

Case Study: The Effects of Instructional Variables on the Semantic Transfer of Spanish on Spoken English Vocabulary¹

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ABSTRACT

El presente artículo contribuye a clarificar el tema del análisis contrastivo y del error que se produce en hablantes de español como primera lengua cuando aprenden inglés oral como segunda lengua. Se analiza desde una perspectiva didáctica teniendo en cuenta las variables siguientes: a) Tema libre y conversación guiada. b) Tema libre y conversación libre. c) Tema asignado y conversación libre. d) Tema y conversación asignados.

La investigación empírica realizada demuestra que el nivel de los alumnos, la motivación y el tipo de interacción entre profesor y alumnos representa un factor importante y según los datos analizados se puede concluir que el aprendizaje es un proceso interno que varía según los individuos y que el trabajo cooperativo, el diseño de tareas contextualizadas, la consideración de aspectos culturales y sociolingüísticos ayuda a que los alumnos cometan menos errores en su interlenguaje.

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Introduction

In the present paper, I would like to contribute to our understanding of transfer in the semantic level of Spanish on spoken English. For this purpose, nine grade 7-8 Spanish speakers learning oral English as a Second Language at Beverley Heights Middle School, North York Board of Education (Toronto) were studied. The interest in this topic comes from observing that some of the issues which this paper presents have not been sufficiently addressed in the literature on transfer.

The study addressed the following issues: what types of Spanish transfer and contribution occur in the semantic system of learners' interlanguage in English; whether the number of semantic errors are dependent on students' level of proficiency and motivation, and finally, the didactic perspective, with the following instructional variables: spontaneous topic/guided conversation, spontaneous topic/non-guided conversation, assigned topic/non-guided conversation, and assigned topic/guided conversation.

Theoretical Issues

Transfer or crosslinguistic influence as Kellennan and Sharwood Smith (1986) have proposed, is defined as the influence of LI based elements as well as LI based procedures in understanding and producing L2 text. A great majority of studies, Odlin (1989), Ringbom (1978), Gass (1983), among others, focuses on transfer in production. Analysis of learner errors has shown how LI forms and LI patterns have been the cause of these errors, which may sometimes have been produced via interaction with L2 forms and L2 procedures.

Empirical research has concentrated on identifying the most frequent lexical errors produced by L2 learners (Obanya 1974); understanding the influence of mother tongue factors on the misuse of L2 lexical items (Ringbom 1978); and assessing the gravity of L2 learners' lexical errors (Politzer 1978). More recent studies include Zughoul (1991), which focuses specifically on errors in lexical choice, and Zimmerman (1987), which distinguishes form-oriented from content--oriented lexical errors. However, lexical errors in these studies are usually elicited under testing conditions, not under learning conditions, as is the case in this study.

In contrast with the studies focusing on learners' lexical product, research has been oriented towards learners' processes of communication and lexical strategy behaviours. Within this theoretical framework empirical studies have concentrated on providing descriptions and classifications of learners' lexical strategies (Bialystok 1983); identifying regularities of lexical strategy use (Bialystok 1983); assessing the effectiveness of strategies (Cohen and Aphek 1981); and defining

relations between learners' strategy use and L2 proficiency (Bialystok 1983). These studies have required subjects to perform real communicative exchanges. Moreover, these research studies have tended to focus on a few aspects in isolation and very few studies have investigated semantic lexical errors as they naturally occur in second language classrooms, with different instructional variables.

Rivers (1983) suggests that students must 'learn how to learn' according to their needs and interests. McCarthy (1987a) says that knowing a word, among other things, means knowing the different meanings associated with it, and often in a connected way, the range of its collocational patterns. The present research paper arises out of the issues discussed in the review of the literature. It addresses needs to investigate issues related to semantic lexical errors in the context of second language classrooms, based on several variables and hypotheses. It was observed that a few studies have addressed the issue of semantic vocabulary errors and teaching in second language classrooms. However, these studies have not addressed how different errors occur depending on the level of proficiency, motivation, and different instructional conditions: Thus, the present study attempts to account for crosslingual and intralingual strategies, and an analytic and an experiential approach.

