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English as a second language: variations and pedagogical implications

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Abstract

In this paper, English texts written by Spanish learners with B2 level of proficiency, following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), were contrasted with texts written by native English speakers in order to detect the most common writing changes (variations) motivated by the mother tongue of the writers. Our objective was to determine the causes of these variations in language production and to explain the pedagogical implications that could be derived from our findings. The results showed that there are differences in the texts produced by writers with different linguistic and cultural antecedents, although their language proficiency was high enough to not produce grammatical errors. The grammatical items analysed in the texts produced by native and non-native writers to look for language variation were articles, the passive voice, tenses, relative clauses, and certainty and uncertainty expressions. Most of the variations found were caused by the interference of the mother tongue, as a consequence, most of the pedagogical implications focused on avoiding these variations.

Keywords: Cultural influences, mother tongue, variation, second language;

1. Introduction

Variation in this paper refers to the different manifestations in the language that are not mistakes or errors (Ellis 1997). It should be noticed that there are differences in the discourse produced by writers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, although they share the knowledge of the specialist content and academic forms of expressing their thoughts. Variations arise when writers differ in their choice of grammatical structures, lexical units or text features to express ideas. Language variations are not incorrect expressions of language; however, as their name implies, they are structures whose use varies depending on the linguistic background of the writer. In this way, variation can be significantly reduced if the writer is very familiar with the typical lexis, structures and organization of a specific genre.

As regards effective communication, it is clearly undesirable if such variations lead to alternative interpretations of the message. Of course, language variation will reflect nuances of expression, which may predominate in language communities throughout the world, where certain terms and forms may be more commonly used than others, but this variation should not distort facts or ideas. Language variation is of interest to linguists and teachers as it is important not only to monitor these changes, but also to establish their causes and understand the implications for the future development of the language. Moreover, given the dominant role of English in the

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dissemination of academic research and knowledge, it is also of interest to consider how the trends in language variation will impact on expressing and communicating scientific knowledge.

The interest of a group of researchers in variation, from the point of view of discourse analysis, has been centred mainly on rhetorical aspects, on analysing how genres vary across linguistic disciplinary lines and on investigating variation across communities (Samraj and Monk, 2008; Durrant, 2009; Charles, 2007; Ozturk, 2007; Hinkel, 2009; Schleef, 2009). The interests of yet another group have been the identification of variation in text features when their writers come from different cultural backgrounds (de Haan and van Esch, 2005; Moreno and Suárez, 2008). The main aim of these analyses is to describe, on the one hand, differences in discourse patterns that sometimes operate as a barrier to effective communication and, on the other hand, that variations exist when speakers with different linguistic backgrounds communicate in a second language.

Nevertheless, the results of the research on variation have rarely been applied to second language teaching (Hinkel, 2009; Carrio Pastor, 2010). Researchers on second language teaching should take into account both the cultural influences of the mother tongue of its users, and the fact that this creates different ways to express the same discourse or more specifically, the same genre. Nowadays, most international writers communicate in English as a second language (L2) and frequently they cannot avoid the use of the structures that are more common in their mother tongue (L1).

Hinkel (1999, 2002, 2005, 2009) explains in her research that the use of some expressions in English is greatly influenced by the cultural conceptions of the writer. The cognitive aspects of second language production should be observed in language acquisition, thus making teachers and instructors conscious of this fact so that they can apply the findings of language variations to the teaching of a second language.

The objectives of this paper are, in the first place, to determine the causes of the variations we find when English is used as a second language and, in the second place, to explain the pedagogical implications of language variations in second language teaching.

2. Methodology

The full corpora of this study consist of twenty papers written by native English speakers (henceforth corpus A) and twenty papers written by Spanish non-native English speakers (henceforth corpus B). Each corpus is composed of 160,345 running words.

In the first stage of this study, corpus A was compiled from papers published in international engineering journals, which offered a broad spectrum of topics from the subject domain of engineering. The main authors were native English speakers (NES) and they, moreover, work in an institution located in a country where English was the mother tongue.

Corpus B contains papers written by non-native English speakers (NNES) for publication in international journals, but they were still in the revision process so that there was no manipulation of language production through third party editing at this stage. Those with a B2 level were chosen, as it was considered that grammatical aspects had been acquired but there were further linguistic and idiomatic aspects that could lead to variation in the use of language. The author or authors had to be native Spanish speakers and be affiliated to an institution in a country where Spanish was spoken as an L1. These papers were not published yet by an international journal, although the authors had later asked for a language revision to be submitted to an international journal for publication.

