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# Mother tongue traces of Turkish university students on composition papers written in English

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the interference errors on the composition papers of Turkish university students. While Turkish university students learning English are writing compositions, they sometimes confront difficulties related to proper word choices, grammatical structures and other aspects of the language due to the differences of these two languages. The aim of the study was, therefore, to determine inter-lingual errors on the composition papers written in English. 436 papers written by 26, intermediate level, preparatory class students (3 male, 23 female), and 642 papers written by 42 upper intermediate level students (11 male and 31 female), were examined in this study. According to the result of the study, the highest ranking interference errors of Turkish university EFL students were “word for word translation”, omitting the indefinite article, subject-verb agreement and number, quantifier and noun agreement. The study also revealed that intermediate level students committed more errors than those who were upper-intermediate and that most errors were general errors, not interference errors. And also it was clear from the present study that as the level of the students got higher, the number of the errors and interference errors got lower.

*Keywords: Interference, composition errors, mother tongue, Turkish language, English Language, avoidance, inter-lingual errors;*

## 1. Introduction

It has always been assumed that in a second language learning situation, learners rely extensively on their native language (Gass and Selinker 1994: 53), therefore, 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 relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L2, thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2 (Dechert, 1983 and Ellis, 1997) (cited in Bhela 1999: 22). Thus, positive transfer is unlikely when the two languages do not share a specific linguistic feature or from a language with a simpler or less salient linguistic structure to the other; instead interference, or negative transfer, may occur, especially in the less-dominant language when the dominant language is the one with a simpler or less salient linguistic feature (Li-Jen and Richard, 2010, p.368). According to Selinker (1994), there are two types of inhibitions, as he maintained:

*retroactive inhibition*--where learning acts back on previously learned material, causing someone to forget (language loss); *proactive inhibition*--where a series of responses already learned tends to appear

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in situations where a new set is required. This is more akin to the phenomenon of second language learning because the first language in this framework influences/inhibits/ modifies the learning of the L2 (p.55).

On the other hand, when the learners experience gaps in their L2 syntactical structures, they adjust the form of their L2 written responses by using syntactical items which are part of their L1 (Bhela, 1999, p.30). According to, Krashen (1988) such interference is more common in foreign language situation than second language situation.

### 1.1. Purpose of the Study

In Turkey there have been some studies on the phonological interference of Turkish language on foreign language (Demirezen, 1998; Elkılıç and Aydın, 2009) but not on other types of interference. The objective of this study is, therefore, to determine the types of errors Turkish university students commit through L1 interference while writing compositions in English.

Throughout the study answers to following research questions have been sought:

1. What are the instances where the structure of L1 is used in L2 by Turkish university students, causing an error?
2. Does L1 influence on L2 get less as the level of the learners improve?

## 2. Review of Literature

Over the last three decades researchers have focused on the first language interference (Aronin & Toubkin, 2002) as well as on writing skills and composition techniques (Xu, 2007; Myles, 2002; Grabe, 2001; White, 1994; Demirezen, 1994) to find out the causes of errors, to develop more effective techniques and thus to promote writing skills. For example, Nennui (2008) maintained that structural borrowing from Thai language such as word order, subject-verb agreement, and noun determiners indicated features of L1 syntactic interference and that levels of language style and Thai cultural knowledge in written discourse presented features of L1 discourse interference. In another study by Bhela (1999), it was determined that when writing in the target language, learners rely on their native language structures to produce a response. As the structures of L1 and L2 have differences, there has been a relatively high frequency of errors occurring in the target language, thus indicating an interference of the native language on the target language, as expected (p.31). The idea of interference has been supported by Beardsmore (1982) as he suggested that many of the difficulties a second language learner has with the phonology, vocabulary and grammar of L2 are due to the interference of habits from L1. The formal elements of L1 are used within the context of L2, resulting in errors in L2, as the structures of the languages, L1 and L2 are different (cited in Bhela, p.23).