According to Lado (1957), all errors could be traced back to LI. But even if it is true that a person's semantic production is affected by transfer, not all errors can be attributed to LI transfer. Some of them may derive from the strategies employed by the learner; from the mutual interference of items within the target language, or from the different teaching techniques employed by teachers. In this study, my hypotheses about the conditions under which interferences would occur more often were the following:

- (1) the greater the knowledge of a topic, the fewer the errors
- (2) the more spontaneous a topic, the more the errors
- (3) the more the teacher directs instructional conversations, the fewer the errors

According to these hypotheses, there would be a gradation going from many semantic errors when the topic of discussion is unknown, and has not been previously prepared, to fewer errors when the discussion is directed by teacher and the topic has been previously prepared. In this case, the number of errors would drop, because students would adopt the teachers' modelling expressions. In addition to that, it was hypothesized that the number and type of semantic errors would vary according to the learners' level of proficiency in Spanish and English.

Therefore, the objectives of this study were:

- (1) to collect empirical data from activities that students are highly motivated for
- (2) to come to a better understanding of Spanish semantic errors which may influence the acquisition of English as a second language
- (3) to investigate the pedagogic implications according to the hypotheses mentioned above; and finally, for students, to come to a better understanding and appreciation of Spanish society and culture, to develop psycho-sociocultural and linguistic awareness.

Research Questions

1. Depending on students' language proficiency and motivation, to what extent does semantic interference Spanish/English change under different instructional situations?
2. Are spoken and written vocabulary skills and context reduced language related in Spanish L1 and English L2?

GRADE		COUNTRY	LEVEL	MOTIVATION
Karina	8	El Salvador	Advanced	High (Sp-En)
Samaida	8	El Salvador	Advanced	High (Sp-En)
Danny	8	Ecuador	Advanced	High (En) Low (Sp)
Lorena	8	El Salvador	Intermediate	High (Sp-En)
Marco	8	Guatemala	Intermediate	High (Sp-En)
Sonia	7	Guatemala	Intermediate	High (Sp-En)
Wendy	7	El Salvador	Intermediate	High (En) Low (Sp)
Martin	8	Uruguay	Beginner	Low (Sp-En)
Sheyla	7	Nicaragua	Beginner	High (En) Low (Sp)

Sp = Spanish / En = English

The Study Subjects

The distribution of students was made according to grade, nationality, level of proficiency, and motivation. Data analyzed was collected from 9 Spanish speaking students (6 females and 3 males), ranging in age from 12 to 13 years old. Meetings had been previously arranged with North York Board of Education and OISE for the data collection of my doctoral thesis on vocabulary development.

Materials and Procedures

As a means of offering topics for conversations, materials consisted of a stack of coloured pictures and handouts with information on Spanish culture, society, religion, and family aspects as well as on travel and holidays in Spanish and English. The activities analyzed in this paper were conducted in English. The design of the activities was through four integrated syllabi:

- 1 Form, function and context of language were addressed. Analytical approach to language learning was partnered by experiential approach. The language was globally approached, according to task needs.
- 2 The themes were motivating, interesting, relevant and to enrich as well as give communicative competence. They were real, global and learner-focused.
- 3 Travel and holidays to Spanish speaking countries were in mind when performing these activities, hence that language gathered meaning and purpose for the students.
- 4 The topics included the origin of the Spanish language, religion, and family aspects aiming to increase students' awareness of language and culture.

The data of this study was collected between January and June 1993. Meetings took place once a week for 22 weeks. The procedures followed are described below.

DAY 1

On the first meeting, a short questionnaire was handed out to learners in order to collect the following data: nationality, length of stay, previous English study, motivation, personal interesees likes, dislikes. A language placement test was also applied to find out their level of proficiency in English.