In the second stage of this study, data was analysed with the Wordsmith Tools suite of programmes (Scott, 2009). Computerised searches included the following: (a) the passive voice (*any copula verb + past participle*), (b) verb tenses, (c) relative clauses introduced by *that, wh-* and zero relativizers, and (d) certainty and uncertainty devices (*perhaps, maybe, likely, may, might*). Later, comparisons were drawn between the occurrences found after the analysis of the corpus of NNES and the corpus of NES in order to determine the variation in the occurrences found. After identifying all the occurrences of the English corpora, we contrasted the results with the certainty/uncertainty expressions found in the Spanish corpus in order to check our initial hypothesis that assertiveness is considered a trait of Spanish researchers. Finally, the texts used were subjected to further readings by Spanish linguistic informants in order to determine whether variation in language use had influenced their comprehension or if the categories found could lead to discourse misunderstanding.

3. Results

The results obtained after the analysis of the corpora written in English can be observed in the following tables. Table 1 shows the results that follow from the comparison of the use of the article:

Table 1. Article: occurrences and percentages

Articules	Non-native English speakers (NNES) (%)	Native English speakers (NES) (%)	Total occurrences (%)
A	1,982 (46.23%)	2,305 (53.77%)	4,287 (100.00%)
An	421 (48.51%)	447 (51.49%)	868 (100.00%)
The	8,420 (48.88%)	8,804 (55.22%)	17,224 (100.00%)

The results show that there is no variation in the use of the article in English by non-native and native writers of English. In this sense, non-native writers can differentiate the use of definite and indefinite articles in English as the average number and percentages are similar. Table 2 shows the results of the use of the passive voice by both groups of writers:

Table 2. Passive voice: occurrences and percentages

Passive Voice	Occurrences NNES (%)	Occurrences NES (%)	Total occurrences (%)
	124 (43.51%)	161 (56.49%)	285 (100.00%)

The results found in the use of the passive voice by native and non-native writers show that the frequency of use of the passive voice in NES outnumbers its use in NNES in about 13 points. This variation of the passive voice in the Spanish texts seems to reflect the author's stance towards the information given. In this context, the use of the passive voice is an interpersonal strategy to convey impersonality in Spanish. Impersonal constructions in scientific writing are a means to detach oneself from one's assertions, and information presented this way is said to be more objective. A pragmatic implication of impersonality in language is the protection of the writer's public self-image, since the author cannot be held responsible for the claims.

In Table 3 we offer the use of verb tenses in the corpus A and B under survey:

Table 3. Verb tenses: occurrences and percentages

Verb Tenses	Occurrences NNES (%)	Occurrences NES (%)	Total occurrences (%)
Present simple	767 (51.86%)	712 (48.14%)	1,479 (100.00%)
Past simple	672 (53.88%)	575 (46.12%)	1,247 (100.00%)
Future	126 (64.95%)	68 (35.05%)	194 (100.00%)
Present continuous	12 (63.16%)	7 (36.84%)	19 (100.00%)
Present perfect	10 (41.67%)	14 (58.33%)	24 (100.00%)
Past continuous	1 (25.00%)	3 (75.00%)	4 (100.00%)
Past perfect	1 (25.00%)	3 (75.00%)	4 (100.00%)

Table 3 reveals the presence of variation in the use of the future tense and the present continuous tense in the compilations. The variation detected may be caused by the influence of the mother tongue of the writers, as the future tense is frequently used in Spanish to show possibility and probability concerning the realization and actualization of an event. The use of the present continuous in Spanish is not so restrictive as in English, since contexts of usage in the former language go beyond describing ongoing or future actions. The low occurrences found in the use of the past continuous tense and the past perfect tense argue for not including them in the list of variation factors in the output of NNES with respect to the production of NES.

In Table 4, it can be seen the occurrences found in relative pronouns. We do not detail the occurrences found, as we considered more important to detect an overuse or an underuse of relative clauses in our corpora.

Table 4. Relative clauses: occurrences and percentages

Relative clauses	Occurrences NNES (%)	Occurrences NES (%)	Total occurrences (%)
Total	341 (38.97%)	534 (61.03%)	875 (100.00%)

It can be seen in Table 4 that NES used almost 22% more relative clauses than NNES. This variation may be caused by the different uses of relative clauses in Spanish; there are fewer relative pronouns. This shortage in relative clauses in NNES can be explained in the preference of Spanish speakers to use other discoursal strategies, such as the use of personal pronouns or the lexical repetition of the object being referred to previously in the text.

