1st year Portuguese university students who are taking English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a B1/ B2 level. The processes of interference and transfer that constitute mistakes in the target language will be coded for syntax, morphology and/or lexicon and remedial procedures to overcome these difficulties will then be set up for two different control groups. One group of students will be subjected to the flipped approach (Huba & Freed 2000, Crouch & Mazur 2001), whereby they will be given full autonomy to work on the technology-based activities posted on the Moodle platform and which will be designed to help them overcome their specific linguistic short comings, be it syntax, morphology or vocabulary. The second group of students will be exposed to a traditional approach, mostly teacher-centered and will have to submit print handouts to their teacher based on the most common syntax and grammar mistakes they have made. This paper will thus examine the following: the most common mistakes in the target language that may result from L1 interference in the context of tertiary EFL teaching in Portugal; and whether the highly acclaimed flipped approach is an efficient remedial, pedagogic method to help students improve their learning experience and mastering of English as a foreign language. Namely, this paper aims at testing the "flipped" approach to hopefully derive meaningful conclusions as to which it is efficient in terms of empowering students, boosting learning autonomy and develop language awareness.

Keywords: *L1 Interference, traditional vs blended-learning methodologies, ICT, language awareness.*

1. Introduction

It is a common occurrence for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) to be influenced by their native language. Studies on bilingualism have also demonstrated that individuals who are fully fluent in multiple languages experience cross-linguistic interferences (Durgunoğlu, 2002; Picard, 2002).

The objective of this study is to examine specific influences which are recurrent for students and consistently manifest as a distinct pattern of common mistakes, regardless of the students' level of fluency in both spoken and written English. Independently of the fluency and range vocabulary demonstrated in their oral and written production, EFL students tend to make fundamental mistakes. It is important to acknowledge that while making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process, and may not significantly impede or hinder effective communication in English, they should still be addressed.

Our second objective is to conduct a pilot study and evaluate the effectiveness of using ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools in the EFL classroom to assist and provide different learning experiences for students in order to overcome these difficulties.



2. Literature Review

Within the context of language learning, it is common for learners to resort to their existing language knowledge and habits. This “interference” (also known as L1 interference, linguistic interference, crosslinguistic influence and language transfer) refers to the influence of a person's native language (L1) on their acquisition and use of a second language (L2).

Dulay et al. (1982) define interference as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. This cross-linguistic influence can be produced and/or manifested at different levels, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and syntax. On the one hand, interference may be viewed as a form of positive transfer (Cisero & Royer, 1995; Comeau et al., 1999; Durgunoglu et al., 1993; D’Angiulli et al., 2001) which may occur when elements of the native language align with those of the target language, facilitating learners’ understanding and production of correct language structures.

On the other hand, these patterns of L1 interference may be considered a form of negative transfer. Lott (1983: 256) defines interference as ‘errors in the learner’s use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue’. In other words, the existence of a conflict between the native and target language may lead to errors and difficulties in L2 learning. Fries (1945), a prominent behaviorist, asserted that interference from the first language (L1) poses a significant challenge for second language learners. He emphasised that comparing the learner's native language with the target language is crucial for both second language (L2) theory and pedagogy.

There appears to be a significant gap between the accumulation and the organization of the knowledge. This then raises a critical question: what kinds of language do second language learners produce in speaking and writing? When writing or speaking the target language (L2), second language learners tend to rely on their native language (L1) structures to produce a response.

If the structures of the two languages are distinctly different, then one could expect a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L2, thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2.

It is our perspective that one of the ways to mitigate negative transfer from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2) is to increase learners' awareness of the differences between L1 and L2, which can be achieved through explicit or implicit teaching methods.

2.1. L2 writing as a product and learning tool

Second language (L2) learners often resort to their native language (L1) as a means of compensating for their limitations in L2 proficiency, especially when trying to express more complex ideas in their written work. Consequently, they may rely on their L1 to articulate these ideas. Errors may arise if the learner inappropriately transfers linguistic structures from one language to the other or if the learner is misled by the partial similarities between the two languages.

At other times, learners reveal confidence and maturity in their writing and yet, these errors still persist.

Eckman (1977) emphasised that certain language features, particularly unmarked features, are more susceptible to being transferred from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2), although we are aware that the interference of these language forms may not always be based on their linguistic features alone. The purpose of this study does not involve delving into such detailed analysis. Instead, our premise is that, once these mistakes are identified through the teacher’s correction of written assignments, students will become aware of them. Identifying specific mistakes plays a significant role in the process of eliminating them, or as Ferris (2002: 4) puts it, “they need distinct an additional intervention from their writing teachers to make up these deficits and developing strategies for finding, correcting and avoiding errors.”