Variable 1 - Spontaneous Topic/Guided Conversation

Initially, seven out of the nine students chose the following topic: "Spanish Speaking countries and origins of their culture". The class was divided into groups of three. Magazine cut outs plus Atlas were distributed with information on the topic. Students had to pick out the relevant information and pictures which would give a clear idea about what the Spanish Speaking countries were and the typical aspects of their culture. What they had selected was posted around the walls of the classroom, and then the whole class had to mill about looking at each other's ideas and writing what they thought was missing. Back into groups, each group wrote a report. The whole class was gathered together for feedback on what they had produced. Teacher put down on board the main features of the topic and

summed up the origins of Spanish culture. The conversation in groups was recorded. The aims for this topic were to understand, appreciate and consider Spanish speaking countries and their culture as well as experience it by visiting each other's country under the exchange program being organized.

Variable 2 - Spontaneous Topic/Non-Guided Conversation

Students were given general rules on how to proceed. First, they were told to choose a topic and discuss about it in groups of three without teacher's guidance during 15 minutes. Second, they were asked to bear in mind the following guidelines, while doing the activity:

- a) Control the time, 15 minutes available
- b) Participation of each member of each group
- c) To collect any information they needed from the stack of pictures and handouts
- d) The conversation should be in English
- e) Questions to teacher were welcome, if needed, teacher would be observing, tape-recording, and documenting through field notes

The topic chosen was "Travel and holidays, a particular place to go". They had to report back their findings and process.

Variable 3 - Assigned Topic/Non-Guided Conversation

The topic assigned was "Spanish families, man and woman, women liberation". The same general rules above were given. Students received materials on this topic. They worked in groups and had a free conversation on the topic. Students' conversations in groups were tape-recorded.

Variable 4 - Assigned Topic/Guided Conversation

The teacher assigned the topic: "Spanish societies, religion and personal lives". In this activity, teacher followed these steps:

1. A controlled process that promoted students' situational use of language
2. A process that went from teacher-centred to student-centred

The teacher provided all the information about catholicism and how Spanish societies were influenced by religion, and how this fact determined personal behaviours within the family and society. Different language patterns were practised, and then students were asked to work in pairs. Each member of the pair had different information. They had to work together and build up a dialogue to

solve their communicative tasks. Students were given basic vocabulary and a sample question and answer sequence. Positive and negative aspects were analysed by comparison. Students' conversations in pairs were tape-recorded.

Methodology

Once collected the data, the audio-recordings were transcribed. Transcripts of the lessons are being coded using an adaptation suitable for this sample from Allen, Carrol, Burtis and Gaudino (1987) COLT scheme. This version of the COLT was selected for two reasons: It had been employed for purposes similar to those of the present study. It had been revised to account for instructional contexts.

The Colt has two parts. Part I analyzes classroom events: a) types of activities, b) the content of the activity, c) participant organization, d) student modality, e) materials used. Part II analyzes the communicative features of verbal interactions between students and teachers; it identifies seven main categories: a) use of the target language, L1 or L2; b) information gap; c) length of utterance, d) reaction to code or message; e) incorporation of preceding utterances; f) discourse initiation by teacher or student; g) relative restriction of linguistic form.

For the purpose of this paper, considering that data collection will not be finished until June 1993, only a preliminary analysis of the data has been conducted. A more detailed analysis will be made after tutoring is finished. I shall summarize some of the most common aspects detected in the data analyzed:

Data Analysis

1. *Spontaneous Topic/Guided Conversation*

Under this condition, students made frequent use of Spanish words when they did not know the English version or as part of the discourse:

eg. You have to go to Spain. It is "imprescindible"

Another feature of their strategies was direct translation from Spanish or invented words:

- SI I want to know Spain and Spanish culture. Do you know it?
S2 I don't *know Spain*. I would prefer... *know*= 'conocer' for "visit"
S3 I don't know... I think it will be difficult to res-- "improve"
SI I think Spanish are like hispanoamericans if they are *out of* the country....

"out of" = abroad= fuera.

A frequent confusion between *be* and *go* was evident in this conditon:

S1 I prefer to go to because I *have not go* to

In addition to that, there were doubts between the usage of *know/meet*.

eg. I know the Incas, Mayas I knew them = "met"

In this condition, students showed a lot of self-monitoring on the part of students:

SI ..for that... *because of that*...