### 2.1. Contrastive analysis

Transfer from the native language was taken to be a matter of habit, and negative transfer or 'interference' would be predicted in cases of difference between the native and the target language – the contrastive analysis hypothesis (Mahmoud, 2000, p.126). According to Corder (1986), contrastive studies are undertaken in order to discover and describe the differences' (Corder 1986: 35). The major contribution of the linguist to language teaching was seen as an intensive contrastive study of the systems of the second language and the mother tongue of the learner (Corder, 1986, p.5). According to Corder, out of this would come an inventory of the areas of difficulty which the learner would encounter and the value of this inventory would be to direct the teacher's attention to these areas so that he might devote special care and emphasis in his teaching to the overcoming, or even avoiding, of these predicted difficulties (p.5).

## 2.2. Error Analysis

According to Bhela (1999), an understanding of L1 syntactical structure and the type of errors made in L2 as well as the extent of the learner's knowledge of L1 and L2 syntactical structures will assist the teaching and learning process by allowing an individualized learning program for each learner. The teacher will be able to predict possible future errors in the target language and may begin to attribute a cause to an error with some degrees of precision (p.29), however, Ellis (2003) maintains that "it may seem rather odd to focus on what learners get wrong rather than on what they get right"(p.15).

### 2.1.1. Transfer

According to Brown (1994), at the early stages of learning many interlingual transfers from the native language, or, interference can dominate L2. Rather, Romaine (1995) maintained that during L2 acquisition, transfer occurs at the phonological, morphological, and syntactical levels. Brown supported the idea that in these early stages, before the system of second language is familiar, the native language is the only linguistic system in previous experience upon which the learner can draw (p. 213). Ellis (2003) stated that L1 transfer refers to the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2. Odlin (cited in Myles, 2002) defined transfer as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired. According to Faerch and Kasper (1987, cited in Mahmoud, 2000, p.127). Transfer is a psycholinguistic process whereby L2 learners activate their previous linguistic knowledge in developing or using their interlanguage. According to Kecskes and Papp (2000, p.xi), although in principle transfer can occur both ways, Cummins emphasized that we generally see only unidirectional transfer from the first language to the other language. Rah (2010, p.149) proposed that it is possible that the L1 plays a privileged role in the acquisition of all subsequent languages. Accordingly, cross-linguistic transfer would only occur from the L1 to all subsequently learned languages, but not across these subsequently acquired languages. On the other hand, in literature, transfer is studied in four categories: negative transfer, positive transfer, avoidance, and overuse.

According to MCLAughlin (1988), transfer errors can occur as learner lack the necessary information in the second language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate second-language routine (p.50). This type of transfer is also called interference. 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 (Ellis, 1997, cited in Bhela, 1999, p.22). 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. According to Dechert (1983), the more different the languages in structure, the higher the risk of L1 interference. However, Albert and Obler (1978) claimed that people show more lexical interference on similar items. So it may follow those languages with more similar structures (eg. English and French) are more susceptible to mutual interference than language with fewer similar features (eg. English and Japanese) (cited in Bhela 1999, p.23).

There has been much research on interference during the last two decades. For example, in their study Blum-Kulka and Levenston (1983) observed that all second language learners begin by assuming that for every word in L1 there is a single translation equivalent in L2. The assumption of word for- word translation equivalence or 'thinking in the mother tongue (L1)' is the only way a learner can begin to communicate in a second language (cited in Bhela 1999, p.30). In another study on Thai EFL students Bennui (2008) found that the students' literal translation of Thai words into English mainly represented features of L1 lexical interference in the students' written English. Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996) also supported that there is only transfer of the lexical categories. But, another study by Demirezen (2008) asserted that the nonnative speaking students apply the pronunciation rules of their native language and the result of such a conduct is the establishment of mother-tongue interference which boils down to be an unavoidable intrusion while learning a foreign language. He also added that a great majority of pronunciation errors are due to inevitable mother-tongue pronunciation habits, which exhibit certain resistance to the sounds of target language (p.73). This Notion was supported also by Elkılıç and Aydın (2009) as they observed that EFL students had difficulty in pronouncing certain English sounds due to the lack of such sounds in Turkish language, so they tended to pronounce them according to Turkish sound system. Hansen (2006) stated that there are strong

effects of transfer on phonology, with the sound systems of a first language being particularly deep seated and difficult to change.