As noted by a number of researchers, students value teacher feedback on their errors and think that it helps them to improve their writing (Ferris, 1995). By using students’ written assignments as pedagogical tools to be analyzed and reflected on, teachers are contributing towards helping students become “independent self-editors” of their own work (*ibidem*).

3. The study

3.1. Context of the Study



The study specifically targets the first year of the undergraduate program in Communication and Cultural Sciences at Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP), a six semester course, the curriculum including four English Foreign Language levels taught in the first four semesters of the course.

The syllabus focuses on media studies topics and interests, and is based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) guidelines and requirements for the B2, B2+ intermediate levels (English I and II), and C1, C1+ advanced levels (English III and IV).

The study involves a total of 47 students enrolled in the first level of the course in two classes administered by two different teachers. At UCP, all classes follow the same syllabus, which entails pre-determined grammar and writing components. However, there is no defined methodology for teaching these items and tailoring them to students' profiles. This leads to variations in teaching styles and approaches across different classes, so this aspect was instrumental in enabling a comparison between two distinct methods.

This study presents the findings of a three-month longitudinal research by means of a pre-test post-test design. The assessment process involved a diagnostic test (writing task 1) administered in the first class of the semester, followed by input and corrective feedback worksheet after two weeks, and finally, a post-test comprising a writing task (writing task 2) two weeks later.

Two different teaching methodologies were used for comparison purposes. The control group (Group A) received traditional teacher-centered instruction, while the second group (Group B) experienced a flipped approach, where the teacher resorted to ICT and the students were encouraged to engage in more autonomous work at home.

The research addressed the following research questions: *Which L1 interference mistakes do students mostly make?; What kind of strategies can teachers use to help students overcome these mistakes?; Up to what point can we resort to ICT to help them?*

3.2. Target Structures

At our university, administering a diagnostic test to students at the beginning of the semester is standard practice in EFL classes. While not utilized as placement tests, they serve the purpose of evaluating the overall proficiency of the classes and identifying students who may require additional support. The writing task included in the diagnostic test played a crucial role in identifying the five most recurrent L1 interference linguistic forms which would be worked on throughout the semester. Table 1 provides a summary of these forms, along with relevant examples extracted from the diagnostic tests.

Table 1. L1 Interference Forms Analysed in the Study

DEFINITE ARTICLE	a) News are very important for <i>*the</i> society. b) <i>*The</i> newspapers cost money.
UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS & ADJECTIVES	a) Social media and digital platforms are <i>*differents</i> . b) But the online has the true and false <i>*informations</i> .
INTRODUCTORY IT	a) On the other hand [x] can be negative. b) I recognize how hard [x] is to create new magazines and new ideas...
WORD ORDER	a) Electronic devices are a more simple way to be <i>*always</i> informed. b) This loss can be <i>*also</i> due to the fact that people are reading less..
FALSE FRIENDS	a) <i>*The</i> evolution of times has developed technology. b) Digital platforms are cheaper than buying <i>*journals</i> .

3.3. Methodology

The study included four phases and the procedures were administered according to the timeline provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Timeline

Day one	Pre-test (diagnostic test writing task 1)
Two weeks later	Written corrective feedback provided, followed by 45 minute lesson (oral metalinguistic explanation of each form + worksheet)
Two weeks later	Return of worksheets + further consolidation of linguistic forms
Two weeks later	Post test (writing task 2)

Both classes were given the same diagnostic tests and both teachers used rubrics and written corrective feedback. Students who asked for clarification were also given additional oral feedback. Likewise, both teachers utilized the same Power Point presentation and followed the same procedure



to administer metalinguistic explanations of the selected forms. Moreover, an individual consolidation worksheet was assigned to students in both classes to be completed individually.

The divergence between the two groups occurred in the third phase. Group A experienced a traditional teacher-centered approach to reinforce the previously taught linguistic forms (Table 1). Students in Group A were exposed to additional written and oral exercises using various examples. Additionally, homework exercises were assigned and subsequently corrected in the following lesson to further enhance the students understanding and proficiency.

In contrast, Group B resorted to interactive exercises available on the institutional Moodle platform as a means to reinforce the studied linguistic forms, and students were encouraged to further their practice at home. The teacher oversaw whether the students had completed this revision at home by means of the Moodle activity reports. Although the integration of ICT revealed low student engagement, as only 7 out of 18 students completed the online exercises, this did not seem to have affected their overall progress.