S2 ..because if you want to understand Spanish, perhaps yo, you will not know or meet...

S1 *many, many* times...

And some peer help.

T my tastes are...

S1 Tastes?

S2 "Gustos"

T my taste is universal, I like many things

As for the teacher, he interferred providing help where necessary:

S1 But yesterday, I have heard, no I ..

T *I heard*

S1 I heard an interesting

2. Spontaneous Topic/Non-Guided Conversation

Under this condition, students showed much use of direct translation from Spanish or invented words as well as the use of Spanish words when they didn't know the English version:

S1 We are going together

S2 No, we are going *separate* = "separately" Sp=separado

S1 do you think we will *progress* our Spanish if we go to...

S2 of course. It is very good.

En=improve; sp= progresar, hacer progresos

- S4 how will we go and what will we do?
S5 We have to do a *programación* = trip plan
S1 this “tema” is very complicated
S2 come on. It is exciting..... “tema”= *topic*
S1 I don’t know a lot about Spain. I can’t speak about that “pais”
S2 country
S3 country

A frequent confusion between *do* and *make* and between *say* and *tell* was noticed

- S7 I like to *do* a trip
S8 yes, but where?
S9 to *make not to do*
S7-8 to make not to do.....
S4 Would you like to go to Spain?
S5 I’d love to but.....
S6 Yes, let’s go to Spain. It’s far and it’ll be expensive, but *Jose says us, it’s*
very nice.

In addition to that, there was a lot of self-monitoring, and a lot of peer help and correction. Students were aware of their mistakes. This reveals that they know English rules, struggling to apply them in oral situations:

- S1 All of us *have learn*, have learnt
S2 The teacher *don’t like* it, doesn’t like it, so, I am going to repeat.

There was a lot of interaction.
Relatively *fewer* errors were produced.

3. Assigned Topic/Non-Guided Conversation

Under this condition, students showed much use of direct translation from Spanish or invented words and of certain concepts:

- S7 We will use less time
S8 How? What?

Sp “usar” = “spend” En.

- S1 how sympathetic!
S2 what?

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Sp. simpático-sympathetic for “friendly”

- S7 It is Holy week= Semana Santa
- S8 what?
- S9 Easter

Frequent confusion between too *much* /a lot - *talk/speak* - *know/visit* - *carry/take*:

- S4 My mother can save *too much money*, but my father cannot
- S5 I can
- S6 I cannot, but my father saves a lot, too much.
- S7 A group of friends were *speaking* about it
- S8 They were not friends...
- S1 I don't know a mistress or...
- S2 What is a mistress? a mister?
- S3 Is it a city? I don't know it. I have ... no..never known that city
- S1 neither have I known it
- S1 the reason is...I can't carry the car. It's my father's.
- S2 ... but ..you know, I am a woman and I can drive ... why not. My father doesn't let mother drive... I don't understand...

Change of meaning because of word order:

- S1 I answer the teacher many times, and my *answers don't like him very much*....
- S2 If *you are ok*. = If it's ok with you.

Wrong meaning of expressions/idioms was detected, as in:

- S1 I am according with you (Estoy de acuerdo contigo = I agree with you)
- S2 Are you agree with me?...
- S3 ... I hope you pass a good time = have a good time (pasarlo bien)
- S1 We came to the resolution
(Sp.resolución- en.= conclusion)

In addition to that, there was self-monitoring and peer help for words:

- S7 I must to ...*I must go*
- S8 no, please, *help to me, help*.
- S1 ..We can see many *machos*, in the Spanish family

- S2 *machists*
 S3 you know, it is the religion or.....
 S1 Look at this picture.....

There were a lot of errors with respect to the other variables.

4. Assigned Topic/Guided Conversation

A frequent confusion between *many/a lot*:

- S1 If we have *many, many time*

Use of words or expressions in Spanish in the middle of a sentence, when they did not know the word or when time was needed to think.