On the other hand, L1 doesn't always cause interference, sometimes in similar languages it may cause positive transfer as well, so it facilitates learning. This is called positive transfer. According to Brown (1994), "a learner for one reason or another avoids a particular sound, word, structure, or discourse category may be assumed incorrectly to have no difficulty therewith" (p. 207). In some situations when a learner learns something new in the target language s/he may not know in which situation to use or how often to use. For instance using "thanks" too often seems to exaggerate the situation or using extra words or prepositions where unnecessary, such as "I went to home". In a study on US English speakers learning Hebrew, Olshtain (1983) found interesting over-use effects with apologies. As a result of his study, he was convinced that English L1 learners transferred their direct apology expressions into Hebrew in ways which were not native-like.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Subjects

For this study, the participants were 26, intermediate level, preparatory class university students (3 male, 23 female), attending the classes regularly and 42 upper-intermediate level students (11 male and 31 female) all of whom were attending the classes 24 hours a week, including a 3- hour writing class. Since the subjects came from different parts of Turkey through the university placement test given by Turkish Higher Education Council, this study can represent the whole Turkish university students.

#### 3.2. Instruments

In order to determine the interference errors of the participants 436 composition papers written by 26, intermediate level, preparatory class students and 642 papers written by 42 upper-intermediate level students were examined.

### 4. Results

Answer to Research Question 1: What are the instances where the structure of L1 is used in L2 by Turkish university students, causing an error?

#### 4.1. L1 Lexical Interference

##### 4.1.2. Misusing the prepositions

Prepositions aren't used in Turkish language as separate grammatical items; however, they are added to the endings of the nouns to show accusative, dative or genitive forms. Therefore, it is seen in Table 1 that Turkish students learning English, either omit, overuse or change them.

Table 1. Misusing the prepositions

L1 Interference	Type	Expected L2
We listen music.	Omission	We listen to music.
Accidents in nowadays.	Overuse	Accidents nowadays...
This damages to our ...	Overuse	This damages our ...
... from day to day.	Changing	... day by day.
He left from his family.	Overuse	He left his family...
... behind of the squire.	Overuse	... behind the squire.
They come across with..	Overuse	They come across ...
I went to home.	Overuse	I went home.

#### 4.1.3. Confusing certain verbs

In Turkish language there is only one word – olmak-for “to become”, “to occur” , “to be”, and “to happen” therefore, Turkish learners sometimes confuse such words in English and they don’t distinguish between them. Turkish students confuse while writing a composition is the correct choice of the words “become, occur, be, and happen” . So in Table 2, it is possible to see such confusions.

Table 2. Confusing the words “become”, “occur” and “be”

<b>L1 Interference</b>	<b>Expected L2</b>
Many accidents become today.	Many accidents occur today.
Pedestrians don’t become careful	Pedestrians aren’t careful ...
We must become cautious.	We must be cautious.
...so, users should become careful.	...so, users should be careful.

As seen in Table 2, instead of “occur”, “aren’t” and “be” Turkish university students wrote “become” on their composition papers. It clearly stems from L1 influence.

#### 4.1.4. Misusing uncountable nouns

Most uncountable nouns in English are countable in Turkish, and therefore countable and uncountable nouns are not equal and in this respect, it is inevitable that Turkish learners confuse them.

Table 3. Misusing countable/uncountable nouns

<b>L1 Interference</b>	<b>Expected L2</b>
Informations are valuable ...	Information is valuable ...
Local foods...	Local food...
...their homeworks...	...their homework...
Rubbishes which...	Rubbish which...
... sugars are ...	... sugar is ...
News are...	News is...

As seen in Table 3, words food, homework, sugar, new and rubbish are uncountable in English, however, they are countable in Turkish, therefore Turkish learners use them according to L1 rules.

#### 4.1.5. Omitting indefinite article “a/an”

In English before a countable singular noun indefinite article “a/an” is compulsory, however in Turkish it is not always necessary.