Two weeks later, students from both groups composed writing task 2 during an in-class session, which allowed for comparison of results between the pre-test and the post-test.

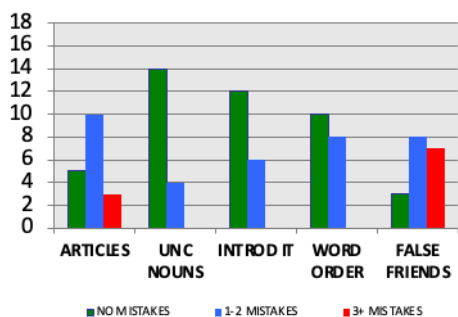
4. Results

Graph 1 clearly shows that the main problematic areas for the students in the diagnostic test were *articles* and *false friends*. The majority of students in Group A made mistakes in these areas, with 72% of the students struggling with articles and 83% encountering difficulties with *false friends*.

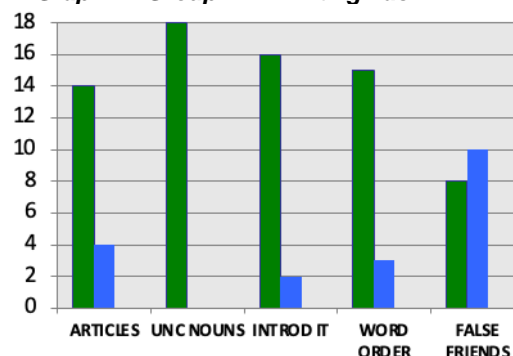
In contrast, the graph indicates a positive tendency in other areas. No student made more than three mistakes in *uncountable nouns*, *introductory it* and *word order* categories. Furthermore, the number of students who made one or two mistakes in these categories decreased by more than 50% in writing task 2.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the number of students in Group A who made no mistakes increased across all the analyzed categories.

Graph 1. Group A — Diagnostic Test (Writing 1)



Graph 2. Group A — Writing Task 2



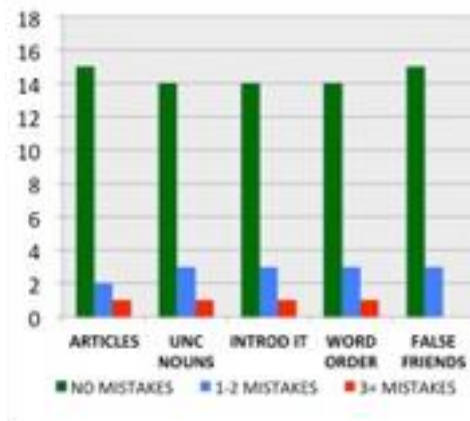
The data for Group B reveals that the majority of students made at least one or two mistakes in all categories, with several students making three or more mistakes in the diagnostic test. However, it is encouraging to note that most students demonstrated improvement and managed the “no mistakes” level in all the categories in the post-test.

This overall progress highlights the effectiveness of the learning process, which is very positive. However, it is noteworthy that one student did not show improvement in any of the categories, except *false friends*. This student’s performance in the other areas revealed no progress.

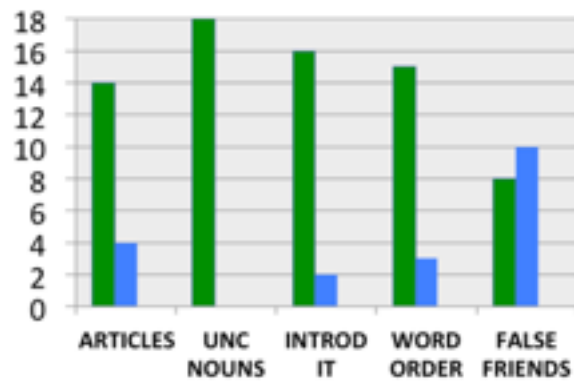
The results obtained by Group B are consistent with those of Group A, indicating that the majority of students in both groups demonstrated progress across all the linguistic forms taught in class. The findings reveal similar outcomes in all categories, except for *false friends* in group A, where a considerable number of students still made one or two mistakes in this category in the post-test phase.



Graph 3. Group B — Diagnostic Test Results



Graph 4. Group B — Writing Task 1



5. Final Consideration

Regardless of the teaching methodology employed, significant progress was observed in both groups, as both the traditional and flipped/ blended approaches produced similar results in terms of student progress. Independently of the strategies used in both approaches, it is our perspective that it was the fact that teachers highlighted, addressed and fostered students' awareness towards their individual L1 interference which made the difference.

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