- S1 and now, we have discussed a lot, and we "*estamos de acuerdo*" that we don't go to the mass on Sundays
 S2 I have to go, but...
 S3 why? If you don't feel it...
 S7 he said... *vamos a ver*, his family is very religious. Everybody is catholic...
 S8 My parents are too
 S9 and you?
 S8 I am not

Table 1. Participant Organisation

Mean percentages of observed time by variable

Variables	Whole Class	Group	Pair	Individual
ST/GC	50	48	0	2
ST/NG	27	70	0	3
AT/NGC	32	65	0	3
AT/GC	0	0	95	5
<hr/>				
STIGC =	Spontaneous topic/guided conversation			
ST/NG =	Spontaneous topic/non-guided conversation			
AT/NGC =	Assigned topic/non-guided conversation			
AT/GC =	Assigned topic/guided conversation			

There was less peer help in comparison with former cases:

- S7 How do you call that?
 S8
 T All right. You remember in your country when you were kids

In this activity, I provided abundant opportunities for communicative practice. Teacher help. Fewer errors than in previous activities.

Results

The tables below present the tabulation of the data analysis. Table 1 displays participant organization according to instructional variables.

Findings and Discussion

Considering the initial hypotheses guiding this study, the data analysis and taking into account the different instructional variables, level of proficiency, and motivation, I have reached the following conclusions.

1. Spontaneous Topic/Guided Conversation

Spanish interference plays a strong role on errors committed, accounting for 55% of them. (See Table 4). As for the level of proficiency, the weaker the student, the more errors produced. (See Table 5 + subjects). The more a student is motivated, the fewer the errors he commits. However, teacher guiding spontaneous topic conversations did not seem to diminish the number of errors, as it was hypothesized. A spontaneous topic seemed to produce the same number of semantic errors than those observed in the assigned topic/non-guided conversation.

A lot of self-monitoring on the part of the students and a few cases of peer help. The fact that there was less interaction, and less spontaneity in the conversation, could be explained by two facts: on the one hand, questions were rephrased, so that students would fall in a kind of communication drill. On the other hand, I asked many closed questions in the beginning. I helped with vocabulary, monitored students' speech, gave them clues, repeated and rephrased concepts, words, etc. Form and communication above all (see Table 3). The students interacted mainly with teacher and posed few questions, except when the subject was switched on a topic related to the students' lives (see Table 1). The control of the topic was held by teacher, and teacher/student (see Table 2).

2. *Spontaneous Topic/Non-Guided Conversation*

Transfer accounts for 45% of the errors committed in this situation (See Table 4). The data does not support hypothesis 2 (the more spontaneous the topic, the more the errors), because in comparison with assigned topic/non-guided conversation, there were fewer errors.

Table 2 displays teacher/student interaction according to instructional variables.

Table 2. Topic Control
Mean percentages of observed time by variable

Variables	Teacher	Teacher/Student	Student/Student
ST/GC	64	31	5
ST/NG	12	2	86
AT/NG	8	35	57
AT/GC	40	15	45

Table 3 displays the amount of different content according to instructional variables.

Table 3. Content
Mean percentages of observed time by variable

Variables	Form	Function	Communicative	Culture
ST/GC	30	5	40	25
ST/NG	5	5	66	30
AT/NGC	5	10	55	35
ATIGC	35	2	25	38

Table 4 displays the semantic errors committed by students according to instructional variables.

Table 4. Semantic Errors from L1
Mean percentages of observed time by variable

Variables	S.E from L1	Other S.E.
ST/GC	64	31
ST/NG	12	2
AT/NG	8	35
AT/GC	40	15

S.E.= Semantic Errors

Table 5 displays the semantic errors committed by students. Martin and Sheyla, the weakest students, committed more errors in all variables than the other students.

Table 5. Semantic Errors by Student
Mean percentages of observed time by variable

Karine	6	5	9	5
Samaida	7	6	10	6
Danny	7	5	9	8
Lorena	10	10	12	11
Marco	11	10	11	10
Sonia	10	9	11	9
Wendy	12	10	11	12
Martin	20	25	14	19
Sheyla	17	20	13	20

Fewer errors, perhaps because students seemed to take less risk, they used simpler talk, and less varied vocabulary. Consequently, they had fewer chances to make errors. Student/student interaction 86% (see Table 2). They were concentrated on communication (see Table 3). There was a lot of peer help, correction and self-monitoring on the part of students.