*Table 4. Omission of Indefinite Article “a/an”*

<b>L1 Interference</b>	<b>Expected L2</b>
... to learn foreign language.	... to learn a foreign language.
... train is reliable vehicle.	... train is a reliable vehicle.
... knows foreign language...	... knows a foreign language.
Learning language is very...	Learning a language is very...

As seen in Table 4, the omission of indefinite article “a/an” is seems to be due to Turkish language interference.

#### 4.2. L1 Effect on subject- verb agreement

In Turkish “there” is used with a singular auxiliary verb followed by a singular noun. However, in English if the following noun is plural, plural auxiliary verb is used, if the noun is singular, singular auxiliary verb is used. And also numbers representing plurals can be used before singular nouns in Turkish.

Table 5. Number, quantifier and noun agreement

L1 Interference	Expected L2
There is many reasons of it.	There are many reasons of it.
...snow in six month.	...snow in six months.
Accidents is everywhere ...	Accidents are in everywhere...
There are a lot of reason of...	There are a lot of reasons of...
A lot of car accident occurs.	A lot of car accidents occurs.
There are a lot of language...	There are a lot of languages ...
There is changes in our life	There are changes in our life
There is a lot of reasons of ....	There are a lot of reasons of ...
There is a lot of music styles.	There are a lot of music styles.
There was a lot of hotel.	There were a lot of hotels.
...two big rock.	...two big rocks.

It is seen in Table 5 that Turkish university students, use such sentences as “there is many reasons of it, a lot of car accident, two big rock” owing to the interference of Turkish language. In Turkish language even after singular demonstratives, plural nouns follow. However, in English there has to be an agreement between them.

#### 4.3.L1 Effect on demonstrative adjective and noun agreement

In Turkish, there is no agreement between demonstrative adjectives and plural or singular nouns. It is possible to say this day, that day, these days and that days, for there are no plural demonstrative adjectives.

Table 6. Demonstrative adjective and noun agreement

L1 Interference	Expected L2
1.... on that days	.... on those days
2. That people don't think...	Those people don't think...
3. This two factor...	These two factors are...
4. Despite all of this hopes...	Despite all of these hopes...
5.This fumes damage ...	These fumes damage ...

It is obvious from Table 6 that structures such as “on that days, that people, this two factors and this fumes etc.” are due to the interference of Turkish language.

It is clearly seen in Table 7 that Turkish learners have used the direct translations of certain sentences and words. This supports Blum-Kulka and Levenston (1983) as they maintain that all second language learners think that for every word in L1 there is a single translation equivalent in L2.

#### 4.4. Word for word translation

Table 7. Word for Word Translations

L1 Interference	Expected L2
... the schools have to make snow holidays.	... the schools have to have snow holidays.
... how can you be useful to your students?	... how can you be beneficial to your students?
Some teachers tell some lessons to the students.	Some teachers tell some lessons to the students.

Traffic polices aren't enough.	The number of traffic policemen/policewomen isn't enough.
They make advertisements of goods.	They make advertisements of goods.
People number using drug is increasing.	The number of people using drug is increasing.
..., transportation is being very difficult.	..., transportation is very difficult.
They are tend to be sleepy.	They tend to be sleepy.
Secondly you can teach by telling beautifully.	Secondly you can teach by telling gently.
There are people who interested in...	There are people who are interested in...
Accidents are very much in Turkey.	Many accidents occur in Turkey.
Olds like sitting at home.	The old like sitting at home.
I can do my some works.	I can do some of my works.
How a person can't live without water, I can't live.	I can't live, just as a person can't live without water..
Air pollution's reasons.	The reasons of air pollution.
You can play a lot of play.	You can play a lot of games.
According to me...	For me (in my opinion)...

Table 8. Distribution of error types depending on the level of the students

Level	TPs	TEs	GEs	%	L1 IEs	%
Intermediate	436	1011	890	88	121	12
Upper-intermediate	642	255	234	92	21	08

Note: TPs= total papers; TEs= total errors; GEs= general errors; L1 IEs= L1 interference errors.