In table 5, the modal verbs 'might', 'must' and 'may' are included in the results of the analysis of certainty and uncertainty devices in corpus A and B. These modal verbs are considered as factors that are likely to cause variation in the light of the results obtained in our analysis of the verbal tenses. Following Larsen-Freeman (1999), the expressions of certainty and uncertainty we include in this study are: *absolutely, surely, definitely, unquestionably, certainly, positively, possibly, perhaps, probably, almost certainly, etc*. Some of these stance adverbs are also considered as evidentials (cf. Downing, 2002 and Alonso-Almeida, forthcoming), although we do not make that distinction here for limitations of space.

Table 5. Certainty/uncertainty expressions: occurrences and percentages

Certainty expressions	Occurrences NNES (%)	Occurrences NES (%)	Total (%)
Uncertainty expressions	244 (49.29%)	251 (50.71%)	495 (100.00%)
Certainty expressions	163 (68.20%)	76 (31.80%)	239 (100.00%)
Might	3 (23.07%)	10 (76.93%)	13 (100.00%)
Must	53 (62.35%)	32 (37.65%)	85 (100.00%)
May	46 (38.98%)	72 (60.02%)	118 (100.00%)

It can be observed in Table 5 that Spanish writers used more certainty expressions than NES. In the same line as before, this may represent the influence of L1 on L2. Spanish writers tend to use assertive expressions when they express in their mother tongue and this fact is clearly reflected in the results. It can also be noticed that NNES used almost 25% more the modal verb 'must' in the corpus used in this study. This may arise from the direct translation of epistemic periphrastic *deber + de*, which the NNES interpret as 'must' rather than 'may' or even 'might', as pointed out in Carrió Pastor (forthcoming). On the contrary, NES used 'might' almost 55% more than NNES and 'may' was used almost 20% more by the native writers of English.

The variations found after the analysis of the corpus showed that non-native speakers use a wide range of patterns, which are not always idiomatic, and so represent language variation. The main reason for this is that the linguistic and the cultural background of the speakers of a lingua franca plays an important role in language production.

4. Conclusions

A number of aspects were taken into account when designing the initial objectives of this research. One was that language production differs between users in numerous subtle and idiosyncratic ways. Every speaker processes reality in his/her own way, and the transmission of this reality is, in turn, bound by a degree of subjectivity. Writers may conceptualise the same idea but how that idea is communicated might differ depending on factors such as culture, social status, academic background, family education, mother tongue, genre, self-esteem, and so on. This is true for writers writing in their L1 and is even more evident in L2 writing as Hinkel (1999, 2002, 2005, 2009) has pointed out in her research. In the results shown in this research it can be observed that most of the causes of variation were the influence of the mother tongue. Non-native writers of English prefer the use of the form 'will' of future to refer to future facts as they consider the implications of the future simple tense in Spanish, i.e. future events that are going to happen in the future. In the same way, they prefer the use of the modal verb 'must', used to show assertiveness in the results section. On the contrary, native English writers prefer the use of the modal verb 'may' and 'may' to express the results or discuss their findings, following the traditional way of expressing findings in

academic English.

Teachers should be aware therefore, that writing in English as an international language can show considerable variations in use depending on the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of its writers. In this sense, tasks that guide students to be conscious of the cross-cultural implications of communicating in an L2 may be considered necessary. Second language learners should be aware of the implications of communicating in an international language. They should be conscious not only of the variations produced by their mother tongue, but also of the variations that they can come across when reading texts produced by writers with different linguistic backgrounds. Students should be able to produce and understand international English and this fact implies that they should be conscious of language variations.

Although discourses are socially constructed, the influence of societal factors seems to be subtler in writing after the results shown in this study. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that English undergoes change and is subjected to all kind of influences, nowadays not least due to its massive use in international communication. As a consequence, language variation undoubtedly questions the fixed characteristics of certain specific use of English.

It seems clear, after the results shown, that second language writers change some parts of discourse, even in static genres such as scientific writing. The traditional analysis of variation has focused on rhetoric and linguistic elements but we propose further criteria in any analysis of variation, which take into account their causes. This study focused on the variations produced by Spanish writers and their pedagogical implications, although we propose to apply also this research to the production of writers from different linguistic backgrounds to more fully assess the impact of variations in English writing.

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