3. Assigned Topic/Non-Guided Conversation

In this condition, students produced the larger number of errors, 65% of them were due to Spanish interference (See Table 4). The data does not support hypothesis number 1 (the greater the knowledge of the topic, the fewer the errors), but it does support hypothesis number 4 (the less the teacher directs the conversation, the greater the number of errors). There was a lot of peer help and not as much self-monitoring as in other variables. A lot of interaction among students. Even though there were many semantic errors, students seemed to achieve communication (see Table 2). Communication was paramount as well as culture component (see Table 3).

4. Assigned Topic/Guided Conversation

In this condition, there were fewer errors than in the previous cases (See Tables 4 & 5). Only 40% of them were due to interference. In this case most of the errors produced were at the morphological and syntactic level. Students seemed to rely more on their teacher than on their partners, even though there was a friendly relationship. As it happened with the spontaneous topic/guided

conversation, the discussion took at times a communication drill-like direction. The amount of teacher talk was greater than in the previous cases. Students' responses were short (see Table 2). The data seemed to support the hypotheses 1 and 3 (fewer semantic errors when topic was assigned and guided by teacher). Form plus Spanish culture was considered very important in this variable (see Table 3), and student interaction was promoted (see Table 1).

Conclusion

This study has shown that students' knowledge of a topic seems to affect interaction, promoting greater communication among the members of the class, and consequently more errors. According to the data, the number of errors is either equal or greater when the topic is assigned than when it is spontaneous, especially if the discussion is not guided by teacher. The errors produced seemed to be related to students' level of proficiency and motivation for learning English and Spanish. The more advanced the level, the fewer the errors, and the less the motivation the more the errors produced and the more the interference. It also seems that the type of interaction between students and teacher may have been an important factor determining the kind of language used. These findings reveal that the semantic interference exists in all different instructional variables.

This study shows that L1 support does not seem to impede the acquisition of conversational and academic skills. In fact, more exposure to Spanish affects positively to achievement in English. As Jim Cummins (1993) points out, "the development in two languages can result in greater level of metalinguistic awareness and the facilitation of additional language acquisition".

According to the data analyzed, it can be stated what Leo Van Lier (1988) argues: "Teaching never causes learning... teaching creates or fails to create the conditions in which learning can occur". It can be said that second language vocabulary learning is essentially an internal, self-regulating process which will vary according to individual.

In addition to that, this study has raised some important implications:

a) Working in groups seemed to create more real situations, more communication among students, even though the quality of the language used was poorer than when the discussion was guided by teacher. However, students seemed to achieve communication. Most importantly, peer correction and help were a constant in the group discussion. As Long (1975,76,77) has suggested, more research on the subject of group work versus lockstep situations should be conducted in order to determine which situation is more beneficial to promote fluency or accuracy.

b) It is extremely important to design appropriate tasks for effective learning contexts, and my claim is that semantic vocabulary learning will be more likely to occur through content, task-based, and interpretation of the use of words in other contexts. Learners must be taught cultural, sociolinguistic and discoursal aspects of word use, if we want to encourage learners to come to grips with the L2.

Finally, this study has not addressed the following issues. If teacher personality and degree of control on the part of the teacher would either help or hinder students' oral interaction. Future analysis will follow focusing on the social and affective sides of learning along with the cognitive and linguistic ones. A holistic nature of classroom is to be considered. Interesting data has been gathered showing that vocabulary is acquired as a result of an interactive process, (Long,1980); (Krashen,1982); (Swain,1985) and their development is social. As Vygotsky (1978) explains,"every function in the child cultural development appears on the social, and on the psychological level".

I am glad to have given support and encouragement towards this Spanish experience. Finally, I think that encouragement and support have to be developed if we want to exploit students' ability to transfer skill from their L1 into their L2.

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