In Table 8 it can easily be seen that intermediate level students committed a total of 1011 errors, whereas 890 (88%) of the errors are general errors, only 121 (12%) of them are interference errors. But upper-intermediate level students committed a 255 errors, 234 of which are general errors, whereas 21 (8%) are interference errors. It is clear from the Table that the level of the students gets higher, the number of the errors and interference errors gets lower.

In Table 9 it can be seen that the most frequently committed interference errors are “word for word translation”, omitting the indefinite article, subject-verb agreement and number, quantifier and noun agreement.

Table 9. Frequences and percentages of interference errors in relation to their types.

Interference Error Type	F	%
Misusing the prepositions	7	05
Confusing certain verbs	7	05
Misusing uncountable nouns	7	05
Omitting the indefinite article a /an”	16	11
Subject- verb agreement	16	11
Number, quantifier and noun agreement	16	11
Demonstrative adjective and noun agreement	14	10
Word for word translation	60	42
Total	142	100

## 5. Conclusion, discussion and pedagogical implications

The presents study revealed that Turkish EFL students' composition papers contained various kinds of interference errors. One type of error was *L1 Lexical Interference*, such as “*misusing the prepositions in English, confusing certain verbs, misusing uncountable nouns and omitting the indefinite article a /an*”.

Other types were “*subject- verb agreement, number, quantifier and noun agreement interference demonstrative adjective and noun agreement, and word for word translation interferences*.”

According to the result of the study, the highest ranking interference errors of Turkish university EFL students are “word for word translation”, omitting the indefinite article, subject-verb agreement and number, quantifier and noun agreement. The study also revealed that intermediate level students committed more errors than those who were upper-intermediate and that most errors were general errors, not interference errors. The results also shows as the level of the students gets higher, the number of both general and interference errors gets lower.

In error analyses carried out on the Sudanese learners of English by (Mohammed,1983, 1992) it was determined that most of the intralingual (i.e. L2-based) errors made were due to overgeneralization as distinct from interlingual transfer (i.e. L1-based). In another prominent study on second level Spanish students LoCoco (1975) discovered the interference of L1 on word-for-word expressions. Krashen (1988) maintained that “first language appears to be strongest in complex word order and in word-for-word translations of phrases” (p.65).

Present study is in parallel with LoCoco's study and Krashen as Turkish learners translated some expressions and sentences directly from L1 into English. However, what is surprising in this study is that Turkish learners didn't commit considerable number of word order L1 interference errors. This maybe because in Turkish Education system word order differences between Turkish and English are emphasized most of the time. This is supported by Ellis (1994) as he proposed that syntax is slightly less affected by transfer than other areas because metalinguistic factors can have a negative influence.

In literature it is suggested that if the level of the learners is low it is more probable that they commit L1 transfer errors. In a study Taylor (1975) discovered that his subjects were influenced negatively by their L1 structures less as their language levels increased. This idea is supported by Krashen as he maintains that “first language influence may be an indication of low acquisition. If so, it can be eliminated or at least reduced by natural intake and language use” (Krashen, 1988; p.67). Our study also confirms this idea as upper-intermediate level students committed fewer interference as well as other types of errors. In his study on four participants Bhela (1999) found that when writing in the target language his subjects relied on their native language structures . According to Bhela (1999), as the structures of L1 and L2 have differences, there has been a relatively high frequency of errors occurring in the target language, thus indicating an interference of the native language on the target language as expected (p.31). This study clearly shows that there are L1 interference and this interference gets lower as the level increases.

### *Pedagogical implications*

- 1.As students should be given a comparative grammar course showing at least the basic differences between Turkish language and English language.
- 2.While arranging the textbooks and materials, teachers should consider the native language system peculiarities and bear in mind the common mistakes in the particular foreign language learning;
- 3.Interference errors should be explained to students when they are seen on composition papers.
- 4.A more detailed research investigating the problematic differences between English and Turkish languages should be carried out.
- 5.Language teachers should be given courses and seminars to be aware of how to solve interference problems of their students.

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